

“... and they will live in safety”

Ezekiel 34:27-28

From action to activists, present and future

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This word is a promise of the Lord in the mouth of Ezekiel the prophet, at a critical time in the history of Israel. The prophet is already among the exiles in Babylon when one day, “someone who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, ‘**The city has fallen**’” (33:21). The deportation is in itself violence that goes along with the oppression, slavery, exploitation, suppression of religion (at least attempted) and eradicating the identity of the Jewish people. To this is added the destruction of Jerusalem, and apart from the concern for the relatives killed in this disaster, it also means the destruction of their common roots and the dream of returning to a “Jerusalem like before”. A people loses orientation, loses control of its future. This prophet dares to say “They will live in safety” - wouldn’t he do better to say nothing?

We also learn of **God's wrath against Israel's shepherds** who have not taken their responsibility seriously. Violence is to be found not only on the side of the Babylonians. “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! ... You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them” (34.2-4). How relevant these words are today! In France, there is currently a discussion of a maximum salary because there are entrepreneurs who receive per day three times the monthly minimum wage.

This prophet, by whom will he be heard? “To them you are like a singer of love songs, one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; they hear what you say but they will not do it” (33:31-32). What does it serve to be a prophet, if nobody listens or takes note? How does one experience such insecurity and powerlessness, both personal and as a people, without it leading to depression or resignation? Ezekiel’s experience is familiar to those who have sounded the alarm on climate change, or other issues.

What security can Christians expect of their God? Or, conversely, what security must we offer in the name of our faith?

Let us look at how the New Testament¹ uses these terms. The first observation is that there are two similar terms to designate two different and complementary realities.

Security in the sense of making sure, keeping watch

Mt 27:64-66: making sure that the tomb is secure (to stop the disciples stealing the body and saying “He is risen”)

Acts 5:23: “We found the prison securely locked” ... but the disciples were no longer there (“an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, v. 19).

Acts 16:23: Paul and Silas at Philippi on business (a slave girl with a spirit of divination who cried out in favour of Paul, but not for the right reasons) ... “after they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.”

What these passages have in common:

- Jesus, Paul and Silas are innocent and the victims of violence - locked up either in a tomb or a prison.
- The political and religious authorities want keep things under control; they are afraid.
- The actors: the Roman government collaborating with the religious power (Pharisees, Sadducees) or the Romans there on business.
- In the three situations, the control fails. The Spirit of life bursts out, God affirms life and the victims, bursts the bolts and rolls away the stone. The victims are rehabilitated.

¹ For this study, I have used the New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible ; Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, 1981.

- The fruit of this experience is faith - what they wanted to hide in the tomb is “seen” and “believed”, key words in the stories of the encounters with the risen one; in Acts 5, Peter is strengthened in his faith after his crisis on Good Friday (“We must obey God rather than any human authority”, v. 29); in Acts 16, the terrified jailer is converted with “his entire household” and they rejoice (v. 34).

There is another term in the New Testament, which evokes a different security. In English there is also the term **safety** - and this term implies the action of **protecting**, of **safeguarding**. In the biblical passages where it is used, **safety** describes the action of a person with power who protects a person in danger, whether she or he is “righteous and holy” (John the Baptist), judged guilty in the sense of the law (Paul) or guilty in the moral sense (the Prodigal Son, humanity at the time of Noah). The term, in these biblical contexts, means: protecting, defending someone, restoring physical, mental and moral integrity - being safe and sound.

Let us examine these biblical passages:

Mark 6:20. Herod protects John the Baptist, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man.

Luke 15:27. “...because he has got him [his son] back safe and sound” - note that in Judaism, physical and mental/moral health go together.

Acts 23:24. Plot against Paul; the tribune organises the transfer of Paul to Caesarea under strong surveillance (200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen) to “take him [Paul] safely to Felix the governor.”

Acts 27:43-28:1. The boat carrying Paul strikes a reef and the crew plans to kill the prisoners on board;

- The centurion, “wishing to save Paul” tells him to jump overboard and those who can swim to save themselves as well.
- Others used planks or pieces of the ship “and so it was that all were brought safely to land”.
- Acts 28:1 “After we had reached safety”... we then learned that the island was called Malta.

2 Tim 4:18. Paul, speaking of his trial where no one has defended him: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom.”

1 Peter 3:20. Alludes to 8 people “saved through water” in Noah’s ark.

What do these passages teach us?

- All these situations describe violence, a threat of death – for questions related to justice (John the Baptist), or religious freedom (Paul); in the case of the Prodigal Son, it is about a violence that he has inflicted on himself by a disastrous way of life abused by others (they do not even let him eat pigswill). The reference to Noah evokes an entirely fallen world that is in the grip of violence.
- The victims receive protection on the part of individuals: a tribune, a centurion, Herod, a father, Noah.
- The protectors are never the only rescuers; ‘salvation’ depends on several factors, including those of the person in danger (going to see the tribune, swimming, voluntary return, having the confidence to ‘build a boat in a complete drought’ etc.).
- The result:
 - The parable of the Prodigal Son and the story of the flood reveal a God who forgives and restores human beings and humankind to their wholeness.
 - The historical situations (John the Baptist and Paul) are about temporary protection that cannot prevent death by the sword.

There is obviously a **link between the two exit routes** - and they both speak strongly of non-violence:

- Protect life, restore human dignity that is harmed by ‘floods of violence’ and stop the latter by creating a more just world, recreating life together (Prodigal Son) - that is the aim of non-violence.
- The aim of non-violence is juxtaposed with the ‘price of nonviolence’²: the actors of nonviolence who risk and sometimes give their lives for a vision of the world that

² An expression used by Daniel Berrigan

burns within them, as the prophet Jeremiah puts it (20.9) “Within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in, and I cannot.” A profoundly Christ-like experience that can bring someone to choose to cross the point of no return, to put boundless love above all and to accept it to the hilt, with all its last possible consequences. Even if that does not justify the death of these persons, we must remember that beforehand they had freely and consciously consented to not having their life “taken” but “laying it down” (to paraphrase the words of Jesus in John 10:18) and that they became, like Christ, “the grain of wheat [that] falls into the earth ... and bears must fruit”.³

We are at the heart of gospel non-violence and, more precisely, at the heart of what it means to be a non-violent actor. We move our attention to the action, the method, the strategy, the person who chooses non-violence or, potentially, will choose it.

For years I have spent a lot of time in Africa with non-violent people and groups, committed to reconciliation. After experiencing so many situations with them, I realise that the focus of my attention has shifted. I have moved away from the nonviolent action itself to the person, be it the person in danger, the nonviolent activist, and increasingly, even to those who see in violence the only solution. I distinguish three stages in this development, which must not be seen as contrasting with or opposing one another.

The first stage: It is energising to speak of nonviolent action and the possible changes it can bring. It is encouraging to see the development in a context of lack of food security, and of economic, social and political insecurity, of armed violence and blackmail: great, there are ways and means - revolutions, holding a rose or jasmine - that change the political map; there are Gandhis and Kings or Rajagopals; wonderful, there are even people who keep their sense of humour, e.g. the Jobless Brotherhood in Uganda who lets out pigs painted yellow in the national parliament (symbols of ‘disgusting behaviour’ of the governing party whose colour is yellow); brilliant, a human rights defender is freed thanks to written protest or the clicks orchestrated by Amnesty, or a battle is won by “Let’s save the forest”⁴ etc.

But through coming close to the same people and groups, as trust grows, I have gradually discovered another dimension of this work for peace in times of conflict. These friends do not only fight against the insecurities and injustices set out above. Peace has few friends and even fewer supporters ‘willing to pay the price of peace’. And they are terribly alone.

First, they risk their lives by going into dangerous areas and approaching enemies. Sometimes even supporting a victim can be dangerous because it means standing in solidarity with the one who is targeted for extermination. Then, what they say often reaches beyond the conception of ordinary people who then withdraw into silence or into ‘anticipatory obedience’. They talk about non-violence during war; justice, where corruption and impunity reign; reconciliation, where the collective feeling cries for vengeance; when Europe is grappling with terrorism, they demonstrate against weapons! ... They are dreamers, irrational, unrealistic ... a public danger!

They need **emotional security**, niches where they can **feel safe**, confident; they need to belong, to have peers; they need someone who understands them; they need to know that someone will get up if they do not return from an action they need to know that they are not forgotten. More urgent than the need for money is very often the need for a text message, especially at the moment of departure: Do not forget us!

This emotional security is not a hindrance to action; on the contrary, for the one who has heard this cry, it enables us to act with all our resources. It is a covenant becoming flesh.

But the path does not stop there. Reaching this level of sharing, they sometimes invite me into this space where they personally - indeed, just like me - are plagued by doubts and are completely vulnerable. **What do we do with our doubts, our failures, our dead ends, our exhaustion, our burnout, our cries of pain, our helplessness?** This is where I see the crux of my presentation today, rarely addressed in the nonviolent movement. For this place is precious: I am finding it to be a place where it all comes together and I approach it as ‘potentially holy ground of nonviolence’.

³ John 12:24-26.

⁴ Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker, a German organisation defending threatened ethnic groups.

I am challenged with respect to my own stand, not only as a militant but also as a nonviolent person facing distress: Can I share that place, become a sister, a friend, respectful and full of tenderness and compassion? It is entering into a tunnel, a desert, a land of temptation and torment, a place where everything comes together. Pope Francis often uses the word tenderness. When he does, he is never talking about tenderness in the ordinary sense of the word. The tenderness he means is a response to evil. He even goes so far as to speak of a “revolution of tenderness”.⁵ It is also, potentially, a tipping point between revenge or consolation, I am neither a magician nor a saviour. In such times, I myself can also only feel helpless, groping, at best, for a gesture, for an appropriate word.

I want to share with you four examples:

- **A young man is the leader of a militia that** commits atrocities by order of the president. The history of the young man: he was rejected by his father, a former minister; he became a street child and was recruited by the militia. He uses his role as revenge toward his father, to gain justice. Already you have to cross his path and not be afraid of him. And then, **talk to him of law? To someone who never been protected by the law?**
- **Bangui, in the area of the famous kilometre 5.** The parish of Our Lady of Fatima is transformed into a camp of displaced persons. 6000 people are packed into an area the size of two football grounds. Among them, students who see their university year disintegrating. All around, the area is under almost permanent attack. It is 3 pm. A woman outside the camp is about to have a baby. The contractions start. The husband calls the MINUSCA⁶ and the Sangharis⁷ who, theoretically, are on duty until nightfall at 6.30 pm. In France, we are told that their job is to protect civilians. They are armed to the teeth. When asked to send a car to take the woman to hospital they reply: “It is too late. Wait till tomorrow.” How can you tell a baby to be patient? The father and mother feel terribly powerless. **Should they take a course in geopolitics? Upload a petition on change.org ? How can we not understand their anger at the foreign soldiers of the UN?**
- **In a refugee camp in Malawi,** I meet a man who has been tortured in his country of origin because of his human rights commitment. He shows me the scars, which are hard to bear. A few years later, his torturer arrives in this camp and becomes his neighbour. He is scared stiff. This refugee has collected enough money to kill him and, when he talks to me about it, I gain the impression that the project is already well advanced. My mouth goes dry. Fear is contagious. **What can I say when the words are lacking?**
- **Faced with evidence of rigged elections,** participants on a course are very, very angry. All the injustice and suffering accumulated over decades rises up again. They tell me, “If you'd come a few months ago, we would have accepted your non-violence, and maybe in 6 months if you come back, OK - but in the meantime”... And they reel off a list of those that they want to kill, why and how. I feel dizzy. If all this anger explodes now? **To continue as scheduled with the program, with methods of nonviolent action - that would be to do violence to them. Something else is needed first, but what?**

For people living in armed conflict, these examples are so frequent that they are nearly commonplace. Moreover, the people concerned have thought about the question many times and do not really expect answers. They force me **into this cul-de-sac of despair for human existence, where only violence seems to offer an escape from the torments of powerlessness.** I was particularly impressed in reading the autobiography of Nelson Mandela (especially before his death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment). He advocated violence, in his case acts of sabotage, every time when failure, loneliness and despair converge within him.

If we are not satisfied just to convert the already converted, but if we really want to change the rules of the game, how can we stand together with those who hope to escape

⁵ *Evangelii gaudi* (The joy of the gospel), art. 88 and 288).

⁶ United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic.

⁷ A contingent of the French army in the Central African Republic.

the three-pronged violence of failure, loneliness and despair? How to go from a powerlessness that leads to emotional and mental paralysis to a creative powerlessness - a tipping point - to a 'holy land' where nonviolence can be born? There is only one resort: to accept this powerlessness and to accept yourself with your limitations, your empty mind, hands and sometimes your heart.

Our ability to give security/safety is proportional to our capacity to accept our own powerlessness and that of others, and to accept it not as a threat but as a travelling companion. Why? Because we are sent back to **our right place**. Powerlessness then becomes a letting-go, a space, an **opening** - or a word, an idea, an intuition where the unexpected can get take root. The Tao⁸ uses the following example: the walls of a house become useful if there is a space where the wall is not, a space commonly known as a door or a window. There is only one way: That is to welcome powerlessness and to welcome its limits, its confusion, with empty hands and sometimes with an empty heart. Our ability to provide security/safety is proportional to our ability to accept our own helplessness and that of others and to welcome it not as a threat but as our travelling companion. Why? Because this brings us back to **our right place**. Powerlessness becomes a letting go, a space, an **opening** where a word, an idea, an intuition, where the unpredictable can find place. The apostle Paul heard God say to him "Power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Powerlessness as a space where our power no longer burdens us becomes a **right presence** and opens a channel to a right perception of **reality**. We can then enter into **right communion** with others, which captures what they really experience, all of which brings them back to life and paves the way for **right action** by all. Afterwards we can say "My heart became hot within me... the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue" (Psalm 39:3). Having found this security-safety in myself, in ourselves, we can recreate it at all levels for and with others.

Conversely, if the experience of powerlessness is denied or repressed, it separates us from ourselves, from others and from reality. We then run the risk of falling into the trap of making non-violence into an ideology.

Let's return to the examples cited in these 'potentially holy lands of non-violence' and let's look at the transitions of the different situations of 'powerlessness':

- **Our young militia man** – he told me this story himself. A man starts walking around in the militia area, listening to them, softening them up a bit. He does not talk much, drinks a coke with them, takes an interest. But one day he says to the young man – after listening for a long time and forming a free relationship - and this phrase changed the young man's life: "My friend, you will never become just by using violence." He had understood the young man's deep desire and to express it, found the necessary words without any judgement, which had opened his eyes. At that time - the man did not know - the young man was charged with planning a massacre of 50 people. The militia man continued to pretend and at the decisive moment, he sent the militia in the wrong direction, gathered all the victims and led them to a radio station that broadcast the story for days. Then, of course, he had to leave the country. He has now become a human rights defender and works with street children.
- **Our woman in labour:** around 8pm, the situation becomes unbearable. Baby has decided not to wait any longer. The neighbours contact some students. Two of them are in their final year of medicine. Now night has fallen. They brave the curfew, go out without arms or military protection and deliver the child (and during the month, 80 others). When asked, they told me: "In the midst of all these real and ongoing risks, we felt an inner security that came each time we did what we did and had to do. In any case, there comes a moment when you only have God ... and you go."
- **The tortured person who wanted to kill his torturer:** A small intuition crosses my mind and I say: "Let us return this evening with two friends who have the same problem and we will talk about it." Amazing: the person from the camp who has organised the training has had a similar talk at the same time and has made the same reply. We did not arrange this before. That evening, during the small group discussion, something

⁸ Lao Tse - Tao Teh King; Wegweisungen zur Wirklichkeit; edited and explained by K.O. Schmidt; Drei Eichen Verlag 1977, Nr. 11, S. 58 [translated into English].

tipped for these men. All of a sudden, they were no longer focused on the torturers but on themselves, bearing their wounds and ready to have their injuries treated, both visible and invisible. They had crossed through the shame of consequences, very strong in their culture, and broken the solitude. They then helped themselves and accepted the assistance of a therapist.

- **“They list those they want to kill, why and how”**: One of them comes to see me at night to explain his plan to me in more detail. I learned that his tormentor is someone with very high standing and a close relative. Words fail me in the face of so much suffering. Something in me moves me to take the young man's hands in mine. I hear myself say, “You will not do it, and I'll tell you why.” I am frightened by my own words because I have no idea “why not”! What a fool to trap myself like that! In a long silence, I look at his face pained as if face to face with his tormentor. He whispers “Why not then?” I hear myself say “Because then you will become like him.” His face relaxes, lights up; his eyes fill with tears. “And if I wrote the truth, the whole truth of which I am a witness? One day it will burst out, and I will have helped to make it known.”

Paul Claudel said, “Jesus did not come to explain suffering - and powerlessness which is one its faces - he came to inhabit it.” It is through trustfully inhabiting suffering, sure of God's covenant with us, that powerlessness is transformed and that the ‘transfiguration’ of the human being and transfiguration of the face of the earth ‘gets underway’.⁹ In his Easter discourse, Gregory Nazianzen, who lived in the 4th century, proclaims, “Today is the day of salvation for the world ... Christ is risen from the dead: Arise with him. ... A new creation born in Christ: Renew yourselves.”¹⁰... And in the measure that we renew ourselves, that life surges forth from our trials, that non-violence and truthfulness within us come together in the intelligence of the heart, we will fulfil the conditions about which Ezekiel tells us for living in security.

- Putting human beings at the centre and take care of them. “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed; and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak. ... I will feed them with justice” (v. 16) - **nonviolence as care**
- There will be “one shepherd” over the sheep, who will be a servant of God (v. 23), who will thus respect “the covenant of peace” (v. 25) that God made with his flock - **nonviolence by the activist**
- There will be security - “when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them” (v. 27) - **nonviolence in its dimension of social and political action**

We know what God will do with them - make them God's servants, whether they are called David or something else. God will not leave us alone, without the means to renew ourselves and be raised up: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you ...” (36.26.27). Nonviolence as intelligence of the heart, the place where it all comes together, for us here and for humankind.

⁹ From an expression used by Olivier Clément in Sources, DDB 2007, p. 51.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 64.