

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 24 MAY 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

John 17: 6-19

“What does it mean to “not belong to the World”?”

Introduction

In our text this morning, John's Jesus prays a prayer for his followers. Jesus knows the challenges of life, and the coming events of the crucifixion, betrayal and abandonment. He desires for his first followers, for each of us, and, as the prayer continues we learn, for all people, a belonging to God that will protect and accompany all people within the unpredictable and complex journey in life.

In a totally different form of witness, I would like to read the story of the German Reformed theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, as a living metaphor which witnesses to what our text means for being in the world but not being destroyed by the power of destructive forces. Yet, here is the twist! Here we have the story of one who was formerly an enemy, a member of Hitler's army during WWII. He was a person aligned with destructive forces, one from whom some Christians would have wanted God to protect them.

JURGEN MOLTSMANN

The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life. Fortress Press, 1997, 2ff

The end of the war, when it at last came, found us with deeply wounded souls; but after the years in Norton Camp many of us said: 'My soul has been healed, for I have seen God.' In the labour camps, the night of cold despair fell on us, and in that night we were visited, each in his own way, by tormenting, gnawing thoughts. But when we emerged, we saw 'that the sun had risen'. As a lasting reminder, as it were, each of had somewhere or other 'his lame hip' - the scars of that time in body and soul. That is why I chose this story, so as with it, and hidden in it, to tell our story as I experienced it....

1. The road to misery

1. We were the ones who escaped.

We escaped the mass death of the world war. For every one who survived, hundreds died. Why did we survive? Why aren't we dead like the rest? In July 1943 I was an air force auxiliary in a battery in the centre of Hamburg, and barely survived the fire storm which the Royal Air Force's 'Operation Gomorrah' let loose on the eastern part of the city. The friend standing next to me at the firing predictor was torn to pieces by the bomb that left me unscathed. That night I cried out to God for the first time: 'My God, where are you?' And the question 'Why am I not dead too?' has haunted me ever since. Why are you alive? What gives your life meaning? Life is good, but to be a survivor is hard. One has to bear the weight of grief. It was probably in that night that my theology began, for I came from a secular family and knew nothing of faith.

The people who escaped probably all saw their survival not just as a gift but as a charge too.

2. Lost hope. Tormenting memories .

We had escaped death, but we were prisoners of war. I was first of all in the wretched mass camp 2226 in Zedelgem near Ostend, then in Labour Camp 22 in Kilmarnock in Ayrshire. It was July 1946 before I came to Norton Camp. The end of the war and the summer of 1945 brought cold horror into the camp: all the German cities in ruins; 12 million people fleeing from East Prussia and Silesia. Many people were face to face with nothing, and didn't know where to go. We had escaped but we had lost all hope. Some of us became cynical, some of us fell ill. The thought of there being no way out was like an iron band constricting our hearts. And each of us tried to conceal his stricken heart behind an armour of untouchability.

Lost Hopes: My spiritual nourishment had been Goethe's poems and his Faust, which my sister had given me to take with me.... These poems had awakened the emotions of the boy, but now, when I was shut into a hut with 200 others, they had nothing more to say to me, although I often said them over to myself. I had dreamed of studying mathematics and physics. Einstein and Heisenberg were my heroes. But in that hut my dream fell to pieces: what was the point of it all?

And then those sleepless nights, when I was overwhelmed by the tormenting memories of the tanks that overran us on the fringes of the battle of Arnhem, and woke up soaked with sweat; when the faces of the dead appeared and looked at me with quenched and sightless eyes. It was five years at least before I found some degree of healing for these memories. In that mass camp, where we just sat around and had nothing to do, one was especially at the mercy of those tormenting memories. In those nights one was 'alone' like Jacob and fought with principalities and powers that seemed dark and dangerous. It was only afterwards ... that it became clear with whom one had been wrestling.

And then came what was for me the worst of all. In September 1945, in Camp 22 in Scotland, we were confronted with pictures of Belsen and Auschwitz. They were pinned up in one of the huts, without comment. Some people thought it was just propaganda. Others set the piles of bodies which they saw over against Dresden. But slowly and inexorably the truth filtered into our awareness, and we saw ourselves mirrored in the eyes of the Nazi victims. Was this what we had fought for? Had my generation, as the last, been driven to our deaths so that the concentration camp murderers could go on killing, and Hitler could live a few months longer? Some people were so appalled that they didn't want to go back to Germany ever again. Later they stayed on in England. For me, every feeling for Germany, the so-called sacred 'Fatherland', collapsed. It was only when my father's Jewish friend Fritz Valentin returned to Hamburg from his English exile in 1945 ... that my father in his French captivity and I in England felt in duty bound to return to that country of contradictions, between Goethe's Weimar and Buchenwald. The depression over the wartime destruction and a captivity without any apparent end was exacerbated by a feeling of profound shame at having to share in this disgrace. That was undoubtedly the hardest thing, a stranglehold that choked us.

2. The undeserved turn of events

For me, the turn from humiliation to new hope came about through two things, first through the Bible, and then through the encounter with other people.

In the Scottish labour camp, together with some other astonished prisoners, I was for the first time given a Bible by a well-meaning army chaplain. Some of us would rather have had a few cigarettes. I read it without much comprehension, until I stumbled on the psalms of lament. Psalm 39 held me spellbound:

'I was dumb with silence, I held my peace and my sorrow was stirred'
(but Luther's German is much stronger - 'I have to eat up my suffering within myself') ... my lifetime is as nothing in thy sight ... Hear my prayer, O God, and give ear to my cry; hold not thou thy peace at my tears, for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were . . .'

They were the words of my own heart and they called my soul to God. Then I came to the story of the passion, and when I read Jesus's death cry, 'My God, why have you forsaken me?', I knew with certainty: this is some-one who understands you. I began to understand the assailed Christ because I felt that he understood me: this was the divine brother in distress, who takes the prisoners with him on his way to resurrection. I began to summon up the courage to live again, seized by a great hope. ...This early fellowship with Jesus, the brother in suffering and the redeemer from guilt, has never left me since. I never 'decided for Christ' as is often demanded of us, but I am sure that then and there, in the dark pit of my soul, he found me. Christ's God-forsakenness showed me *where* God is, *where* he had been with me in my life, and where he would be in the future.

The other thing was the kindness with which Scots and English, our former enemies, came to meet us half way. In Kilmarnock, the miners and their families took us in with a hospitality which shamed us profoundly. We heard no reproaches, we were accused of no guilt. We were accepted as people, even though we were just numbers and wore our prisoners' patches on our backs. We experienced forgiveness of guilt without any confession of guilt on our part, and that made it possible for us to live with the past of our people, and in the shadow of Auschwitz, without repressing anything, and without becoming callous. I corresponded with the Steele family for a long time afterwards.

The other experience which turned my life upside down was the first international SCM conference at Swanwick, in the summer of 1947, to which a group of PoWs was invited. We came there still wearing our wartime uniforms. And we came with fear and trembling. What were we to say about the war crimes, and the mass murders in the concentration camps? But we were welcomed as brothers in Christ, and were able to eat and drink, pray and sing with young Christians who had come from all over the world, even from Australia and New Zealand. In the night my eyes sometimes filled with tears.

Then a group of Dutch students came and asked to speak to us officially. Again I was frightened, for I had fought in Holland, in the battle for the Arnhem bridge. The Dutch students told us that Christ was the bridge on which they could cross to us, and that without Christ they would not be talking to us at all. They told of the Gestapo terror, the loss of their Jewish friends, and the destruction of their homes. We too could step on to this bridge which Christ had built from them to us, and could confess the guilt of our people and ask for reconciliation. At the end we all embraced. For me that was an hour of liberation. I was able to breathe again, felt like a human being once more, and returned cheerfully to the camp behind the barbed wire. ...

In some English circles, Norton Camp counted as a camp where young Germans were supposed to be 're-educated' for a better Germany. But in reality it was a generous, gift of

reconciliation offered to former enemies; and as such it was unique. I came to the camp in the autumn of 1946. My wartime Abitur - the school leaving certificate - was no longer accepted and I had to go back to school. The decision whether I should become a teacher and pastor was made for me through my experiences with the Bible and at the Swanwick conference. ...

3. The blessing of Norton Camp

Everything, and the theology especially, was fabulously new to me. ... My first book of systematic theology was Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, which made a deep impression on me, although I hardly understood it. New worlds dawned for us, worlds which had been forbidden to us under the Third Reich. ...

The semester timetables were rich and varied, and of course we wanted to hear everything. I learnt Hebrew ... Greek... New Testament. ... systematic theology...

4. Limping but blessed

For us, what looked like a grim fate when it began turned into an undeserved, rich blessing. It began in the night of war, and when we came to Norton Camp the sun rose for us. We came with wounded souls, and when we left 'my soul was healed'. Certainly we did not 'see God face to face' like Jacob at that place on the Jabbok. ... No, what we experienced was just the reverse: God looked on us with 'the shining eyes' of God's eternal joy. ... We experienced with pain his hiddenness and remoteness, and we sensed that God looked upon us 'with shining eyes', and felt the warmth of his great love.

We have met together here after fifty years in order to praise the hidden and yet so merciful God for everything which we have experienced. We have also come to remember with gratitude the people who came to meet us prisoners with such readiness to forgive, and such hospitality. ... Let me close with Psalm 3 and acknowledge:

Lord, thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing;
Thou hast loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness,
that my soul may praise thee and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to thee for ever.