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Bible Study Isaiah 41.10

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“Have no fear, for I am with you.” (Isaiah 41.10)

The scent of fear

There is nothing exceptional when God speaks to the human being in the book of the prophet Isaiah: “Have no fear”. “Have no fear” is an oft-repeated motif in the biblical narrative. It is used by the prophets, and recorded in the Gospels.

The way the motif keeps repeating itself tells us something about how the Bible portrays the human condition. The utterance “Have no fear” testifies to the existence of fear. It is real; it is a given fact in God’s world. In the Bible fear is taken seriously; it is recognised and met with the response, “have no fear”. The tone here is of the essence. This is neither a restriction, nor is it a moral demand. The tone is consoling, encouraging and congenial: have no fear, for I am with you. Its purpose is to drive away and alleviate fear. There is no shame in being afraid.

When I read these messages in the Bible, I realise that I do so as an affluent Northern European living in social and economic safety. People like me have experienced exceptionally little fear from a global or historical perspective. For the most part fear in our lives has been marginalised to the private sphere. It is experienced collectively only in association with terrorist attacks and other events whose impact derives from our underlying sense of security. When Finland was shaken by the school shootings some years ago, I received a letter from Bishop Medardo Gomez of the Lutheran Church of El Salvador. He wrote that he understood our shock because we lived in such a secure country, whereas they, he continued, had been tattooed with violence and sorrow.

Nevertheless, I have sensed a new scent of fear that has recently spread all over Europe. It has crossed the Mediterranean with people who have been tattooed with an experience of fear that has caused them to flee. On top of this another scent of fear has seeped into the European atmosphere. It is sensed in uncertainty and in the experience of a threat that is difficult to discern. However, its effects are tangible in restrictive migration policies, the growth of hate speech and aggressive reactions against minorities and the unfamiliar. It becomes dangerous if this scent of fear begins to dictate our decision-making. There is a danger that decisions are justified because of

perceived threats, and the emphasis is placed on the control of the margins. Let me emphasise that this is all about the scent of fear, not fear as such, because this relates to something vague and intangible that we sense in the atmosphere that seems impossible to counter with rational arguments or moral demands.

This is the context in which I propose to read the biblical narrative about fear. I shall begin with Isaiah: “Have no fear”.

As aliens

The background of Isaiah’s text lies in the historical situation in the Middle East of 500 BC, which was no less unclear and violent than today. As a consequence of the power politics of the day, in 587 BC Jerusalem had been destroyed and the majority of the people of Judah had been exiled to Babylon. Isaiah resounds with this context and experience. The experience is of a forced departure from the people’s own land, from all to which they were attached and on which they based their life: the experience of struggling to survive in an alien society, in the midst of an alien culture; the experience of trying to settle down, with no suggestion that their reception was a particularly kind one.

This was not simply about bare survival but above all about identity, both individual and collective. Previously, the temple cult at Jerusalem had been at the epicentre of religious and ethnic identity. Now, it was destroyed, and the people could not take it with them. The experience was traumatic and full of uncertainty. The deep meaning of “Have no fear, for I am with you” arises from this: God had not been left behind in the temple at Jerusalem; God walked with God’s exiled people.

During the exile the people’s narratives became more important: their narratives about identity, about who they were, where they belonged to, and where they had come from. This leads me to ask: what kind of narratives are formed in the cultures of those who have arrived in Europe as refugees, and how is that identity formed today? What are the meaningful stories of their identity in the suburbs of Paris, Brussels or Helsinki? Who hears them, and to whom are they told?

At the time of the Jewish exile, the narrative of the people of God was the one the people held to. They looked backwards, all the way to their founding myths: indeed, to the same narrative we as churches hold to as we join the biblical narrative.

In this narrative it has been the human portion to have to depart since the very beginning. The man and the woman are driven from paradise, and are forced to leave behind all to which they have grown attached (Gen 3.23-24). Noah has to leave and wander in uncertainty and settle in a place that is alien to him (Gen 6-9). After the attempt to build the tower of Babel “the Lord took away the sense of all languages and from there the Lord sent them away over all the face of the earth” (Gen. 11.9).

The same theme is repeated in the stories of the Patriarchs. Abram leaves his homeland; Jacob is a migrant worker; Joseph migrates to Egypt; Moses is constantly on the move. Everyone is forced to leave. Homelessness, being sent away, alienation and longing are the human portion and destiny.

These were meaningful stories to be told during the Babylonian exile – and they are no less meaningful for us today. When we read them in the context of 60 million people being forced to leave their home country, it is obvious that they communicate the tragedy of what it is to be human in this world. The discourse in my safe world tends to view this situation from above, as if the people on the move exited ordinary human life and could be treated as objects: not subjects, but as objects of our moral examination or our moral action to return them to what is deemed to be normal. But the founding myths direct us to another kind of seeing: the people of God tells a story of a humanity that is tragically homeless. In the biblical narrative, this is the norm. In the midst of it, God says: “Fear not, for I am with you."

A Country called Exile

Of all the stories of exile in the Bible I particularly want to mention the story of Cain. After Cain had killed Abel God said to Cain: “No longer will the earth give you her fruit as the reward of your work; you will be a wanderer in flight over the earth.” (Gen. 4.12) In this account violence, harsh natural circumstances and the loss of the means of life come together as they do today, and force people to leave.

Cain feared that what he had done meant there would be no protection for him. God, however, put a mark on Cain to protect him. The more that moral purity, innocence and honour are emphasised in the way asylum seekers are treated, the more carefully we should read this story. It is a story that shatters both the idealisation and the demonisation of the refugee.

Cain settles in the land of Nod to the east of Eden. The name of that country means ‘exile’. Cain is a person whose portion is to live in a country called Exile. And there are now more and more people in Europe who carry a passport to no other country. The question posed by Cain, whom God protects, is: what does it mean to be the church in a country called Exile?

Purity and holiness

I return to Isaiah and to the Babylonian exile. In an alien environment there is a need to strengthen religious and ethnic identity by rehearsing the narrative of the people of God. Furthermore, to safeguard that identity a set of rules and regulations emphasising purity and holiness is presented. In the multicultural metropolis of Babylon the law replaces the role of the temple cult as the anchor (änkör) of religious identity. The people of God are distinguished and recognised by their own code of conduct.

This code of conduct is marked by the stories and experiences of exile. You shall treat the stranger well; you shall not return a runaway slave; hospitality is the mark of the ethics of the people of God. Anyone who wishes to belong to this people must understand what it is to be a stranger, to be in flight and to be oppressed. The experience of life in Egypt serves as a collective memory, as in Deuteronomy 24, 21-22: “When you are pulling the grapes from your vines, do not take up those which have been dropped; let them be for the man from a strange land, the child without a father, and the widow. Keep in mind that you were a servant in the land of Egypt: for this is why I give you orders to do this.”

It is much more powerful to invoke this collective memory than it is merely to demand that all should follow an ethical code. Our task now is to invoke the European collective memory by reminding ourselves what may happen if people are treated unequally or suspiciously because of their background, religion or nationality.

The fair and benevolent treatment of the stranger is part of the Old Testament ethical code that has shaped the identity of the people of God in exile and ever since. But there is a dilemma: for just as strangers are to be treated well, they very much remain strangers who do not share the values and identity of those who receive them. They remain in their strangeness, and the border between ‘us’ and ‘them’ continues to exist.

I detect the same dilemma in the European discourse today. There has been much talk about European values. The European narrative has been associated with an ethical code that includes taking care of one another and helping those in need. However, at the same time European identity has been defined by geographical borders. The Mediterranean Sea has become not only a geographical border, but also a border of values and culture beyond which strangers live. One must help strangers in need, but they must remain strangers. If they do not, they will threaten the European economy and our security, and ultimately the identity we base on them. Our dilemma is crudely exemplified by the fact that we try on the one hand to rescue people from the Mediterranean Sea, while on the other we create structures designed to prevent these same people from destroying what we consider to be European or national identity.

Jesus as a refugee crossing borders

These two discourses, the one an ethical code based on narratives and the other about the protection of ethnic and religious identity, form parts of the world of Isaiah's proclamation and the entire Old Testament tradition. The Christian Gospel grows from this tradition.

The flight of Jesus's family into Egypt repeats the themes of exile found in the stories of the Patriarchs. It is the fate of God's chosen one yet again to be oppressed, homeless and a refugee. In the Gospels this theme is radically expanded. This is not only about the human portion in the world, and nor is it about the destiny of those God has chosen and to whom God says, "Have no fear, for I am with you." This is about the very person of God. When Jesus refers to his portion in the world by saying: "The foxes have holes, and the birds of heaven have a resting-place; but the Son of man has nowhere to put his head", it means that the very person of God is without home and shelter in this world. Furthermore, there is a powerful ethical emphasis in St Matthew's description of the final judgement: "I was wandering, and you took me in." (Matt. 25.35b)

The question is not only about how people treat one another or follow an ethical code, but it is also about their relationship with God. There is a deeper meaning at question on the Mediterranean shores, in asylum centres and at European borders than simply how we treat strangers. This is all about how we encounter God. For it is God who is in the uncertainty and danger, and it is God who is rejected, named as a burden and a threat.

At the same time the Gospel breaks down the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between us and the other we need to treat well. God is the Father of all people; the Father who makes no distinction between his children. This is how Jesus encounters the Samarian woman, a descendant of those who moved into the country during the exile and who were labelled as defilers of the chosen people’s sanctity. He treats her as one of the chosen people, indeed, as one of God’s children. Jesus crosses borders: he eats with those he should shun; he ignores the rules that make some people outsiders.

Instead of protecting the holiness and purity of the people of God, Jesus introduces a new way. Holiness is not threatened; it is not defiled; there is no need to fear the losing of one’s identity. No. Holiness and purity spread and stick: with Jesus, a touch that was once considered a source of contamination becomes purification. Jesus purifies the leper and the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7.24-30). “Not that which goes into the mouth makes a man unclean, but that which comes out of the mouth.” (Matt. 15.11)

God is no respecter of persons.

The example of the Apostle Paul tells us what this means for the Christian church. In the present debate we do well to remember that Paul’s background was in the world of hate speech, hard attitudes and violent actions. He had zealously defended the national and religious purity of the Jewish people and protected the identity of the people of God. Christians had learned to suffer what this meant. There is something similar, if not yet as extreme, in the neo-nationalistic fear-mongering and the demand to close borders today.

Yet it was Paul whom God chose. When Paul changed, it was a radical transformation. He did not become timid; he did not shy at expressing himself strongly; he did not pursue understanding of everything and with everyone; he did not seek political decisions aimed at calming everyone down. There was very little of the political pragmatist in Paul. But he was not a cynical realist either, settling for the world as it was and trying to discover how best to benefit from it.

Paul was transformed through his encounter with Christ: the Christ who crossed human, social and cultural borders to stand alongside those who were threatened with being excluded. Paul himself was helpless when he lost his sight. It was then that the Christians, who must still have been very

much afraid of him, helped him in spite of their fear. This showed Paul what it means to follow Christ.

And thus he became the Apostle Paul, an unwavering crosser of national, social and cultural borders. For Paul there was “no [longer] Jew or Greek, servant or free, male or female: because you are all one in Jesus Christ” (Gal 3.28). There were just people, created and redeemed by God.

In this respect Paul followed in the radical path of his Lord. His radicalism was deep, deeper than political, questioning all the powers and borders of this world. It opened new opportunities for reconciliation and unity with a decisive refusal to marginalise anyone based on ethnicity, culture or social status. There was no moral high ground or moralistic demand, but a new way of seeing human beings, simply, at eye-level, as people created and redeemed by God. In this respect there was no distinction between refugees and others. The Apostle Peter testifies to this divine impartiality when he visits Cornelius: “Truly, I see clearly that God is no respecter of persons.”

The churches, following their Lord in the footsteps of Peter and Paul, are not free from fear. The scent of fear is in the churches as well. The churches too face the experience of homelessness and alienation, and the fear of losing their identity. The churches are not immune from uncertainty and perplexity. In the European churches we are used to asking ourselves what it means to be a church in Finland, Germany or the Netherlands. When we also find ourselves asking what it means to be a church in the country called Exile, it must strengthen our identity as the church shaped by Peter, Paul and ultimately by Christ. This draws us out of our comfort zone, and requires us not only to contribute through what we do and what we say in the public debate about European and national refugee politics, but to challenge our own cultural politics of identity.

The message of Isaiah, even for the churches, is powerful and firm, yet gentle: “Have no fear, for I am with you.”