

Belief and Disbelief

My sermon is on the topic of belief and disbelief and on the question: What makes our life meaningful. This is on the background of the biblical story of the boy who suffered from severe epilepsy and was healed by Jesus.

In our everyday language we often use the expression „I believe“ in the sense of „I suspect“ or „I assume“. For instance: I believe the wheel nuts of my car aren't tightened properly. - We better check it! Or: I believe she loves me. You better ask her. Sometimes we use the expression „I believe“ because we are suspicious: am I cheated? Do you tell the truth? Or when we are not sure. The other day I saw a sticker above the sink of a toilet in a church center. I read: *Water tap closed?* And below the answer: *I believe.* - One of the shortest confessions in a church.

I

Faith and reason are usually seen as opposites. However, could it be that it depends all on how I look at things? That everything depends on my perception, my inner attitude and my interest? With what interest do I look at the world, at others and at myself? Do I take it more fact-based and reason-based or more emotional and spontaneous? And how do I answer central questions like: What is mankind? What holds the world together? What is the meaning of life?

Quite clear that you don't have to be a religious person to deal with these questions. Maybe it's more about whether I even deal with these questions at all. Whatever we decide for ourselves: faith has more to do, which goes beyond just taking it based on reason. However, hopefully not without reason.

Our Christian faith has above all to do with trust, hope and love. The biblical stories of healing and miracles tell of this. Often surprise stories. We have heard of a biblical story where a man finds himself at the end of his own resources and when it happens that he opens to God's resources. A Roman occupation officer comes to Jesus because his child is severely ill. Probably he got to know that Jesus is a great healer. The father carries his son on his arm or is taking his son by the hand. He points to his child and approaches Jesus: if it is at all possible for you, take pity on us and help us. - If it is possible! said Jesus, Everything is possible to one who believes! Immediately the boy's father cried „I believe; help my unbelief!“

Probably a long period of time had passed before this encounter. A time of scepticism and doubt. Can I trust this Jewish healer? Maybe he is just a charlatan like many others? Is there any hope at all that my child will be healthy and strong? Is there any hope that all of us can live a new, happy life? Probably he is torn between hope and despair.

But then he gathers courage again. He approaches Jesus: I need your help to get out of this impasse. In the following Jesus stops discussing. He starts doing the helpful. Doing what is going to change a person's life.

II

The first help that Jesus provides is that he casts out the demons. To us this is rather strange. Of course this has been the traditional and common understanding that sick people – and especially people with epileptic seizures – are obsessed by evil spirits. First of all the evil spirits had to be cast out of the body of a person. Nowadays scientific medical progress

has happened. We are no longer trapped in demonic ideas and attempts to explain the inexplicable that overtakes us. However, could it be, that the first necessary aid is not the doing rather than the awareness of a complex process. I am talking about the profound understanding of *good* and *evil*. Of what is life-promoting and of what is life-hindering.

Some years ago I worked in the diaconical institution of Bethel close to the city of Bielefeld. I worked there for some years as a teacher for pastoral care and counseling and as a hospital chaplain in the Epileptic Clinic. During this time I have met many people who were suffering from epilepsy. People of all ages and social classes. And I remember those most frightening seizures very similar to the one described in the biblical story.

I have experienced situations when I felt my own fear when all in the sudden being confronted with one's seizure. And often I felt pity. Therefore I have special sympathy for the father in our biblical story.

I remember an evening walk in Bethel. It is already dark. A little away from me I recognize a group of teenagers. Something seems to have happened. As I get closer, I can see that one of the young people is lying on the pavement. He is having a seizure. His friends are observing him carefully. They are waiting until the end of the seizures. They are completely calm. At the same time a medical doctor arrives on the spot. Both of us are asking if we can help. The young people: No, thanks, we can do it on our own. Okay, we both say. Then we go. Have a good evening! These young people, all of them epileptic patients solved the problem among themselves. They relied on the competence of their own group. The group of victims. The group of patients. I was impressed

III

We all know moments when we are not up on the mountain but down in the valley. The work is too much. Relationships are too strained. Life doesn't seem to head anywhere. We want to believe in God. Want to have a trustful, confirming relationship with him. But we are not even in contact with our selves. And we desperately need help. Need to be encouraged. It takes our full strength to only tell what we are suffering from. Not really expecting a way out, but longing for it.

We Christians in the west live in a society which is dominated by a 'can-do-mentality' and 'you-are-responsible-for-yourself-society'. What then about prayer? Do we trust in the power of prayer? Are we aware that political concepts and theories are necessary but maybe limited attempts to survive. According to Jesus, only prayer can drive out our demons – especially the demons of the demon of being possessed by despair. The prayer of a hurtled and desperate person. Jesus is moved by the helplessness and by the love of this father.

Today epilepsy is seen as an expression of physical illness. Therefore it is left to the science of medicine. However, this does not exclude that notions of magic are still associated with epilepsy. To control the fears that are induced by the dynamic of epileptic seizures, it does not seem sufficient to claim that it can be dealt with only through a rational approach.

In the biblical story the demonic origin of the illness is pointed out. At that time it was important to be mentioned in order to emphasize the power of Jesus as saviour. It is kind of a dramaturgical approach. A medical doctor told me that in the biblical story we are given a detailed description of a certain type of epilepsy. This was rather interesting to him. From the viewpoint of a lay person who is witnessing a seizure it can be a frightening event, It turns by-standers into participants. We are confronted with the breakdown of the aesthetics and harmony of a meaningful, interpretable body movement. The seizure interrupts meaningful communication. It produces fright even between parent and child. In addition our natural impulse, to help is apparently useless.

A seizure brings with it the question of meaning, when something seemingly meaningless occurs so dramatically. Epilepsy in this regard is crisis and critique of a world view which is based on the assumption that man can do everything. In the face of a seizure the concept of

complete rationality fails. It represents the failure of man's attempt to constitute himself. Instead we are confronted with our fear of powerlessness, helplessness, loss of control. This fear is fundamental and common to all mankind. In the seizure it only finds its dramatic expression.

IV

If this interpretation is correct, then every time we have to deal with epilepsy we also have to deal with our own fears, and at such occasions the need for social and religious meanings is awakened. Protestant theology is interpreting experience in the sense of that which ultimately concerns, as the great Protestant theologian *Paul Tillich* states. This points to a transcendent reality, which – in the language of faith – can only be expressed symbolically. Symbols can make us aware of the hidden depths of our existence by taking root in the unconscious of our own being and at the same time pointing out beyond the realm of reality into eternity- or as Paul Tillich would say: to the non-ultimate.

On a symbolic level a seizure has to do with death and life, meaningless and meaning. The stiffness could be interpreted as an intimation of dying. The uncontrolled crying out as a scream of death. The falling down as a falling into emptiness. The unconsciousness as the experience of the absence of self. The involuntary convulsions as an expression of the throes of death. The complete exhaustion at the end as an expression of being delivered by an allmighty power. And finally the awakening could be understood as a resurrection into life.

The seemingly meaningless of a seizure can be interpreted meaningfully in view of the person of Christ, who also cried out on the cross before he died. He did not deny the dark experience of the diabolic and demonic, rather he went through that experience. In Christ we see that the reality which includes both the abyss and the ground of being. Christ who was cast out by society, encounters us in those who experience the signs of existential danger and failure within their own bodies and make it known to us.

The epileptic boy as well as all those fellow-men who suffer from other severe illnesses, in this way, changes from an object for our archaic fears to a representative of the hope that „neither angels nor force, neither death nor life can separate us from the love of God“, as the *Apostle Paul* wrote in his *Letter to the Romans*.

In the end questions remain: What cuts us off from our own vitality? What can we rely on in life? We know only too well how fragmented life is. We can only perceive many things indirectly, like in a mirror. Could it be that each of us is a kind of mirror for the other? In this way we can gain an understanding of ourselves and – maybe – of God. The bible says: Jesus is such a mirror. When we look at him and each other, we see God.

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