

'I will give you future and hope' (Jeremiah 29:11)
70 years of living nonviolence - resisting militarisation

Sermon during the Worship Service

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Four days ago I came back from the Central African Republic. I have been going there regularly since the crisis began in 2013. This crisis has brought the country to the brink of genocide and 80% of the country is still exposed to armed violence on a daily basis. Although the crisis has political and economic causes, it has resulted in massacres by militias which have formed according to their predominantly Christian or Muslim origins and have become an outlet for violence. How do the biblical texts which we have just heard resonate for me with these impressions of the past few weeks?

It seems to me that we are talking here about 4 stages - 4 stages which are in harmony with the real world and its encounter with the prophetic word which transforms everything, makes it new, yesterday and today.

First there is the **stage of violence**: death, sorrow, crying, suffering and then the painful awakening: the horses and chariots, all the paraphernalia of war, were based on an illusion. It was an illusion to believe that they would bring peace.

The hour of truth: acts of violence have multiplied. They have deepened the suffering and brought us to the edge of the abyss. And many have fallen into this abyss. By the way, these weapons of war come from Europe. Our rulers - we - share responsibility. Where the weapons are used, people see that violence is a failure. This is the stage during which we denounce the violence and call things by their name, at least after the event. "Never again!" is the password in such situations. And we look for a new direction. But what guarantee do we have that the hope and the future which the living God promises us is not also an illusion, some kind of mirage, merely a product of our own despair and longing?

The third stage: to take courage and proclaim it in words and works or in the language of the "Anawim", the poor people of God, with their gestures and glances.

So that this is not just theory, I will tell you a bit about a meeting I had on Monday in the capital, Bangui. For 5 years I have been closely attached to the Catholic parish of Our Lady of Fatima. This parish is only a few yards away from the big Muslim market and the mosque. In this part of the city the riots were particularly severe for all sides. Since 2013 the land around the church has regularly served as a refuge for thousands of internal refugees, Christians and Muslims alike. But there are also radical Islamists living in this neighbourhood, for whom this solidarity is a thorn in their side. The church has already been attacked three times. The last attack took place during a mass on 1 May 2018: 20 people lost their lives and 200 others were seriously injured. It is shortly after this terrible anniversary that I met, once again, Father Moses, the priest, who is also a friend. He shared his experience with me.

*This reckoning, he says, is in itself a miracle. The attackers came with so many grenades and other - extremely powerful - weapons that one would actually have to believe that they did not want to count the dead, but rather the few survivors. Yes, that was the **hour of screaming**, of suffering, of mourning, and then the time of fear, which has paralysed some people to this day. And then came the **time to denounce the violence**, to demand an investigation, and to stand up against impunity. But now they are living through the third stage: **proclamation**. Father Moses showed me a building under construction. The building work is already well under way and it is possible to see the outlines of the future building: the new cultural centre which is to be opened in October. On the ground floor there will be a space for traditional dance, traditional music or exhibitions, storytelling - a space to reconnect*

with the culture which has united the peoples of the Oubangui since time immemorial and for which awareness is being lost today; next to it, a library will be built with a target of 10,000 volumes, with shelves which will also interest Muslim readers. Because they are not all Islamists! And who better to speak to the hearts of the radicals than their moderate brothers and sisters who share their faith? A film studio is to be built on the 1st floor. This is a way of taking the word and expressing the hope that the word holds; of trying to understand the incomprehensible, to find meaning, to dwell in the word and to shout it out into the world. The word is not tied-up! Violence does not have the last word. It is like a visible sign of the word of the psalmist: "God has formed all their hearts". (Ps 33:15)

This cultural centre is an act of faith. They know that they will be a stumbling block for some people. But the psalmist also has a word for them and for us: "We are waiting for God; he is our help and our shield". (Ps 33:20)

The fourth stage is the foretaste: that God "wipes away all tears, that death no longer exists, that all mourning, crying and suffering are over". And when redeemed humanity prepares itself like a bride for Christ, its bridegroom, then we will all recognise each other as being prepared for this wedding: prepared for love, for the covenant, for fidelity. And we will see the original beauty with which we are all created in the faces of our brothers and sisters, in ourselves, indeed in all creation.

I have a friend in Central Africa. He is an Imam. We met again this time. We spoke of all this, of this day when death and violence no longer exist and when we see ourselves in the primal beauty with which God created us. I said to him: "I want to be able to share this paradise with you". - "Do you know what paradise is for us?" - In such cases it is better to say, "No," because then I can learn and go deeper. "Another name for Paradise is House of Encounter."

House of Encounter, the real one, even if it is miniscule and imperfect today. Why wait for paradise? Heaven is not an "improved or even corrected edition" of the Earth. It is exactly the other way round. The earth was created by God to reflect Heaven; it is His vision for humanity, His dream "*I alone know what I have in mind for you - plans of peace and not misfortune*" (Jer 29:11) and shortened in the continuation of the text "*You will seek me in your hearts and I will let you find me; I will raise you up, bring you together, lead you home ...*" (Jer 29:11). If we are to believe Jeremiah, it all begins "in your hearts". I have access to my heart here and now. And if it is not buried under a layer of concrete, I can always go to it. This access is visa free: for those whom I want to invite to come and meet me; and for me, when others invite me into their inner space. This is not a hope which I have laboriously squeezed out of my theories. It is these encounters which snatch us from hopelessness and the belief in fate in the face of violence. **It is these encounters which bring hope and the future to life.**

Encounter – This is it! - the holy city, the new Jerusalem. The foretaste of the wedding, the love-feast, the covenant, the promise, fruitfulness, permanence. Encounter as God abiding with humankind (Rev 21:3). As a foretaste, at least. This foretaste, however, gives us the energy to act and to sing the new song with the psalmist, joyfully, like a wedding song: "*Yes, in God our mind rejoices; yes, in His holy name we have trusted. Your kindness, Living One, come upon us if we wait for you*". (Ps 33:21-22)