

Sisters and Brothers,

one of my favourite movies is entitled „Die Große Stille“. The big silence.

It is a movie about a monastery in the mountains near Grenoble, in the South of France, called „La Grande Chartreuse“.

The specific characteristic of this community is that they don't talk. Prayer and worship is the only time during the day or during the year when the monks are allowed to speak and to sing. Apart from that: Silence. The big silence.

The producer of the movie wrote a letter to the Prior of the Abbey and asked for permission to be part of the daily life of the monks with his film team and to produce a movie about the daily life in the “Grande Chartreuse”.

The Prior wrote back and agreed – after 15 years!

After nearly twenty years the movie was shown in German cinemas. 160 minutes, nearly three hours without a single word spoken, without any music. 160 minutes of silence. Only pictures, very slow pictures.

More a meditation than a movie...

The reactions of the people watching the movie was very different.

For some people this movie was an experience like worship. Calming down totally for nearly three hours. Something which is nearly impossible during everyday life. But lots of other people left the cinema after 20 minutes, because they could not cope with the silence or, as they said, with “nothing happening”.

For them it was a disturbing or maybe frightening experience: “nothing happening”.

Actually “nothing happening” was not true.

No words, no music, no action does not mean that nothing is happening.

There is one scene in the movie, where you can watch one monk cutting the hair of another monk for about 15 minutes. One slow cut after the other. No word spoken. No music. Nothing but silence.

However: Lots of things are happening during the big silence.

For the monks it was and still is the essential time and way of living. It is their contemplation. Their seeking for the presence of God. They are focussing on the essential questions of life. They are concentrating on God.

For some people in the cinema watching this movie was a time of peace. Nearly three hours without any noise. Others got angry, anxious or bored to tears.

However: Lots of things are happening during the big silence.

When was your last day of silence?

When was your last day without Smartphone, Computer, Tablet, TV?

When was your last day without any noise? Only you and silence?

Never had one? Why not?

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came...

Forty days and nights of big silence...

Forty days of loneliness, heat during the day, cold in the night, no one to talk to, no words, no music, not even the distraction of cooking or eating.

Forty days of “nothing happening” ...

Actually “nothing happening” was not true.

No words, no music, no action does not mean that nothing is happening.

The time in the wilderness, in the desert is a disturbing time. It is even the time of dangerous thoughts and questions. Maybe people realize that and therefore try to avoid any time of silence and “nothing happening”.

The devil is the living symbol of the danger during times of big silence, the danger of essential questions which we have to answer and which we are answering every day even if we are not aware of it. The devil in the wilderness is the living symbol of the danger of giving wrong answers to the most basic questions. Even Jesus had to pass these temptations before he was able to begin his ministry in Galilee as the Son of God.

The first essential question which we have to answer and which we are answering every day, even if we are not aware of it, is:

Do we want to command stones to turn into bread?

Of course, nobody ever asked us a question like that. But let me ask it in another way: How tempted are we to be indispensable people?

Let me tell you a bit of my own experience.

I served as a pastor in the German speaking Methodist Congregation here in Munich for 20 years. I think I did a good job. I gave my best. I was able to preach intellectually. I led home groups, organised retreats, was responsible for the Newsletter, the website. I was in charge of a Kindergarten, had to do all of the

financial business, I was on ecumenical committees, my office was always perfectly organised...and so on. A sort of all-rounder gifted with a lot of skills. Five and a half years ago, I changed my job and started working as a chaplain in the Methodist hospital and nursing home here in Munich.

And the thing that still disturbs me is: Whether the mentally disabled or demented old people particularly like me and my work or not, has nothing to do with all of these skills. My skills are completely worthless. Whatever I did for 20 years was not and is not of interest to any of these old people.

When visiting people in the hospital who are suffering from cancer I realize that none of these skills, like being organised, is a help.

What is required in both situations, is:

To be there. To be present. And not only to be present, but to be present as a vulnerable person, as someone who depends on being loved - just like the person you are visiting.

For me, caring for people means: I come with empty hands. It is not me bringing answers or bread. The task is to look for bread together and to be fed by this bread together. It is not me bringing God to someone else. The task might be to discover where God already is. Discovering God changes both of us, the sick person in the hospital and me, the chaplain as well.

The first temptation is to try being an indispensable person, to command stones to turn into bread. It is a lifelong ongoing temptation. I must confess that I still have days asking myself: What am I doing here? Am I really at the right place? Isn't it a waste that I am not able to use all these former skills which are not necessary where I am now?

I am still learning:

What is required is to share as a person who is not indispensable, to share the life of those people who feel dispensable in this society. Not to create bread by all our skills but to be bread by all of our love which is fed by the love of God.

Who are we beyond all our skills, all our money, all our possessions?

“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

The second essential question which we have to answer and which we are answering every day, even if we are not aware of it, is:

Do we want to present a spectacular show?

'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '

The second temptation for Jesus was to be greedy for applause and to increase his popularity by acting like a stuntman.

Education at school or university mostly works by teaching people to be able to survive as a lone fighter. You are sent on an enormously long trip and your rucksack is filled with all sorts of things to help people or to develop your career.

Trained as a pastor, I brought with me answers for different questions, solutions for various problems, "medicine" for manifold diseases. The only thing you had to do was to confirm a diagnosis.

The temptation is to act like an artist on a high wire being greedy for applause because you did not fall. But we have to admit that most of us are not created for dancing on a high wire, that we do not have magical power, that we are not able to prepare an adorable service every Sunday, that we cannot meet the misery of needy people as we would love to do.

What we have to learn is: a fulfilled life always is life in community.

When Jesus sent out his disciples he always sent out at least two of them. No one was sent out as a lone hero. No pastor, no lay preacher, no musician is the lone hero of a church.

It is our call to tell the good news of the kingdom of God as a community of faith! As Peace Church community we can only survive by sharing our gifts and the life of the church. During the year at least ten different preachers share the pulpit, at least another ten people are leading through worship, another twenty-five share their musical talent, another ten people help with communion, and many more help with coffee or cleaning. We need the financial generosity of all of us and of course we need the prayers of the whole congregation. What we do not need are lone heroes.

This is an enormous relief for everyone.

The Iona Community in Scotland has the symbol of the wild *goose* for the Holy Spirit. The Community there reminds us: *Geese* in a *flock* have seventy per cent greater range than a single *goose* on its own; *geese* in formation fly seventy-five per cent faster than a single *goose*.

Jesus said to the devil "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Church is always a Community of disciples who depend on each other, however weak or strong we might be. And all together we depend on the kindness and faithfulness of God.

The third essential question which we have to answer and which we are answering every day, even if we are not aware of it, is:

How do we feel about power?

The devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'

Perhaps the biggest tragedy in Christianity always was that male church leaders could not resist the temptation of power. Political, military, economical and spiritual power.

The nearly irresistible fascination of power is that power is a simple alternative for the demanding task to convince people by love.

It is easier to be God instead of loving God. It is easier to dominate people instead of loving them. It is easier to command life instead of loving life.

Jesus asks Peter: Do you love me?

We ask: May we sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom?

We are always tempted to replace love by power. Educating our children, living together with our wife or our husband, working in a church committee, even in preaching...the temptation is always to replace love by power.

It makes people feel small when they meet power. Our call is to make people feel strong and worthy because they are loved by God.

Power also humiliates people by involving them in questions which are too small. A real question is: What is our call beyond all our skills, all our money, all our possessions, all our power?

Jesus said to the devil, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'

Worshipping God means that we are called to help people to discover the silent, gracious and tender voice of God and to be comforted and encouraged by God's voice.

Do we want to command stones to turn into bread?

Do we want to be greedy for applause and to increase our popularity by acting like a lone hero?

How do we feel about power?

Let us come back to the beginning.

The disturbing and frightening experience of the "big silence" was: Nothing happening.

The disturbing and frightening experience of forty days and nights in the wilderness: Nothing happening.

Actually “nothing happening” was not true as we learned.

No words, no music, no action does not mean that nothing is happening.

The time in the wilderness, in the desert is a disturbing time. It is even the time of dangerous thoughts and questions.

The devil is the living symbol of the danger during times of big silence, the danger of essential questions which we have to answer and which we are answering every day even if we are not aware of it. The devil in the wilderness is the living symbol of the danger to give wrong answers to the most basic questions.

The last sentence in this story is:

“...suddenly angels came and waited on him”

Let me encourage you to conduct the experiment of a day in the desert.

You could begin with one day per month. Switch off your Smartphone, your Tablet, your computer, your TV...and if possible, your children...(!)

Take a day off in silence. Take the challenge of facing some disturbing and dangerous questions:

Who am I beyond all my skills, all my money, all my possessions?

Do I want to command stones to turn into bread?

Do I want to be greedy for applause and to increase my popularity by acting like a lone hero?

How do I feel about power?

Let the community of the church help you to discover the silent, gracious and tender voice of God and to be comforted and encouraged by it. Let the community help you to replace power by love.

Do not miss the experience

“...suddenly angels will come and wait on you”

(Silence...)