



on exorcism

Robert Steiner

introducing the Word

We might not be faithful in embodying Jesus' vision. But by going back to our origins and foundational stories we try to remain faithful to those beginnings and open ourselves to the possibility of something new unsettling our world.

Paradigmatic for such an approach is the story of Jesus meeting Peter at the sea of Galilee. Peter and his crew did not catch a single fish all night. There is disappointment and tiredness. The biblical verse that Heinrich Schütz put to music gives expression to such frustration and exhaustion, composed under the impression of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). Eight million people died from violence, famine, and plague.

And so I imagine Schütz sitting down at the piano: If you say so, Jesus, then I compose another song, that gives hope to our lives, that makes us dream of a new future, a life lived in peace and harmony. Beautiful to see, how this little verse from a truly memorable scene the Gospel

writers have created, was meant to weave hope into the fabric of a generation ravished by 30 years of war.

Each Sunday we gather around the words of our Scripture, praying and hoping that they will become our Word, the Word that Jesus speaks to us today. A Word that inspires and re-awakens the desire to pursue his vision and compassion for the world.

Description

Heinrich Schütz: "Meister, wir haben die ganze Nacht" (SWV 317 – Kleine Geistliche Konzerte II)

„Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." (Luke 5:5)

scripture reading

Luke 13:31-35 (NIV)

31 At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you." 32 He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today

and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' 33 In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside

Jerusalem! 34 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. 35 Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Our passage presents us with five verses which seem to have been stitched together from previously independent sayings. We are introduced to three important protagonists as the story of Christ's passion unfolds: Herod, who represents the Roman oppressor; the Pharisees, who are caught in between the firing lines; and Jesus, who is presented as the fearless exorcist and healer. We are invited to consider how differently power can be exercised.

a dangerous city

Jerusalem is a dangerous city. It is dangerous because it is occupied and ruled by foreign powers that instill fear and immediately quench any form of resistance. The Roman reign is ruthless. Herod and Pilate epitomize such powers. Later in the story of Christ's passion Jesus would be passed around between the two of them. Their portrayal in our Gospels is biased, with elements of propaganda, to gain favor among the Roman elite. 40 years down the line the early Christian congregations are suffering persecution and trying hard to find acceptance from those in power. From what historians managed to re-construct, Herod and Pilate did not hesitate to kill those who stood their way. They were merciless in their determination to quench any form of resistance against the Roman empire and to prove their loyalty to the emperor. It continues to be a tragedy with far reaching consequences, that the Jewish authorities were portrayed as those to blame for Jesus' execution. The reality was that they had no power whatsoever to order an execution. It is most unfortunate how the traditional Jesus movies portray Pilate as the weak and undecisive ruler who cannot find any fault with Jesus and finally washes his hands in innocence. It shifts all the blame onto the the Jewish leaders who come across as power hungry and blood thirsty. We are made to forget that they too had to find ways of surviving the brutality of Roman rule and carve out an existence for themselves. They were caught between a rock and a hard stone. When we follow the heated discussion in the Sanhedrin as described in John's Gospel, we will realize that their

concern was also the wellbeing of their own people. It was a real dilemma: If they let the people have their say and hail Jesus as the Messiah, the Romans would not hesitate to put a quick violent stop to it. But if he is not the expected Messiah - and how can he be, with no real military power to back him up - then Jerusalem is heading for disaster. And this is exactly what happened in the year 70 CE. The Romans crushed a major resistance and Jerusalem was completely destroyed. The logic was one of despair: Rather sacrifice the one, then risk the downfall of the whole nation! But it must have been a decision. And we know that Jesus had sympathizers among the Pharisees. And poor Judas might have followed a very similar logic. It was not his greed or lust for money, but his concern for the people's wellbeing, that made him hand over Jesus into the hands of those who had all the power. Or was he even hoping that this would push Jesus to finally rise to the occasion and assume the power of God's anointed Messiah? We don't know. But he does not deserve the role of villain and traitor bestowed upon him. The recorded suicide speaks another language.

This interpretation of the events leading to Jesus' crucifixion also resonates with the depiction of the Pharisees in our text. They show a sincere concern for Jesus' wellbeing: Watch out, Jesus, Herod Antipas has you on his radar. Remember what happened to your teacher John the Baptist. Antipas has gone as far as believing that you are John the Baptist, who has returned from the dead. You will be the next, if you keep stirring. And here is Herod Antipas, whose obsession is with power and

control. He surrendered to the temptations Jesus was able to resist in the wilderness. Disappointed of not having become the sole heir of his father's kingdom (Herod the Great), he keeps trying to expand his influence. As the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea he builds the new city of Tiberias at the sea of Galilee and names it after the Roman emperor. In order to gain new territory he marries his brother's wife Herodias. John the Baptist challenged his thirst for power. Richard Rohr points out that the primary issue here is not adultery, but endogamy, the creation of a family dynasty, the attempt to centralize power in the hand of one family, one clan. It was a tyrant's way to solidify his political rule. The result is a deeply corrupt political system, a state captured by one family, spinning an intricate web of control. The present Zondo Commission in South Africa is busy exposing the extent of state capture the country suffered under Zuma's presidency. Every new finding reveals how widespread this web was and how many political leaders are implicated. A conspiracy which showed no concern for the wellbeing of the people, but was driven solely by selfish interests. John the Baptist was not afraid to speak truth to power. But he is shamelessly killed. Just as the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who entered the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul, but never made it out alive. So many present day journalists have taken on a prophetic ministry. Their courage and dedication deserves our admiration and gratitude. The journalists themselves would of course say that the real heroes are the whistleblowers.

Jesus does not mince his words. He calls Herod a fox. To call someone a fox carries a strong emotional and moral charge. It is usually during election times and on political campaigns that politicians call each other names. Animal names can sum up complex concepts concisely. A fox did not have a very good reputation. One of Aesop's famous fables tells us more about what antiquity thought about the fox. It is kind of striking that the writer of Luke's Gospel has composed the passage in such a way that both the fox and the hen are mentioned almost in one breath. It is hard to tell if an allusion to the fable is intended. But the parallels are certainly fascinating and open up a further interpretative dimension. Considering the continuities and discontinuities between the biblical text and Aesop's fable assists us to bring into greater focus what the Gospel story is trying to convey.

the fox and the cock (Aesop for children, 1919)

One bright evening as the sun was sinking on a glorious world a wise old Cock flew into a tree to roost. Before he composed himself to rest, he flapped his wings three times and crowed loudly. But just as he was about to put his head under his wing, his beady eyes caught a flash of red and a glimpse of a long pointed nose, and there just below him stood Master Fox. "Have you heard the wonderful news?" cried the Fox in a very joyful and excited manner. "What news?" asked the Cock very calmly. But he had a queer, fluttery feeling inside him,

for, you know, he was very much afraid of the Fox. "Your family and mine and all other animals have agreed to forget their differences and live in peace and friendship from now on forever. Just think of it! I simply cannot wait to embrace you! Do come down, dear friend, and let us celebrate the joyful event." "How grand!" said the Cock. "I certainly am delighted at the news." But he spoke in an absent way, and stretching up on tiptoes, seemed to be looking at something afar off. "What is it you see?" asked the Fox a little anxiously. "Why, it looks to me like a couple of Dogs coming this way. They must have heard the good news and—"But the Fox did not wait to hear more. Off he started on a run. "Wait," cried the Cock. "Why do you run? The Dogs are friends of yours now!" "Yes," answered the Fox. "But they might not have heard the news. Besides, I have a very important errand that I had almost forgotten about." The Cock smiled as he buried his head in his feathers and went to sleep, for he had succeeded in outwitting a very crafty enemy. The trickster is easily tricked.

courageous vulnerability

The fox is portrayed as cunning and deceiving, corrupt and devious, but also as a little bit dumb. The good news he pretends to present to the cock are fake news. Just as the good news of the *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace) were everything but good. This period of so called „peace" lasted for 200 years across the Roman Empire, and began with the reign of Augustus,. But to call it peace was rather a euphemism for a period of harsh and brutal colonialism and imperialism. The difference in the Gospel story is of course, that he fox is not dealing

with a clever cock, who teases him from the safety of a tree. In the Gospel version we have a Jesus who compares himself to a mother hen, who is less concerned about her own safety than about protecting her children, and who speaks not from a place of strength and safety, but from a place of profound powerlessness. To spread your wings over your chicks is to expose your breast. It is an image of unparalleled vulnerability. It highlights the courage with which Jesus challenged Herod and his henchmen.

But it also raises questions about Jesus' mission. He is clearly aware of the risks that prophets face and that he too might lose his life. It calls forth a lament about Jerusalem, which would equally apply to other cities ruled by iron fists. It also speaks to the reality that love continues to be crucified by policies and laws that privilege a few and leave the majority in the cold. But it doesn't help us understand how Jesus could think that the display of such vulnerable love can save and liberate his people. What was he hoping for as he continued on his way to Jerusalem? Was there a plan of action?

Was Jesus expecting God's miraculous intervention, bringing about the consummation of God's kingdom on earth as it is already in heaven? Or was he hoping to start a peaceful protest, a movement which would gather enough momentum to overthrow the foreign rule? A Palestinian spring?

The traditional reading of Jesus as the suffering servant, who has to die on the cross to redeem humanity and to atone for our sins, avoids the difficulty of such a historical re-construction. It suggests that Jesus lived in order to die. Jesus' death epitomizes his ultimate victory over sin and evil. It is a theological meta-narrative, far removed from the historical realities on the ground. It speaks about Jesus as a sacrifice to God, which lends itself to misconstrue God as an angry father, who needs the sacrifice of innocent blood in order to be pacified. The Gospel stories are transparent enough to counter such a reading and rather propose that Jesus died, because he wanted to live. In other words, from the beginning Jesus' mission was to bring a fullness of life, especially to those at the margins. It was his commitment to this vision, his willingness to stay in the place of love at all costs, that led to his death. The cross then symbolizes both humanity's resistance to change and God's commitment to love even God's enemies. God's response to the death of Jesus is not revenge, but the unexpected and undeserved gift of forgiveness, offered to the world through the risen Christ. It moves us from redemptive violence to redemptive love. At the heart of such redemptive love lies an incredible courage. And as Brené Brown's research has shown: Such courage does not derive from strength, but from vulnerability, which in turn generates authenticity and genuine compassion.

regaining control

Jesus' campaign is described as one of exorcisms and healings. When we hear exorcism, we tend to think of scenarios from horror movies, with a screaming woman and an old priest in a black cassock holding up the crucifix. Or we think of so called prayer camps, where exorcisms are performed for those with a mental illness or physical disabilities, often thought to be stemming from witchcraft, curses or demons. Hence my reservation and caution towards the idea of exorcism.

But for the Gospel writers exorcism constitutes a fundamental aspect of Jesus' healing ministry. Our text speaks about Jesus' firm commitment to continue to exorcise and heal, and to not be afraid of Herod's threats. It suggests a deeper connection between Jesus' resistance to political power and his ministry to the people. It opens up a fuller understanding of why exorcism was a vital aspect of Jesus' healing ministry. A careful consideration of the suffering that comes with militant occupation and colonial rule will help to re-frame our view of exorcism and to understand its central role for Jesus. It will also challenge us to think of how to recover this aspect of healing for our own ministry in a country that has suffered under colonial rule and more recently bore the injustices of Apartheid.

The best way to describe the climate in Galilee during the first century CE would be to speak about "nervous conditions". It is the title of a novel by the Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga (first published 1988), whose story introduces us to various broken characters who all suffer some form

of nervous condition in the aftermath of colonial oppression. The description is taken from the introduction by Jean-Paul Satre to Frantz Fanon's book *Wretched of the Earth*.

Historical research on first century Galilee established that 9 out of 10 persons lived close to the subsistence level or below it. A middle class was missing and the state showed little care for the poor. Startling inequality and the inability to change one's social status were responsible for a sense of powerlessness. Herod's building projects demanded a lot more taxes and forced labour. The provinces became a main source of revenue through taxes for the Roman State. Provincial governors, tax collectors and moneylenders worked for the imperial services and became very wealthy. The majority of people lived in rural areas and small towns. Most of them were peasants living from agriculture. They had very little control over their political and economic situation. Within such an agrarian society wealth was based on the privilege of owning land. But only a small number of wealthy, elite families had control over most of the land. The land itself was worked by tenant farmers and slaves. Villages were taxed by the state, which included payments in kind and conscription to public labour or military service. But the tax burden was in fact double. On the one hand Rome collected taxes from its provinces. On the other hand local vassal kings, like Herod Antipas, demanded taxes to sustain a luxurious life style, and build palaces and cities. In Galilee tithes and offering to the Temple and priesthood added further financial pressure.

Poor harvests caused incredible suffering and even starvation. Furthermore, besides the imperial levies, cities gained revenues from capitation, rents, tolls, salt taxes and sales taxes. In addition, annual exactions drove some peasants into debt and further impoverishment. There was of course the possibility of loans, but the interest was outrageously high. Droughts, floods, and disease made repayment at times impossible and led to debt servitude and even loss of land. Recent findings have shown that poverty was wide spread in the Roman empire, in both rural and urban areas. At most 10% managed to secure a livelihood, while 90% of the population had to deal with continuous food insecurity. In fact two thirds of the population suffered severe or extreme poverty.

The experience common to all was that it could happen very quickly that one lost possession over one's life. For such dispossession did not only mean loss of ownership over one's land. It also affected one's sense of identity and mental wellbeing. It cannot be a coincidence that in one of the exorcisms the demon introduces himself to Jesus as "Legion", which is a Roman military description for ten cohorts, made up of roughly 5000 men. It alludes to the overpowering military presence of Rome as a serious threat to one's mental health. Exorcism, in this context, was about regaining control over one's life, becoming self-possessed again. An exorcism signaled compassion and healing in defiance of imperial exploitation. It was not addressing a moral issue. Its provocation was not the transgression of natural

laws, but the public confrontation of maddening injustice and a radical exposure of what Roman occupation had done to the human psyche: a nervous condition. It is about being driven towards self-destruction (note how the demons enter into the pigs who then throw themselves over the cliff) versus being in charge of one's life. The exorcism begins with the identification and naming of the destructive force within the man's psyche. It involves a process of realization and re-integration of an aspect of his personality which developed a life of its own, became a person within the person. Such healing is not aimed at perfection, but at wholeness. And wholeness is about knowing and integrating all aspects of our being, including what Carl Jung described as our shadows. Such integration leads to control and self-possession. One can only imagine what this man must have experienced and suffered to live a life completely removed from society, naked and vulnerable, haunted by past trauma, with the dead being his only refugee and the tombs his sleeping place. Thomas Moore explains exorcism in a similar vein, when he suggests that "Some people are haunted by other deep and powerful negative images from their past - a remembered cruelty, a sexual betrayal, or a withholding or withdrawal of love. As they grow older, they may glimpse the influence of these painful memories and then try to deal with them. At this point the struggle may become so intense that the inner demonic forces begin to show themselves as voices or even faint presences. They may actually make demands and give orders."

How does one integrate those insights into a pastoral ministry without a proper psychological training? The kind of healing ministry exercised by Jesus is very much at the interface of the disciplines of sociology, theology, and psychology. It becomes clear that liberation from possession calls for an interdisciplinary approach: It identifies and confronts systemic evil; it sources itself from a deep understanding of God's desire for healing; and it acknowledges the psychological trauma caused by injustice. In the context of South Africa's history of colonialism and Apartheid, a bold and imaginative process of restitution is needed. But such a process cannot be successful without the healing of memories, which must involve certain forms of exorcism. It seems that only now, 25 years into the new dispensation, we realize that the ghosts of the past keep coming back, and will not stop haunting us, until we have allowed them to show up and acknowledged their existence. Thomas Moore refers to "inner figures" that usually remain in the background, experienced as passions and urges that don't have to necessarily have to overpower us. "But," he continues, "there are times in the lives of most people when they come out of hiding. If you could stop and think for a moment when you feel driven or compelled, you might be able to give a face to a strong feeling. It might be the face of someone you have known, some aspect of yourself you recognize, or it may be a complete stranger."

Walking through the streets of Obs at night, a popular though slightly scruffy student neighborhood, I see a growing presence of people living on the streets. Some of them are day patients from the nearby Psychiatric Hospital. Some of them have been driven out of their homes in the Cape Flats because of a drug or alcohol addiction. There are those who show great skills in surviving on the streets. But there also others who seem to have completely withdrawn into their own inner world, hardly making connections with what is happening outside of them. What would a ministry of exorcism and healing look like in such a context? How would one mobilize a concerted intervention involving the synergy of a social worker, a psychologist and a pastor?

Jesus showed a confident self-possession to challenge narcissism, paranoia and aggression. Having gone through 40 days in the wilderness and having learnt to resist the selfish drives of wanting to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful, he had enough clarity of insight and vision to confront the destructive forces within us and around us. His authority did not derive from a particular status or the accumulation of power and wealth, but from allowing himself to be a channel of God's desire for liberation and healing.

We, too, are sent out to exorcise and heal. Amen.

Acknowledgements:

My historical understanding of first century Galilee is based on the research by Sakari Häkkinen, Norman Gottwald, Richard Horsley, and Bruce Malina. Ched Myer's understanding of exorcisms as symbolic actions which have a political character helped me to re-frame Jesus' exorcisms as an integral part of his healing ministry. Thomas Moore's psychological insights into exorcisms enabled me to reflect more on how to resist demythologizing exorcisms and translate them more meaningfully into our present context.