

Predigt am Gründonnerstag 2017 in Nes Ammim, Israel

Von Pfr. Tobias Kriener

Dear Nes Ammimniks, dear Guests,

in this so called „Holy Week“ we are commemorating and considering the suffering and the dying of Jesus – before we celebrate his resurrection on Easter. The climax of this week is of course the great joy of Easter: The message of new life. But this new life comes through death: In order to reach the brightness of the new day we have to go through the darkness and the bitterness of the death on the cross.

This is not easy to follow through – this is not easy to understand. To confront this extreme suffering is hard. Therefore it is not surprising that the Holy Week and the so called “Good Friday“ at its center are difficult to celebrate and to commemorate. It is not surprising that other Christian holidays are much more easily and readily celebrated – first and foremost Christmas of course: The joy about the birth of a child is easily understandable and comprehensible. That there should be something good and important about the suffering and dying of a human being – this is not easily to comprehend. And quite rightly so: Suffering and death should not be glorified. Every effort should be made to diminish suffering – to ease pain - to banish torturing and killing of our fellow human beings - to fight the dark powers of evil and to foster everything that promotes life and well being.

In what way then can the story of the suffering and dying of Jesus contain a message that helps us – that helps mankind? In answer to this question I would like to share with you a surprising discovery that I made this year.

Katja and I visited an exhibition in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem with the title „Behold the Man – Jesus in Israeli Art“. This exhibition is a sensation. First of all it is not to be expected that Jewish artists deal with Jesus at all. Jesus over many centuries was absolute anathema – an absolute Tabu for Jews. The reason for that lies completely with the church, because since the 2nd century the Christian church - when it preached Jesus to the Jews - when it demanded from them to be baptized and become Christian it demanded at the same time that they cease to be Jewish – that they stop living as Jews: As soon as a Jew let himself baptize it was strictly forbidden that he circumsize his son, it was strictly forbidden that he eats kosher, it was strictly forbidden that he rests on Shabbat and so on and so forth. The Christian church did not enable Jews who believed in Jesus to live a

Jewish life – it demanded from them to deny and to disavow their Jewishness. Therefore every mentioning of Jesus for Jews contained the unreasonable demand to relinquish their Jewishness – to abandon themselves. The Jewish name Jesus thus became unspeakable for Jews.

And yet since the emancipation of the Jews in the 19th century Jewish scientists began to deal with Jesus and to rediscover his Jewishness – to rediscover him as a son of the Jewish people: They showed us Christians that his teaching and his life are Jewish in every respect – and that even his death as well as the message of his resurrection from the death are Jewish in every respect!

Therefore it is no sensation that Jewish artists also dealt with Jesus. And of course we were very interested how they did this when we went to this exhibition: How would they portray his life and his teachings, his helping and healing, his signs and wonders? And there are of course wonderful examples of this dealing with the Jewish brother Jesus.

But what really stunned me was that the subject that was dealt with most often and in a most moving way was the suffering of Jesus. I didn't expect this – and it made me musing about it ever since. Let me show you some examples of this dealing of Jewish artists with Jesus' suffering:

Of course the persecution of the Jews inspired Jewish dealing with Jesus suffering. The most prominent example is Mark Chagall's „White Crucifixion“ which is not part of this exhibition: It shows Jesus on the cross in Jewish traditional religious garments with the murdering of the Jews during a pogrom going on around him. Here is another example of this theme by Moshe Hoffmann – for me even more disturbing: The German soldier pulls Jesus from the cross to bring him to the other Jews who are led to the gas chamber – and by this he – most probably himself a baptized Christian – renounces and empties the very core of the Christian message of Jesus' death as the source of grace and forgiveness. The core of the Christian message perishes in the gas chamber.

But the Holocaust is not the only theme: Jesus suffering is also a source to deal with actual political questions: Jigael Tumarkin made his sculpture „Mita Meshuna“ in the context of Israel's Lebanon war in 1982: „Mita Meshuna“ means „Strange Death“ or „Embarassing Death“. It criticizes the political and military decisionmakers who went to this war not out of necessity to defend Israel, but out of choice to reach a political goal – and in order to reach this political goal they condoned with the death of hundreds of soldiers.

This collage by Michal Heimann parallels the painting of Jesus' deposition by Rafael with the photograph of a Palestinian victim of Israeli soldier's shooting – a radical criticism of the conduct of

the Israeli military in the occupied territories.

This photograph by Adi Nes alludes to Leonardo's „Last supper“ - depicting a group of Israeli soldiers the night before they have to go into battle – where every single one of them is risking his life and none of them knows if he will live to see the next evening.

Two works have especially moved me:

This one by Reuven Rubin is called „The Encounter (Jesus and the Jew)“. The figure on the left stands for the bygone kind of Jewishness – symbolized by the drooping branches of the tree behind it: The Diaspora-Jew – the Orthodox Judaism of Europe. The figure on the right stands for the future - symbolized by the upright branches of the tree behind it: The resurrected Jesus showing the wounds in his hands. He incorporates the Zionist ideal of resurrecting the Jewish people from the suffering of the exile to new life in its land Eretz Jisrael. Much could be said about this work – and much also must be said in critical considering of this work: It is not least a document of the Zionist contempt for diaspora Judaism which I personally certainly do not agree with – and which has been criticized and overcome also in Israel. But still it is a remarkable turning of familiar images upside down.

And lastly this picture by Moshe Castel. It looks completely unspectacular: one more corps on the cross as you find it in every Catholic church – nothing unusual – nothing new – nothing moving – at first glance. But when you take a closer look at the inscription above the cross it says: „Hajehudi Castel“ (Castel the Jew). It turns out that this crucifixion is a self-portray that the artist painted after he lost his first wife and their child. And it becomes even more astonishing when one knows that Moshe Castel was the son of a respected Rabbi and kept this picture as well as another painting of the crucifixion locked away his whole lifetime. He shared the traditional Jewish shying-away from this controversial figure – but at a certain point in life – when he himself lived through a traumatic loss – he felt drawn to Jesus as the ultimate incorporation of human suffering.

To me it is most moving to see that Jews – who have every reason to distance themselves from Jesus because of the unreasonable demand of the Church to distance themselves from their Jewishness when becoming a follower of Jesus – are finding their own ways to Jesus. It's most moving to see in their works of art the expression of how Jesus' acting and teaching and how Jesus' fate is attracting people – how it is moving people – how it is consoling people in deep agony. By this those Jewish artist give me an example how I can draw inspiration from Jesus' acting and

teaching, how I can find consolation in Jesus' suffering. Through their works of art they teach me a deep understanding of Jesus – they preach to me anew how I can grasp Jesus in his suffering as my saviour.