

(143) I WAS IN PRISON AND YOU CAME TO SEE ME

For Jean and Peter Wright. In memory of Frank Wright, who died the 10th of February 1993.

The title is from Matth. 25, 36. It is the theme of the talk we had with Frank in Hyde Park, the 6th of January 1993, the last real talk I had with Frank. Of course there are already several papers about the general theme, recognising and meeting the scapegoat, e.g. (49) The possibility to recognise and meet the victim, (57) Joining the scapegoat, (94) Scapegoats and responsibility. This paper does not refer to the older ones. It stands as a “memorial paper”, on its own.

We were talking about visiting the prisoners, something Frank in fact had done. We said to each other that when we are visiting the prisoners, we visit the scapegoats of society and we meet, in them, our sisters, our brothers, Christ. Their eyes become, when we ourselves really are looking for them, Christ's eyes and we are safe, we come at home, because Christ himself accepts us with their eyes. Frank recognised all this immediately and was very happy with it, deeply happy indeed.

1. The context

The text comes out of the teaching of Jesus about the Last Judgement, which is placed by Matthew just before he begins to tell the story of Jesus' own judgment. Jesus, who as a matter of fact in his existence of a human being always was in the situation of the scapegoat, was on his way to become a real, a cultural one. In that moment he turned to his fellow-scapegoats. He connects himself totally with all the scapegoats of culture, with the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick and the prisoners.

He makes them the people whose treatment by us will decide about our life in the final judgment, in which will be decided about our future, if we have any or none at all. Here again it is clear, that Jesus turns all cultural categories around. Not our life with the scapegoaters, the important and interesting people, those who we always try to emulate, decides about us. Getting along with them we only can become more of what we already are, scapegoaters, perpetrators of injustice. Our getting along with the scum, with the rejected, who anyway are a nuisance, decides about us. Only by getting along with them, seeing the result of our doings, the humiliated and oppressed, we have a chance to meet final reality, true humanity.

Thus the text does not only show to us that it is good to have care, that we should have care for all those people. It says in fact to us that finally they are the only important people for us because they, our getting along with them, decides about our life. In them we meet the scapegoat who is the centre of the Gospel, who is the Way, Truth and Life (John 14, 6).

Consequently, visiting the scapegoats of culture is the Way, let us meet Truth, gives to us life.

2. These people are victims, scapegoats, they are not (only) “needy”.

Our common strategy is to make the text more or less harmless, innocuous, by assuming that it is about needy people. Because we have needy people around us and because it is inhuman to let them suffer unnecessarily, we have to do something, to do something “good” for them. We are in that manner in the atmosphere of philanthropy and of the ethos of the “helping professions”. It is the manner by which innumerable good-meaning Christians made the text in fact harmless.

The very fact that Jesus says that we meet him in them, that they are the only people in which we meet him on, that they are the only category by which the sum of our life is made up, makes it clear that they are central, central for our very life. We really meet in them the scapegoats of culture, the hidden axis around culture revolves, the reality out of which everything in culture gets meaning. And, obviously, we meet in them the possibility to live. The Gospel is here again turning the cultural realities upside down. Culture drives scapegoats out, kills them (3,500,000 deaths, every year, on the roads and because of murders), makes them marginal, reduces them to being objects, cultural commodities. Jesus says: You won't live if you don't turn around 180 degrees, turn with your face to them, turn your back to everybody who and everything which fascinated you until now. If you don't, you perish.

3. The different kinds of scapegoats

Most of those who are mentioned here are recognisable. The hungry, the thirsty, the naked, they generally are the rejected of culture. Although the situation they are in is the result of our doings, that very fact is so hidden for us, that we pity them, in a sense with a very good conscience. We are good, already and just because we are pitying, commiserating them, putting ourselves again, in a new manner, above them.

The strangers always had, and more and more have again, a perilous existence. We all are more or less racist. They can't defend themselves as well as we can and thus they are very suitable to be used as scapegoats. We have more good reasons to do so. We are afraid of them. They are “strange”. We fear that they partake in our superabundance, taking away something from us. The Hebrews in fact were the first people in world history who took care of the strangers. Our care for strangers, as far as it really is care, we inherited from them. Nevertheless, the step that they all are our victims, that we are, straight away, responsible for their position amongst us, in life, that finally we can't really live if they can't, probably we still have to learn.

The sick are our scapegoats. We made them ill, physically or mentally, because of our eternal rivalling and violence, in which they of course in some manner at least partook but in which they lost, in which they became occupied by their opponents, but the Other, by us, thus falling ill. We still have to learn a lot about this. Generally we are sure that illness is something natural, something physical. Even mental illnesses, we pretend or hope, finally have (only) physical causes and further they are, we presume, the consequence of unhappy circumstances, in the past or in the present. That we altogether, in the past and in the

present, are responsible for their illness, although it has of course physical consequences and then again causes in circular movements, and that their illness contributes, however difficult it is and always will remain to trace it directly, to our wellbeing, because they carry (a part of) our load, our guilt, our responsibility we still have to acknowledge and to accept, intellectually and existentially.

With prisoners the situation is more clear and, in the same time, more difficult. We are beginning to understand that crimes are the last consequence of a long chain of happenings, very often impossible to trace at all, which, in the end, result in the committing of a crime by one of those, who partook in the power games and who was, in the end, driven to crime. People are driven into crime, into being the scapegoat.

We begin to understand all this a little bit, but that certainly does not yet mean that we know that we all are responsible, that we all have our peace at least in that sense that we agree about the fact that the real culprits are behind the bar, that “the guilty ones” are driven out of society, giving us the certainty that we, being free, are the good ones, that we agree about that and that consequently the world is in order. We still don’t acknowledge that very important parts our own human realities and possibilities are behind the bar, that we make those people responsible for our possibilities, for the violence which is in every body of us. All this is even more hidden, because (most of) these people did in fact the things for which they are punished. We have our judicial system to investigate and condemn in a just manner. Consequently it is right that they are behind the bars! But this certainty is dwindling. We become less and less sure about the reality of justice and thus become more and more uncertain about our prisoners. One of the consequences, amongst many others is, that prisons are more and more reshaped into nice hotels (see further paper (113) Judicial System and Hypocrisy).

Although prisoners are our victims, in a deep sense they are privileged in the same time. They arrived where we all finally belong: Out of hypocrisy, back to facts. Although of course prisoners mostly are as hypocritical as we are, they have chances to find back to reality, to humanity, which those who are outside of prison hardly have or do not have at all. We begin to understand these chances a little bit, when we hear people, who were long in prison, tell their stories, how they began to recognise themselves and their humanity in the faces of their old enemies, how they met Christ in prison.

We should not forget that nowadays there are at least two kinds of prisons. The one kind is the prisons in which the so-called criminals are locked up, after being convicted and sentenced. The other ones are the psychiatric hospitals and their likes, in which people too are locked up, too as a consequence of a sentence, their crime being that they cannot cope with our mad life. Generally the circumstances, the life-conditions in the second type of prisons are much harder, much more inhuman, than those in the first type and the length of the confinement very often is much longer. The whole institution of the mad houses further is much more hypocritical than the prisons as such already are. We pretend that we lock the mad up because we care for them. We put people in inhuman conditions, make them our victims, pretending that we are helping them, doing it at our expense for their own good.

Very generally, all victims of culture are prisoners, imprisoned by the victimisation. Those who are confined show in fact the situation all victims are in. Finally, in our world of internal mediation, in which freedom has disappeared, we all are the prisoners of each other, of

ourselves and our desires. The more transcendence is disappearing out of this world, this world, this culture becomes a more and more strict prison.

Anyway, Jesus is very clear. The victims are those who belong to him, who are in the same position in culture as he was and, because so many people and at least time and again all of us reject him, still is. We can't belong to him, if we don't convert to them.

4. Visiting the prisoner

We visit the prisoner. Whom do we meet?

--We meet a woman or a man who is closed up, in a prison, in a cell, or in a hospital, being together with others or in an isolation-cell. She/he is closed up, as all victims in fact are, as finally we all nowadays are, closed up in internal mediation. She/he is in prison, as our prisoner and, in the same time as a representative of everybody. She/he is carrying the consequences of the deeds we provoked. This does not mean that these deeds are not bad, destroying in some manner humanity. These deeds show us our possibilities. Seeing them done by others shows to us that we were spared, that it is not our merit that we did not do them, but they. That we only can be grateful that they took these deeds upon them.

--We meet a woman, a man who carries the guilt, or the madness, of all of us. We meet our own guilt or our own madness, or both, our failing to carry our responsibility, in the being, in the eyes of the prisoner. In the prisoner we meet ourselves. She/he is mirroring us. When we meet the prisoner, we are given the possibility to repent, to change our relationship with the world, with our fellow-human beings, to find back to our guilt.

--The more we know this, become aware of this and accept it, the more we have the chance that we meet in the eyes of the prisoner the eyes of Jesus, of Christ, the eyes who forgive. In the prisoner we meet the possibility to be forgiven and to begin a new life, which is given to us by the prisoner, ultimately, via the prisoner, by Christ. That new life knows about living outside the mimesis of desire and thus outside of violence. It knows about peace, living it and giving it, giving it and living is.

Of course we can't all flock to the prisons and to the mad-houses, of the latter of which there are nowadays so many kinds. We cannot, although it is thinkable that if we would, prisons would very quickly disappear, because they would not be necessary any longer. If we all would flock to these prisons we would become, in the "flocking", other people, who don't any longer need scapegoats, victims, don't any longer need prisoners and mad-men and women.

First of all, we can be with them, with our heart, our mind. We can be with them, knowing that they, in a sense more than everybody else, are our sisters and brothers, that they represent and carry our hidden parts, which belong to us, of which we never can get rid of, exactly as long as they are in prison. We always deny them, we try to hide them, we are ashamed of them, we put them upon others, our scapegoats, we only accept them, and

“disarm” them by accepting the prisoners in our life, as our sisters and brothers and take the responsibility for their life upon us, if it only would be by praying for them.

The prisoners are all-around us, nearby and all over the world. People who are imprisoned in their feelings, imprisoned by their fate, who are ill, who are destroyed by worrying, about people, about affairs, about difficulties in their work or because they can't find work. Imprisoned in poverty and cruelty.

Imprisonment in the end always is a situation which is brought about by the relationships we have with each other. We imprison nowadays everybody, being ourselves imprisoned in the same time. Some hardly are, others got a life sentence and are in solitary confinement. In any case, all around us are prisoners.