

the mystical and the prophetic

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Dear friends, we are now God's children;
what we shall be has not yet been disclosed ...

- 1 John 3:2

the mystical "already now"

the prophetic "not yet"

on the mystical and the prophetic

Preacher: Robert Steiner

Scripture Reading: 1 John 3:1-3

It was the German liberation theologian and poet Dorothee Sölle who noticed that this passage from the first letter of John speaks with two very distinct voices: The mystical "already now" and the prophetic "not yet". Each voice represents a specific tradition and language. And in some ways the life-long challenge for us is to give both aspects of our faith equal attention and to discover how interrelated they are in fact. Sölle did this in her maybe most important book titled *Mysticism and Resistance*. (1997). At one occasion she poignantly said: "Theological reflections without political consequences are nothing but hypocrisy. Every theological statement must also be a political one." (My own translation)

The central verse begins with stating what has become common knowledge and belief, but should actually never stop astounding us: "We are already now children of God". Such a claim speaks to us about the mystical aspect of our faith, the certainty of being not just friends of God, but children of God. It is a status given to us not as a result of any achievements, not as a reward for good behavior. It is rather the result of a declaration of love from above - completely unwarranted! And a little bit later in his letter the writer would help us see what lies at the heart of this child-parent God relationship: "God is love." And therefore: "Whoever remains in love remains in God, and God in them." (1 John 4:16) It is the mystical language of "remaining", of "abiding". It describes a profound union, an experience of oneness rooted in

a love that dwells within us and within which we dwell.

It was the mystic and feminist Teresa of Avila who believed that it was everyone's calling to discover and experience the gift of such oneness within oneself. At the age of 62 she writes what Richard Rohr describes her "mystical masterpiece", *The Interior Castle*. Having received a vision of a crystal castle inside the human soul, with God, the Beloved, at its center she describes the stages of spiritual growth. Mirabai Starr sums up this spiritual journey as follows: "The journey to union with the Beloved is a journey home to the center of ourselves. ... The human soul is so glorious that God himself chooses it as his dwelling place. The path to God, then, leads us on a journey of self-discovery. To know the self is to know God."

Richard Rohr points out that this lay at the heart of C.G. Jung's criticism of Christianity: "It was all external and intellectual; there was no inherent connection between God and the soul." (Rohr) The inner prayer is the heart of Teresa's spirituality. She thinks of prayer as "nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us."

We need to know of course that proposing such an immediacy with God was seen to be a dangerous provocation to the ecclesiastical powers of her time. She suggested a friendship with God which did not have to be mediated by the official priesthood or set liturgical prayers. So already here, in the way she conceives prayer, we notice how a deep mystical experience led to a bold resistance to those who see themselves as the custodians of the church and its belief system and rituals. In many ways her life shows beautifully how interwoven mysticism and resistance can be, how the spiritual should always also become the political, how the one cannot actually be separated from the other.

This comes out clearly also in our passage from 1 John. For after asserting that we are already now God's children, the writer continues to say: "What we will be has not yet been revealed." In other words, despite God's invitation to dwell in God's love very often we do not act like children of God, but rather like enemies of God in the way we live lives at the expense of other lives, at the expense of this earth. The mystical "already now" always goes hand in hand with the



prophetic "not yet". We are not there yet. We continue to try to become who we already are. And we feel the pain of that difference between our calling and our actual behaviour, our being and our doing. At the same time the prophetic "not yet" and the mystical remaining in love grow with each other and nurture each other. They cannot be separated. The prophetic "not yet" without the mystical remaining in love can easily grow into cynicism and despair. The mystical „already now" without the prophetic reaching out can easily become a privatized good feeling religion.

Dorothee Sölle recalls a meeting with the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch in Tübingen. She visited him and raised her own doubts about these hopes for "a new human being". Someone who would live, feel, think, and act differently. In his response Bloch did not refer to the dialectical development, which after the change of the economic and political conditions would bring about the new human being. Instead he quoted the bible to her and quoted 1 John 3:2: "It is not

revealed yet who we will be." In reflecting on his response Sölle realized how this response was in continuity with the very foundation of his thinking, "the awareness of the utopian in religion and the religious in utopia." (My own translation) She realizes how a deep inner yearning for wholeness cannot every be stilled. And any profound experience of love which gives birth to new life only makes this yearning for wholeness stronger. In her own words: "We never become full in God, but only hungrier." (My own translation)

This resonates in many different ways with what we know about Teresa of Avila's spirituality and life. She was born as the third of ten children in 1515. Her father was born as a Jew, but later converted with his family to Christianity. 1531 she enrolled at the Augustinian convent in her home town Avila for further education. After one and half years she returns home because of health challenges.

1535 she joined the Order of the Carmelites in Avila. This was partly motivated by her fear of hell, but also in order to avoid another form of hell: Being locked into married life, which in those times for women meant to suffer discrimination and oppression. Having joined the Carmelite order a long journey of searching for God started. She became sick often. There was a constant inner restlessness. God seemed so far away. The strict, formal prayers did not help her. She suffered self-doubts and felt not being good and faithful enough.

Her breakthrough only came with discovering God within herself. Now everything changed. It opened a door to her inner life, her soul, and to a life in unity with God. There was a growing conviction that God wants to reveal Godself already in this life. Her new experiences and insights led her to take concrete steps to reform the Catholic Church. In 1560, together with fellow Carmelites, she decided to reform the order of the Carmelites. At the heart of the reform was a return to simplicity: Small houses instead of big monasteries; the robes had to be a plain, rough cloth, as used also by poor people; another characteristic was to go barefoot. A contemplative and withdrawn life style was supposed to help to live an inner and centered life. The big monasteries and convents had become too busy and loud. She wanted to go back to small groups of brothers and sisters. 1562 she founded the small convent San Jose. One of her goals was to lead those who stay there to become free human beings. She was critical of mere obedience to the law, of spiritual narrowness, of an inability to make informed judgements as a consequence of harsh and inhumane rules imposed in monasteries and convents. She was hoping that her "small God corner" (this is how she described her communities) would bear fruits, which would contribute to the healing of the church at large. An important aspect of the reform was the personal conversation with God, the listening to the Word of God as a way of gaining certainty that Christ lives in me and acts through me. It is a spirituality which looks at the love of God and love of neighbor holistically. The idea

was to live such a spiritual life in small communities.

She experienced, of course, a lot of male resistance when trying to reform her Church and Order. Imagine the kind of politics and negotiations involved when founding seventeen convents and two monasteries. And we should not forget that convents were places of refuge and safety for women, but also places for education free from male manipulation and control. She took the Carmelite Order back to its origins of simplicity, poverty, and contemplative prayer. And even though as a woman she was forbidden to preach she still managed to assume the role of a spiritual teacher. 1614 she was made a saint. She became the patron of chess players and Spanish writers. Maybe because she knew how to make the right moves in a highly contested game and in addition managed to write several spiritual classics along with poetry and hundreds of letters. And after St Augustine's famous autobiography she was the one who wrote the second large autobiography, encouraged by her confessor. Something which says a lot about her confidence and determination and to what extent she saw her life as a gift of God to be celebrated and shared with others. 1970 Pope Paul VI declared her the first woman Doctor of the Church.

Her experience of the mystical "already now" of God's love sensitised her to the prophetic "not yet", the dissonance between what is and what should be. Being rooted in this profound experience of being one with God, she was able to not only challenge the status of

quo of her own times, but also to face long periods of severe illness. In her early years she was almost declared dead suffering a rigor mortis for three days, followed by three years of almost complete paralysis. Later in life she battled malaria and cervic cancer. The way she tackled reforming her Carmelite order illustrates how the prophetic "not yet" keeps turning every "no" into a "not yet". In other words: With God nothing has to stay the same, not even we ourselves. It is all a matter of time. The certainty is, at some stage, change will happen. There is hope. There is space. There is a movement. And the pain involved is not one of accommodation and indifference, but one of resistance and of not giving up.

Teresa of Avila's conversion experience is very telling about the way the mystical and the prophetic were deeply interwoven in her spirituality and life. At the age of 39 she was deeply affected by a portrayal of the suffering Christ. The sight of him, suffering at the cross, made her realize how much help God needs, and how much God relies on people who dedicated themselves to being God's hands in the world. For God does not have any hands but our hands. There are powerful continuities to Sölle's "God is dead" theology and how God comes alive again through our actions. Sölle also spoke about God having no hands but our own hands. But Teresa of Avila's piety and activism was not performance driven. Salvation was not dependent on certain spiritual practices or acts of charity. It was her rootedness and dwelling in God's love that inspired her solidarity with others.

$\text{♩} = 72$

Na-da te tur-be na-da te_es-pan-te; quien a Dios tie - ne na-da le fal-ta.

Let nothing trouble you. Let nothing frighten you. Whoever has God, lacks nothing.

Na-da te tur - be, na-da te_es-pan-te: só - lo Dios ba - sta.

Let nothing trouble you. Let nothing frighten you. God alone is sufficient.

The doors that were opened within her own soul led to doors being opened in the world around her. And every door that was opened was meant to lead into a greater freedom and joy. She kept reminding her fellow sisters that the inner life should not lead to an inner laziness, but rather stimulate a commitment to compassion and care for others. She was convinced that the attachments they struggled with could not be broken forcefully. She recognized in them an expression of inner hunger. Once that hunger would be stilled, those attachments would simply fall away. She was convinced that "God is sufficient". And this is also how one of her wellknown prayers ends which was later put to music, "Nada te turbe". Her approach to change was characterised by a humility in the best sense of the world - being connected with the earth, the "humus", in gratitude and in hope. Sölle echoes such connection when she maintains: "We should eat more at the Eucharist and we should pray more when eating."

The more I read about her the more I am convinced that a good sense of humor can help tremendously to hold together the mystical "already now" and the prophetic "not yet". In one of the many anecdotes from her life we hear about her traveling to one of her convents and falling off her donkey. As she lay in the mud with an injured leg she is said to have prayed: "Lord,

you couldn't have picked a worse time for this to happen. Why would you let this happen?" And the response she heard is: "That is how I treat my friends." To which Teresa then responded, "And that is why you have so few of them!" Here are a few more examples of her witty and wicked sense of humor:

The first line of her autobiography reads: "Having virtuous and God-fearing parents would have been enough for me to be good if I were not so wicked." After having spent quite some time on explaining the nature of prayer she kind of apologizes saying, "It seems to me I have explained this matter, but perhaps I've made it clear only to myself." "I am more afraid of one unhappy sister than a crowd of evil spirit." One of her most charming prayers goes as follows: "From silly devotions and sour-faced saints, good Lord, deliver us." Susan M. Garthwaite speaks about the saint's "playful teasing of God" ("The Humor of St. Teresa of Avila", in: *Spiritual life*, Spring 2009)

In her theological grappling with the suffering in the world Sölle comes to the conclusion: "At the end of the search and the question about God does not stand an answer, but an embrace." (My own translation) Let us then replace all the „no-s“ we encounter with bold and hopeful „not-yet-s“.

Amen