

On the way – to Preserve Creation

Sermon in the Oekolampad Church from March 7th, 2003, Martin Vosseler

“The almond trees in blossom: All that we can achieve here, is, to recognise ourselves completely in the earthly appearance. And, finally, I gaze in wonder at you, you blessed, your behaviour, how you carry fading decoration in eternal sense. Ah, he who would know how to blossom: to him the heart would be beyond all slight dangers and in the great, be comforted.”
Rainer Maria Rilke

Wonder of Creation, Planet Earth

When I read these words, which you sent me the day before yesterday, dearest Rebecca, then a thousand images from my pilgrimage to Bethlehem spring into my mind. I feel the summer heat and the cooling shade on the soft woodland path, which takes me along the Rhine. I see the alpine flowers on the Arlberg, waving gently in the breeze, daisies, white chervil, blue monks-hood, red crane’s-bill. I hear the gurgling rush of the fresh water in the Innersbach gorge. A narrow path leads through this deep ravine, and now and again, there is a clear view to the turquoise-green water basin. The beech trees of the Vienna woods arch above me, with their powerful, densely standing trunks, the resonance of a cathedral. I experience the immense sky over the Hungarian plain. The clouds form themselves into staggered rows, as I know it from the sea. I see again the group of four ants, which with united force, try to steer a sunflower seed as winter food supply, into the walled, funnel-shaped nest, and which quickly disappear into the hole with their loot, as I lend them a helping hand by pushing with a twig. I gaze over the park landscape of Istanbul, over the Bosphorus gliding in the evening light, across to Turkey, where I sense oriental secrets. The yellow, gold, red, orange, turquoise-blue of the evening sky after the threatening stormy day before Ankara. The bizarre rock formations in Kappadokia, reminiscent of a moon-landscape, where the early Christians dug out their cave-churches, through fear of persecution. The flock of pigeons in the evening sky of Antakya, former Antiochia, where Peter, Paul and Barnabas met. The ancient cedars, above Bscharre, birthplace and burial place of Khalil Gibran, where I lean against a thousand year old trunk. I feel the power of the tree and look up to Qornet es Saouda, where at 3000 m above sea-level, the snow is gleaming in the afternoon light. The beach between Caesarea and Tel Aviv, three days long to the right the sea, to the left the steep coast, and under the feet sea shells and stones which have been smoothed by the sea. What a world! What a miracle has developed here! That here we can sit, breathe, listen, talk, sing. An inconceivable idea of creation, which allows the Earth to become a living sphere. If we walk for months on the Earth, we get a feeling for its curvature. The horizon in our back dives down, disappears, new hills and plains appear in front of us. Also, the thin life-supporting layer of our troposphere can be experienced, these 8000m, which let us breathe, a distance we could walk in a little more than an hour, whilst to walk through the globe of the Earth, with its 12,000km diameter, would take at least 1½ years. Like Rilke, when he observes the almond blossom I am seized by a passionate love for this planet, for this mother Earth.

Threatened Earth

And just as strong is the pain about her vulnerability, about the threat, to which she is exposed by the animal species ‘man’: when walking, the senses register everything we are doing to the Earth: polluted air, which I inhale again and again, the cities suffocating in traffic, streets polluted with litter, dead waters, which I met often from Hungary onwards. The Mediterranean countries have lost much of their charm: where in 1985, the old parts of Jerusalem were still dominated by the lively clip-clop of donkey hooves, stinking tractors now rattle through the echoing narrow streets.

We experience the vulnerability of life at every turn. As with the loss of a loved-one. A week ago, Christian Kuster died. This place here binds me to him strongly. He grew up here. We played serenades together here in the vicarage garden. We have described ourselves as pilgrim brothers – one walks and the other stays. And when it was about trees, Christian was always there. Back in 1990, when the threatened Schützengraben plane-trees were occupied, he gave the action the name "Aufbäumen"; and again, on 17th January, he was one of the first to put up his tent in the Wiese riverside forest; he came every evening to spend the night there, often left me a written greeting, when he walked along the Wiese into the town early in the morning, whilst I was still asleep. Never again to feel his powerful handshake, to see his open look, to receive his attentive ears in conversation? The mourning is immense. And still: in the awareness of death and life the mourning is completely different from the pain about what we do to our mother Earth.

Today is the day of the sick, and we know: our mother Earth is sick. We humans, are the disease-causing agents: never before has the inhabitability of our Earth been placed so strongly in question as today. The climate changes lead more and more to extreme weather conditions. On my pilgrimage, I was also confronted with extreme weather: that summer was the hottest for the last 500 years: there was drought everywhere I went. Many farmers complained about the lack of harvest, also farmers in Austria, whose land had been flooded three years ago. Then the early winter in Turkey and flash flood rainfall in Syria. And these symptoms are just the beginning.

The Miracle

It needs a miracle, that we as a species will be able to remain on the Earth. I trust in this miracle. It cannot be, that the creation, in such an early stage of development is set out to be destroyed and mankind releases itself from the creation. Creation is still a long way short of reaching its potential. Although there have always been individuals, who have broken out of the devil's circle of hate and hating back, who have lived their lives in respect of the living planet, who have "entered into a peace contract with nature", as the artist Hundertwasser has described it; but as a global community, we are only at the beginning.

I trust in the miracle, because I have always experienced wonders: how engagement for life and resistance prevented the Kaiseraugst nuclear power station, and a giant warehouse on the market square, and how they saved the Danube flood plain forest in Hainburg and the tropical rain forest in Tasmania. How, within a short period of time, a strong movement against nuclear war was formed amongst physicians. But also other wonders: that we can be here with one another today, Liselotte, that you returned to life three years ago, is an inconceivable wonder; and if such a miracle is possible, then why should there not be a miracle to help us on a larger scale?

A communal will to survive

How could such a miracle appear? An awakening of all mankind? A communal will, to do everything within our powers, to retain the basis of life? A new consciousness, for which I prayed every day of my pilgrimage. A consciousness, that in politics, economics, science and in everyday life, gives energy-change utmost priority? That leads us to not taking away more from the Earth than can grow back, not to poison the soil and air any further? That we can integrate ourselves again, into the natural life cycles? That is the kingdom of God, the creation, this perfect astounding balance of life, this varied life-tissue working together, without which life isn't possible. We don't know, when and how this miracle will be possible.

The Bible says: “As Jesus was asked by the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God shall come, he answered them and said: The realm of God doesn’t come in a way that we can observe it. Neither will they say: See here! Or see there! For behold, the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke, 17: 20, 21).

Man – the helper of men

He is in our middle: I think of the overwhelming hospitality which I encountered whilst underway. Marianne Bauer from Innsbruck gets off her bicycle on the cycle path and asks: “Where are you spending the night? We have plenty of space to put you up.” I think of Esen Leylâ, who looks after me lovingly in Istanbul, who helps me get to know this city, and who, with her friends, feeds me up, after months of walking and privation. Ahmed Basar, the village chairman in the Turkish mountain village of Sarayçik, and his wife Saniye, open their door to me and show me to the cushions in their warm living room. A cloth is spread out and covered with delicious dishes. They prepare their bedroom for me, lay a fire in the oven, and soon I am falling asleep beside the singing oven in the warm down, whilst outside it is freezing cold. Or the graphic arts student Hagai near Nazareth. He comes towards me on his mountain bike wearing a cycle helmet. I ask him if there is a hotel in the vicinity. “Yes, of course; but you don’t need a hotel.” In his apartment in Balfourya he cooks me spaghetti with finely spiced vegetable sauce and makes up a comfortable bed for me on the sofa in his living room.

Three encounters stand for hundreds. And with the protest action at the river Wiese things continue in this sense. Rebekka Duss helps with the action from the very beginning. Elly von Orelli brings fresh, hot tea and the mail from Bruderholz every morning. My godmother Hanny Wartenweiler comes again and again to the tent and would also have been with us for the tree occupation. Again here we have three examples, which stand for hundreds. Here the kingdom of God is dawning. As Bertold Brecht writes in his poem “An die Nachgeborenen” (“To those born after”): *“Once the time has come, when people will help other people, you however, think of us with leniency.”* With all these encounters, this time has dawned.

Preparing the Miracle

The above-mentioned wonders intimate: the miracle needs our cooperation. It is not sufficient, to sit and wait for the miracle to happen. Otherwise there would not be so many passages in the Bible about “return”, about “Teschuwa”. John the Baptist, calls the people to “turn back!” Luther translates this as: “do penance!” (Matthew 3: 1 – 3), likewise the prophets Hosea (14: 1,2,), Ezekiel (18: 30), Malachi (3: 7). In order for miracles to happen, it needs our passionate love of the planet Earth, our action, our intervention. This passionate love can move mountains, is infectious, effects that we experience no hunger pains whilst fasting. There were always people at the Wiese, who said: “I hope, that the trees won’t be cut down”. If you can take action against something, then to hope only is too weak, too narrow. We know: the CO2 emissions should be reduced to 20% of their current level as quickly as possible. If we hope that this will happen, but take no positive action, then we are passing on responsibility rather than intervening, rather than behaving responsibly.

That is why I like the word in 1 Corinthians 13:13 so much. “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.” It helps us, to apply ourselves with body and soul, and not just to be satisfied with belief and hope; and bearing in mind all the words from Hilde Domins :

„Wahl
“Choice
Ein Mandelbaum sein
To be an almond tree
eine kleine Wolke
a small cloud
in Kopfhöhe über dem Boden
at headheight above the ground
ganz hell
bright
einmal im Jahr
once a year
Einer im kleinen Stosstrupp
One in a small assault party
des Frühlings
of spring
keinem zu Leid als sich selber
who don't want to harm anyone but themselves
im Glauben an einen blauen Tag
in the belief of a blue day
vor Kälte verbrennen
burn with the cold
Ein kleiner Mandelbaum sein
To be a little almond tree
am Südhang der Pyrenäen
on the south of the Pyrenees
oder im Rheintal
or in the Rhine valley
der bleibt und wächst
that stays and grows
wo er gepflanzt ist
where it is planted
Aber entlang gehen
But go along
bei diesem Mandelbaum
beside this almond tree
oder ihn plötzlich sehn
or see it suddenly
wenn der Zug
when the train
aus dem Tunnel kommt
comes out of the tunnel
Lachen und Weinen und die unmögliche
Laugh and cry and have the impossible
Wahl haben
choice
und nichts ganz recht tun
and do nothing completely correctly
und nichts ganz verkehrt
and do nothing completely back-to-front
und vielleicht alles verlieren

and perhaps lose everything
Doch mit Ja und Nein und Für-immer-vorbei
Yet, with yes and no and for-always-past
nicht müde werden
not to get tired
sondern dem Wunder
but to the miracle
leise
silently
wie einem Vogel
as to a bird
die Hand hinhalten. “
hold out the hand.“