

on finding your voice

- Robert Steiner

"Fairy tales do not tell children the dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed."

- G.K. Chesterton

Scripture Reading: Galatians 5:22-26

Taming Dragons

Children need to be reassured that good will ultimately triumph over evil. But as one grows older one recognizes that violence only begets new violence. And as one gets to know oneself better, one realizes that dragon like behaviour is often not so much driven by hatred, than by experiences of rejection and fear. I am therefore glad that some of the more modern fairy tales don't end with killing the dragon, but rather with taming the dragon.

What Pentecost has in common with fairy tales is that the story comes to us from a distant time and place. What we read there does not always match our own experiences and rather fills us with both yearning and wonder. Miraculous interventions in fairy tales don't raise the question of historicity for us. We don't ask, if this really happened. They communicate a belief and truth that is not factual, but nevertheless true and important. The child within us feeds on the promise that in the end all will be well. The story of Pentecost intends to leave us with a very similar hope: The story of Jesus continues and his Spirit will continue to be with us to confront and overcome the dragons that threaten our dreams of peace and our hopes for caring communities where all find life. Luke's account of the early beginnings of the Jesus movement probably presents us more with an ideal of community than with historically accurate facts. But in its symbolism, it is a powerful antidote to ideologies that sow division and hatred. The tongues of fire dancing on the apostles' heads are meant to counter the wild fires of nationalism, ethnocentrism, classism, ageism and sexism. Slowly but surely the insight grows that, with the words of the apostle Paul, in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female". It is a oneness that is neither homogenous nor monolithic. It breathes respect for difference and rejoices in diversity. It is a oneness of prophetic vision, inspired by God's wind: she knows no discrimination and carries the seed of transformation. And in the process everyone is allowed to find their own particular and unique voice. The ancient dream of participation is being realised. Pentecost may therefore be, as the writer Arnold Stadler pointed out, God's strongest declaration of love: All are filled with the Spirit. And as a result everyone is given the belief that their voice and their story matters and needs to be heard. It is along those lines that Stadler considers Pentecost to be the festival of writers and poets.

Inspiring Poets

We know that when inspiration strikes, the ink flows, and the words simply pour out of our mouths, as it happened to Peter and all those who suddenly stood up and spoke in unknown languages of God's commitment to this earth and all its people. And certainly the writer of the Acts of the Apostle, credited with both the Gospel of Luke and Acts, did not have a writer's block. The story of Jesus is to be continued. With God in every end dwells the promise of a new beginning. And it is marked by tongues of fire dancing on our heads inviting us all into a dance of love. This is what happens when the heart overflows with exuberance and joy about a deep and renewed sense of God's continued presence. Luke's account does not only show us how quickly the Gospel spread all the way to Rome. More importantly Acts attempts to give testimony to how the Spirit continued to break down age old barriers and divisions, bringing people together into a community where all are affirmed as children of God. The unfolding of the story in the Acts of the Apostles is a testimony to such revelation and a witness to what it means to follow the inner stirrings of God's Spirit. Breath in Spirit, and breath out fear. It is, as I shared last week, the fulfilment of an ancient threefold dream: the dream, that we will understand each other across the divides we have been born into; the dream of everyone feeling that they have something to contribute, that their voice matters and that all are to participate in building this community; and the dream of a deeper sharing, so that no one will be in need. These are bold dreams and to hold on to them brings beauty and promise to our little community.

Stadler himself started off by studying theology for the priesthood. But in the course of time he sensed a calling to proclaim the Good News not through preaching, but through writing novels, which in their own way echo the Gospel story for a new generation and time. It was the historian Leopold von Ranke who believed that every age should have their own Gospel, a so called "fifth Gospel". And it is along those lines that Stadler considers works of literature, art, and music as instruments of God's Spirit, expressions of a fifth Gospel. A good story, novel, poem, painting or piece of music can become a striking embodiment of the Spirit, opening up new ways of seeing God at work and of celebrating the various fruits of the Spirit. Some authors portray the protagonist in a way that he or she becomes a Christ figure. Authors like Victor Hugo have the gift to evoke compassion towards those deemed "sinners" or "losers" by society. Their God given dignity is restored. We hear the heartbeat of the first Gospels, the passion and compassion that gave rise to "the people of the way", as Christians were first referred to according to Acts. And we are reminded that without love we cannot enter another person's life. The writer Georg Büchner maintained that we are to love human beings in order to understand someone's character and nature. No one should seem to us too lowly or too ugly. Only then would we be able to truly see life from someone else's perspective. A wonderful variation of the commandment to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Voice to the voiceless

Stadler is not alone with his claim that Pentecost is the festival of writers and poets. The American poet Denise Levertov, in her book *Breathing The Water*, dedicates one of her poems to Caedmon, the poet credited with the earliest recorded poem of English Poetry, composed as early as the 7th century. It is a hymn on the creation. The famous historian Bede (672 to 735 AD) attributes it to Caedmon. Bede talks about Caedmon in *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV. 24: *Quod in monasterio eius fuerit frater, cui donum canendi sit divinitus concessum* – 'How in this monastery there was a brother, to whom the gift of song was divinely given'. Caedmon was an illiterate herdsman. But thanks to a moment of divine revelation he started to produce spontaneous poetry, generally taken as marking the beginning of Anglo-Saxon poetry. In order to fully understand Levertov's poem, we need to get some background about Caedmon. As legend would have it, he was a shy cowherd, tending the animals which belonged to what later became the monastery of Whitby Abbey. He was unable to sing and did not know any poetry. So when the harp was passed around in the feast hall, he would quietly recuse himself in order not to embarrass himself in front of those more literate friends that knew how to recite and sing poetry. But on one of such evenings, when he fell asleep with the animals in his care, in his dreams he received a revelation. An apparition appeared encouraging him to sing of „the beginning of created things.“ And in his dreams he started to sing. And the memory of the dream stayed with him, allowing him to recite the verses revealed to him. And from then on the ice seems to have been broken. He continued to produce more religious poetry and it was celebrated by all as a blessing from God. He went on to take his vows and became a monk.

Levertov's poem turns this moment of revelation into a true Pentecost moment. It is the liberation and affirmation of someone who thought he had no voice. And just as at the first Pentecost those deemed servants and slaves started to prophesy, have vision and dreams, in the same way Caedmon, thanks to a profound dream, becomes a wordsmith of note.

All others talked as if
talk were a dance.
Clodhopper I, with clumsy feet
would break the gliding ring.
Early I learned to
hunch myself
close by the door:
then when the talk began
I'd wipe my
mouth and wend
unnoticed back to the barn
to be with the warm beasts,
dumb among body sounds
of the simple ones.
I'd see by a twist

of lit rush the motes
of gold moving
from shadow to shadow
slow in the wake
of deep untroubled sighs.
The cows
munched or stirred or were still. I
was at home and lonely,
both in good measure. Until
the sudden angel affrighted me—light effacing
my feeble beam,
a forest of torches, feathers of flame, sparks upflying:
but the cows as before
were calm, and nothing was burning,
nothing but I, as that hand of fire
touched my lips and scorched by tongue
and pulled by voice
into the ring of the dance.

South Africa still has five million people who are illiterate. They all in their own way experience marginalization and humiliation. A terrible legacy of Apartheid. Levertov's poetic interpretation of Caedmon's story helps us to ground Pentecost in the everyday challenges our society faces, especially in the area of education. The coming of the Spirit gives voice to the voiceless and provides Caedmon with access to the monastery, a place of both contemplation and education. It is a Spirit which does not discriminate and which overcomes past divides. To source ourselves in this Spirit is to transform society in a way that all have access to a life of continuous self-development. To be open to the Spirit is to be open to change and to be willing to listen carefully to what the Spirit is saying to us today. The Jesus of John's Gospel promises new insights and truths, not heard before, but revealed to us through the Spirit, when we are ready to hear and bear them. In his farewell speech we hear him reassure his disciples of a continued inspiration: "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when she, the Spirit of truth, comes, she will guide you into all the truth." (John 16:12-13a) Such truth includes the challenge of overcoming a long history of patriarchy, which led to God being created in the image of man. Our Hebrew ancestors thought of the Spirit (*ruach*) as feminine. And also in Aramaic, the language considered to have been spoken by Jesus, the Spirit is feminine. Unfortunately the Greek language of the New Testament turned the Spirit into neuter (following the tradition of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), which gives us both options. So, when Jesus refers to the Spirit in the Greek New Testament, he refers to it as „it“. Only where he speaks of the Spirit as *parakletos*, the Greek word for counsellor or advocate, only there does he refer to the Spirit as „he“, for the pronoun of the Greek word for counsellor is masculine. But if we really want to be faithful to our faith tradition, then we should favour she and not he for the Spirit. Remember, that the Spirit, God's advocate will lead us into all truth.

Liberating truths

Such truth includes the most astounding insights the apostle Paul shared with the congregation in Rome. He envisions the Spirit of God breathing, dwelling and groaning in all of creation, ready to give birth to a new heaven and earth. God's Spirit comforts those silenced by pain, breathing and sighing deep within everything created, translating creation's sighs of despair into prayers that articulate the profound longing for redemption (see Romans 8). The church father Augustine is quite right when he encourages us to protect the mystery of such moving solidarity: "If you think you have understood it, then it is not God." It is a solidarity that is built on a most unlikely union between the holy and the unholy. It is possible because Jesus interpreted Leviticus' dictum "Be holy as God is holy" as "Be compassionate as God is compassionate". Holiness is no longer about separation, but about connection. Holiness is no longer exclusive and defensive, but inclusive and infectious. A distinctively different approach from how the Pharisees interpreted the call to holiness.

Gerd Theissen compares such union between the holy and unholy to God moving into our humble homes: This God does not expect perfection and completion (morally or psychologically), but is quite willing to move

in immediately and help us with whatever renovation and restoration is needed. This God does not just want to move in for rent, but rather wants to make our home God's own home and dwelling place. Such union does not only give expression to humanity's longing for God, but also, and that is even more surprising, to God's longing for connection and friendship with everything created. It is a union that needs no priestly mediation and speaks of intimacy and the priesthood of all believers.

It is a union which lifts those who feel the poverty of their own spirits to a new level of understanding of their unique calling and dignity. God's Spirit, therefore, functions as a "homing device" (Richard Rohr), which keeps reminding us to draw our sense of identity and self-worth from who we are in God's eyes, and not from the way others see us or from the way we see ourselves. Everyone has a voice and the same rights, independent of their status in society. It engenders a democratic spirit which was concretized within the Reformed tradition by the Synod system of representatives, headed up not by a bishop, but by a moderator facilitating the process of discernment and decision making.

Such divine/human union is not the result of hard work and constant striving, but the result of sourcing ourselves differently. This is why Paul does not speak of the works of the Spirit, but the fruits of the Spirit. He evokes the image of natural growth, of transformation as a gift, and of change as the result of knowing our roots. Remember my reflection on the abstract painter Jule Olitski and how, before he gets going, kneels and says one prayer only: God, help me to get out of the way. It is a matter of trusting the process, trusting the Spirit within us. But it certainly is counter intuitive to a society ruled by meritocracy, where you only reap what you sow and only earn what you deserve.

It is a union which encourages participation and instills self-esteem. For all too long debates on humanity's sinfulness were shaped by a male perspective. Martin Luther described the quintessence of sin as the homo incurvatus in se, a self-centered and inwardly turned life. But Feminist scholars rightly challenged such reductive approach to sin. In a patriarchal setting sin is not only about self-important arrogance, but also about misplaced self-debasement. Patriarchy's intentional side-lining and degrading of talents and gifts that women have to offer was quickly internalized. And to believe those voices was surrendering oneself to the lie that one has nothing to offer and should rather play it safe and bury one's talents.

Such union encourages us to listen more carefully to the inner stirrings of our heart. We should be bolder in trusting our intuitions, our sixth sense, our gut feelings. Of course, the Spirit cannot be reduced to such experiences, for "the finite cannot contain the infinite" (finitum non capax infinitum; John Calvin). But the Christian teachings of humanity's fall (a concept not familiar to Jewish scholars) has led to an excessive suspicion towards ourselves and a neglect of what has been described as our "original blessing". This God is bigger than our heart, especially when our heart condemns us (1 John 3:20).

Spirit of God, come and guide us into all the truth and help us to open ourselves to those truths we cannot bear at the moment. Amen.

References: The idea of Pentecost being about finding your own voice was inspired by an interview of Arnold Stadler, conducted by Jan Ehlert, titled "Über das Glück des Beginnens" (in: NDR Kultur - Glaubenssachen). My account of Caedmon is based on the article „Caedmon, The First English Poet“, by Ben Johnson. Gerd Theissen uses the wonderful image of God moving in and explores its implications in his Pentecost sermon (27th May 2012). And Richard Rohr's daily meditations on the Spirit offered wonderful little jewels.