

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE REALITY OF GOD

The Hebrews experienced the reality of God when they were saved from a certain death by drowning in the sea. In front of them lay the sea, the age-old symbol of death and at their backs were their persecutors, the Egyptians. The Egyptians were in serious difficulties and badly needed a scapegoat. The Hebrews knew that they were the intended victims. They were to be the sacrifices to the gods, which would placate them. There was no possibility that they could escape. This was not only because of the impossibility that they could escape. This was not only because of the impossibility of their predicament but much more because all human experience and knowledge until that point confirmed that they would be sacrificed, a necessity if the world was to continue. Despite the fact that this was certainly true, confirmed by age-old and ever repeated experience, nonetheless they were saved. They experienced the existence of a reality, a power that saved those destined for sacrifice from the gods to which they were being offered. The realization struck like lightning. The joy and the awe were overwhelming. Miriam (Ex. 14, 20-21) gives the immediate reaction. Moses (Ex. 15, 1-18) reflects theologically in a passage, which dates from later although still very close to the event.

Before all this happened, Moses already knew about the possibility. His meeting with YAHWEH, HE WHO IS, had already struck him like lightning. The metaphor of the burning bush shows this very clearly. As soon as he knew about this possibility, a knowledge that was at the same time something like a reality, he knew what he had to do. He did not like the idea at all and tried desperately to rid himself of it, but he could not escape. He had to go. Knowing this, this God, was the God of all those thrown on the altars of the gods, and who saved him from these altars he had no choice but to act. He had experienced that YAHWEH, HE WHO IS, exists and simply by existing He works.

These experiences of Moses and of the Hebrews are the point of departure and at the same time the kernel of all living with God, the God of the Old and New Testaments. All thinking about Him has to begin from and be corrected by this experience. All thinking about God, which is done outside of the relationship to Him, is immediately thinking about the gods, about religion, about the gods of the scapegoaters.

Faith in this God, in YAHWEH, is first of all a remembering of His great deeds performed for the people belonging to Him, the people of the scapegoats. It had become clear that he was not the God of the rich, the wealthy or the powerful who all make scapegoats. He is the God of the scapegoats themselves. The scapegoats celebrate the memory of His deeds and they know that He will not let them down, that He will save them again. In the meantime are the times of the memories (Pascha), of celebration and of expectation of His coming. Faith means memory and expectation and so a fulfilled present, today.

There are of course differences between parts of the Old Testament, written at such different times and differences between the Old and new Testaments. Although these differences grew out of new experiences in new situations, we still experience the reality of God in exactly the same manner. We experience Him when we are standing with the sea in front of us, death, our enemies, and our scapegoaters, behind us, death once more. (Between the devil and the deep blue sea). In that situation it becomes He

is the Creator. This was one of the later discoveries. In a sense it was one of the last conclusions. It remained a very precarious one. For the thinking it was an inescapable fact and yet at the same time the manner in which the world lived was one big enigma, if not a nightmare. In the thinking they knew that humans are probably responsible but that was a nightmare too.

And we are still, as the Hebrews, expecting His new deeds, in the end the Promised Land, His Kingdom. In between we are, as the Hebrews, living in memories, of our ancestors, of ourselves, of the deliveries out of hopeless situations, which He gave and the expectation of His new, coming deeds. So our today expands itself, becomes full of joy, of freedom, of abundance. Every day becomes a celebration of Him and His deeds.

Very often, if not mostly, this sounds in our ears as straightaway impossible or even nonsense. This again is an old problem. The Hebrews are constantly grumbling (Ex. 15.24 et pass) and complaining (Ex. 16.2 et pass), even immediately after the lighting of the new experience. We, following them, constantly are. In the whole Old Testament and in the New Testament the struggle with this problem goes on. How to save us from ourselves and all the expressions of being ourselves, our laziness, our helplessness, hopelessness, proudness, self-centeredness, contentment with ourselves, our shame and depression, and, and, all aspects, in the end, of our wish to be alone, to help ourselves to win, (nearly?) preferring to be lost over the possibility to lay our hands in His, to be carried on His wings.

There is neither forward nor backward. Before us is the sea, death. Behind us, around us are the others, the other, the enemy, in one of his many metamorphoses. Insolvable difficulties in our relationships, in our professional life, which destroy us. Straightaway persecution, simply because we are the scapegoat of everybody or, because we are fitted scapegoats because of our convictions, opinions, deeds.

There is the other situation, that we lose someone who is irreplaceable for us. Our partner leaves us. Our child dies. Or we ourselves fall dangerously ill, so that we despair about our future, our life. Again, the sea is before us, the Other, in the form of the illness, is all around and even already in us. Or we fear to become mad, that we will not or are not able to carry the responsibility for ourselves. Or again, death is certain. He, death, is everywhere around us.

In all these, and so many other situations. He may come and save us. Saving means that we are not any longer the object of the doing of others, the Other, not any longer the object of death. He, coming with His deliverance, makes us free from the threats, the anxiety, the fighting, the destroying pain and sorrow. This does not mean either a *restauratio and integrum* that the old situation is given back. It may mean just that. That we recover from the illness, that we don't die. That we are delivered from our

persecutors, because it is not any longer fun for them. As long as we are persecuted, we nearly always are part of it. When we stop it, all is over.

But the many opportunities for our life are still lost. The child is still dead. We may not (fully) recover. We may die. But anyway, whatever happens, we are safe with Him, the deliverer, the Saviour. Life has changed fundamentally, He being there. From there on, just as the Hebrews, we can live and find peace in the memory, looking forward to the future.

This memory of His presence, too changes all the memories from our own life. They get a new meaning, another colour. The peace found reaches back to the past.