

RITUAL AND JUSTICE

“I hate and despise your feasts; I take the pleasure in your solemn festivals. When you offer me holocausts, (...) I reject your oblations, and refuse to look at your sacrifices of fattened cattle. Let me have no more of the din of your chanting, no more of your strumming on harps. But let justice flow like water and integrity like an unfailing stream”. (JB)

“I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy booms. but let judgement run down as water, and righteousness as a might stream”. (KJV)

It is again interesting to compare the two translations. Which do we like more? Which is more clear? Are there differences which are striking for us? What do we learn from these differences?

1. Ritual in the life of Israelites

For the Israelites, ritual was the kernel of life itself. In the feasts, the offerings, they came together. All the dissipation of life, all the differences between them, the striving, the enmities, they were forgotten, they disappeared in the celebrations. They were all agreeing again, being together with Yahweh, with God. Giving together, singing together, making music together, they found each other again as brothers and sisters. They found peace. With that peace they went home again. Life was not disappearing into chaos. Life could go on.

Ritual still has this function in our lives. Going to church together on Christmas and Easter. Do we recognize that? And can we find other examples.

2. The dismissing of all ritual

The prophet is saying time and again the same: ‘I, your God, I do not like it! I despise your feast days. I cannot smell it when you come together for them’,

The words I cannot smell are extremely penetrating. In all religions the gods smell, and are happy with the smell or they are disgusted. Smelling is the most emotional of our senses. It means, when we are disgusted by the smell, that we are not only saying no, we are turning away, without further, thinking we do not wish to have anything to do with those from whom the smell comes. I will not accept. I will regard. Take away from me. I will not hear.

It is not important what all these rituals which are mentioned mean. What is deciding is that the prophet says that God does not wish to have anything to do with any of them. In fact, to make his point, the prophet is repeating time and again the same with other words.

The people who heard these words must have been absolutely flabbergasted. They did what God himself, they were very sure, had said to them to do. They did as their fathers did. Tradition for them was all important. It was part of their life, it was “programmed in the very cells of their body. They could not do anything else other than follow the tradition, obey the commandments of God as they knew them. They were acting in good faith.

Of course, they knew, as Amos knew, that times were hard. Just because of that they were even more faithful, eventually, in carrying one with all the rituals of religious life. If there were difficulties in public and private life, this was the way out.

Again, do we recognize this? Are there impulses in us to do the same? Do we see it around us?

So this prophet, Amos, is deeply disturbing, if not a rascal or, even worse, a criminal. He is destroying the only possibility and hope of the people to get out of the predicament. A new way to look at the reality we live in, trying to find a new way out, is always threatening for everybody. People become insecure, and then angry.

So every often, when we see, or think to see, new possibilities we are or become afraid of the people around us, and we draw back, shut up. Extremely many of the creative possibilities to change things in Northern Ireland are lost in this manner. Do we have experiences, that we tried to change things, or were even too afraid to try?

“I tell you solemnly, no prophet is ever accepted in his own country”. (Luke, 4,24 JB) Do we understand that? Do we understand that it is very difficult for people who know us, to accept a good idea, which in the same time makes life to begin with more difficult?

3. What is the meaning of ritual?

It is worthwhile to think a little bit more about the meaning of rituals. One aspect is already spoken about: “You are coming together from all sides, with your cares, your sorrows, your enmities, your expectations and preoccupations. Then you are doing things together. You do it as the fathers did it, in obedience to God. You bring yourself into a long and important tradition. You become free of being an individual, with all the difficulties which belong to it, and you become part of a whole; not any longer alone but together. This is not any longer a burden, this responsibility, it is a joy”.

Of course this is as ritual can be and, in the past, very often was. Do we recognize (something of) it?

Ritual has other aspects too. That people become one, undivided, at peace, has a price. What was separating people, and people who were separating people, were driven out. Everybody disturbing the peace, was shut out of the community.

So discord is shut out. Enmity. But all these interpersonal realities, such is our deep understanding, are provoked by bad people, so they again are shut out. Once they were sacrificed, driven into death, burnt. Another example is the church ban, excommunication.

So rituals are only possible because we are dividing people between good people and bad people. The good people are the people who are performing the rituals, the bad ones are the ones who do not belong, are smitten out, who once were killed and now are scapegoated.

In a sense it is very curious: We all are scapegoating like made and in the same time we get more and more difficulties with it. We begin to understand that there are no good and bad

people, that we all have, infact, the same possibilities to be good and bad. Do we recognize that?

As soon as this happens, when the insight grows that it is unjust to divide people between good ones and bad ones (and do in this, of course we are always the good one....), then ritual is endangered. It does not perform any longer its task. So ritual is falling down and in the same time society runs into difficulties and into disaster.

This is exactly the case in and with Northern Ireland. Although we are scapegoating each other like made and are very, very sure who provoke the difficulties in our society, it is dawning upon us, that it might not be true. In that very moment we lose sense of direction, if we don't find another one. Do we recognize that?

There is still something else with ritual, which is extremely important. Ritual changes us. In a sense we only have to partake in the ritual to change. We do not need to make a personal decision to change. We only have to decide to partake in the ritual. The ritual changes you, for the good or for the bad.

Can we understand that? And can we find examples in our own life and/or in the life of others.

2. Ritual in our own life

Amos lived more than 2500 years ago. Since then the real problems of life have not changed. That is the reason that he, and the solution he speaks about, is still important for us. Seen from the outside, life changed very much. In Amos' time the whole of life still was religious very visibly. People knew that their life only was possible because of religion.

Our situation is in fact exactly the same. Our life is as religious as the life of the Israelites, 2500 years ago. Our life is, as the life of those Israelites, only possible because of ritual. Ritual always is religious, if we know it or do not know it. We do not know but it is no less true, with our rituals we are still driving out the bad ones, so making peace or, at least, trying to make peace.

This is most clear in our courts. Everything that happens there is ritual down to and with the wigs of the judges. And in the end the culprits are driven out. And in the same time, here our modern hesitations begin: Are they the real culprits? Are they rightly driven out?

We see it in our political life. There too, everything is ritualized. Politicians are driving out their opponents with big, threatening words, ritualized words, with never anything new, in ritualized sessions and gatherings. You can do what you wish if you stick to the rules and so, in fact, nothing happens. The rituals prevent that politicians kill each other (the old function of rituals),but life does not go on.

And again, in our life at home, we have our rituals. These are the manners by which "things are done". Rituals around our meals, when and how we eat. Rituals in agreeing each other. For every aspect of our having to do with each other we have our rules, without knowing that they are rules. It is just normal, as all living rituals are. And those who do not know our rituals, cannot get along with them they are strangers. They do not belong to our world. We do not wish to have anything to do with them. They disturb our rituals, and with our rituals

we do not know any longer what to think about each. We may end up in chaos and unhappiness.

And so it is in the street., in the shops. There are those things we say, and which we do not say, to strangers. To people who help us in a shop. And as soon as there happens something we did not expect, which is out of our ritual, we feel worried, upset. And we scapegoat the person who is doing the not-done, the unexpected.

It is very important to talk about all these, and eventually about other aspects, of ritual. Do we recognize them, How important are they for us? Probably very important, so do not be too quickly dismissive. And in the same time: do we begin to question the rightness, the justice of rituals? In the courts, of course. But elsewhere? And are there openings in our life, that people who do not comply, who do the unexpected, are welcomed instead of scapegoated?

2. Changing times

Amos lived in a changing time as we do. Society in the old sense, with its security in which people could live, was breaking down, as, in fact, ours. That means that we run the risk that chaos takes over.

Amos was, as far as we know, the first prophet who saw clearly what was happening. Others following suit. Isiah, Micha. So Amos really is a prophet. A prophet is a man or a woman who with a deep insight, understands clearly what is happening to society and who is able to show ways forward, to a new form of living together, to a new peaceful society.

Do we know people who are prophets? Or who have at least something of a prophet. People who can read the signs of the time? Who can tell about maybe very unusual, but maybe just because of that, real possibilities to live, to live together again in one country?

When ritual does not work any longer, when ritual does not bring peace, as it always did, and even eventually provokes new difficulties, that is a certain sign that times are changing that the old methods to keep peace do not work any longer. We do our utmost to do things better, to make new appointments, to promise each other to do exactly as we have to do, and it does not help.

Can we recognize that? In our own lives? In our society?

Amos is not saying: "Rules are bad. Do without it". It is very clear that we cannot live without rules, without appointments, mostly made without any word said about it. Without rules life ends up in disaster, because we cannot understand each other any longer and we will fight as mad.

He says to us: "These rituals, which you are performing with this big dedication and diligence, do not any longer work! Very probably the performing of them does not bring back peace, the possibility to live peacefully together as they did once, in older times, the times, of our fathers".

Or, to say it in still another manner: Amos said to the Israelites, and in fact to us: "You are mistaken. I understand you to be very honest trying to do the rituals as exactly, as precisely

as possible, as you fathers always did. I see your deep hope, even if you are not thinking consciously about it, that peace in that manner will be regained, but you are wrong.

You can see that yourself. Probably times have changed so much that we have to find another possibility to go on together.

So Amos is not saying: “You are bad, performing this rituals”. He says: “You are mistaken. You are blind for the reality you, we, live in. Although you do your utmost, rituals do not work any longer. In fact, they make things worse”.

Can we find examples of that?

So performing rituals was always culture itself and so as such it is not bad. And if times go wrong, we feel eventually hopeless and try desperately to go on because we do not see another possibility. And in the same time, when it is said to us that they do not work any longer, and why, then it can be hypocritical to go on with them.

Of course a common example is parents enforce upon their children to go to church. The parents feel hopeless about it and do not do it themselves any longer. There are more examples of this.

And, on the other hand, the parents, not any longer believing, not going along with ritual, may feel very hopeless because of that, and they hope their children will find the way back, the way they lost. And it is clear, because of what Amos says, that this way only is found back in a new manner.

Another form of hypocrisy: Doing the rituals, making yourself believe that you are believing in them, that they are very important for your life and in the same time know that it is not true. This is hypocrisy and it is hopelessness. It is worthwhile to talk about that.

Can we find examples of hypocrisy in our own lives. There certainly are. In our neighbourhood, our parents, relatives, friends? In politics? In the churches? And do we recognize the hopelessness which is hidden in all hypocrisy?

In any case, the Israelites must have been extremely astonished and probably very offended, if not furious. They fulfilled the law. They did as their fathers did. Things clearly are already going wrong, and now this man comes, saying exactly the reverse of what always was believed: That God hated what they were doing to get peace with Him and with each other. Instead of helping us, first of all he makes things more hopeless.

We recognize the hopelessness of political life, which ritually goes on and one in the old manner, without any solution. The hopelessness of the ritual confrontation of protestants and roman catholics, always going on in the old manner, making things worse and worse. We recognize the hopelessness of so many lives, so many couples, so many parents. To all of this Amos says: Stop it, you try, in the old, known manners, to find ways out. It does not help. You are sinking deeper into the morass.

First of all the hopelessness deepens. Infactwe knew already but we could go on as if we did not know. Now, being told and so knowing, it is not even possible to go on. Do we recognize this?

6. **The step out of the world if ritual**

It is clear Amos could not have said this without knowing about a possibility to go on, about a new way to go. If he would not have know that, he would not have been a prophet, but simply a pessimistic moralist, a nuisance.

In fact he says to us: Get out of the ritualistic way of life. Stop trusting ritual to get peace. This means in fact : Get out of society for a moment, go back to yourself.

The ritualistic way of living, our normal life, is not a life of real personal decisions. By fulfilling the rituals, we belong. Rituals keep life in order. We need not think not take decisions. Now that ritualistic life is moving into chaos, into havoc, we cannot to in this manner.

Amos says to us: Stop being part of the whole, being together with the others, being just normal. To have a way forward, not only for yourself but for all around you, take the responsibility for your life yourself. Go a new way.

Can we recognize this? Can we look so deeply into ourselves, that we fantasise that we are not any longer part of a much bigger whole, but really only with ourselves, responsibilities for ourselves?

Responsibility means that we are answering, questions about our life, our being. If we really are on our own, not answering to the other people around us (because then we immediately are again part of a whole) to whom can we answer, be responsible, staying in that freedom?

7. **Into another way of living**

Amos becomes very concrete when it is about leaving the old ritualistic culture by choosing for another life: “let justice flow like water, and integrity like an unfailing stream”. (JBN) “Let judgement run down a water, and righteousness as a mighty stream”. (KJV)

“Let justice flow like water”

The Hebrew word, which is translated in the JB by ‘justice’ is translated by the KJV by ‘judgement’. This means already clear, that this is a word with its own character, which cannot be translated with one of our own words. ‘We need more words to make clear what it is about.

First of all: Justice was for the Israelites a totally other reality than it is for us. Our word justice is filled with a meaning which comes more or less from roman law. It is a ritualistic, a religious (heathen) justice, in which things are allocated. It is about rules which are implemented. If, by using these rules, poor people become more poor, that does not matter. Justice is about right and wrong, not about humanity. The consequences can be extremely inhuman. The Romans already knew: summumius, summa iniuria, the highest justice is the highest injustice.

For the Israelites justice was a totally other reality. For them justice was, that everybody had the possibility to live. Justice was not about things and rules, but about persons and their

necessities. Everybody had to have the possibility to live without fears, without want, having what she, he needed, being able to live in the gratitude of life itself.

So, “Let justice flow” meant: Give everybody the possibility to live with a happy heart. To have this possibility, to give everybody, as far as you are able to, to live with a happy heart, means of course, that you know what the other is needing. To have insight, judgement.

And so we come to the word the KJV is using. The Hebrew word in fact means, besides the justice in the meaning just explained, a way of looking to your fellow-humans. A way, in which you see what they need. And a way fulfil, as far as you can, these needs. This exactly, is justice.

‘Let this justice flow like water’.

Every Israelite, hearing these words, would see a wadi, a mountain river, before him in the rain time. The waters are going all over the country, making everything thoroughly wet. And then, after some days, the dry plains begin to flower. Green and beautiful flowers all over.

Let your justice be like that!

Give life, possibility to live, because that is justice, to everybody who comes into your life, who is in your life. Everybody is reached by this justice, as the water reaches every spot of the arid land. People around us are as arid, longing for humanity, justice, possibilities to live and to enjoy life.

If we wish to escape from the hopelessness of ritualized, of so-called normal life, then our justice is for everybody. It does not matter if she/he is catholic or protestant, beautiful or ugly, sympathetic or not likeable. Just anyone who is human.

The second half of the sentence is again a repetition, an underlining of the first half: let righteousness run down as a mighty stream (KJV), let integrity flow like an unfailing stream. (JB).

Again, the word righteousness (JB: integrity) is a translation of a very rich Hebrew word. It can be translated: that what we owe each other, that what somebody has a right to get, the right behaviour amidst of human beings, charitable love, the putting right of a relationship. So we recognize what is said about the other word in this sentence, justice, judgement. It means again what we owe each other, so that everybody has the possibility to live without hardness and in peace.

You cannot keep a stream back which is falling down to the plain. So our righteousness (in the biblical sense, which is certainly a better translation than integrity) cannot be kept back. It flows on, watering life, the life of those around us.

8. We are called to change totally

Amos puts before us a possibility to be delivered from the chaos which is growing around us, by changing. The change means that we stop to make the old distinctions, between people who belong to us and people who do not belong to us, between interesting and not interesting

people, between beautiful and ugly people, between friends and foes. The only people who remain are all humans around us and the only difference, if they need us or do not. And in fact we all need each other to live.

We could seek somebody we know, whom we left along until now and about whom we can now ask ourselves if this is not a person we need, because she, he needs us?

And we can ask ourselves, and talk about whether or not the only possibility to be human in that the other is human to us. Only by finding a human way to the other we begin to understand what it means to be human.

Amos means a total change. Not of our thinking and our feelings, rather of our whole being. That means that the change is visible in the way we are amidst of others. We need not always say things. The manner we are with people is already telling. The way took, we are talking about people, not scapegoating them and refusing to scapegoat them, allowing them their place and their dignity.

If we go along with Amos, making our choice for possibility in the future we are asked to do justice, to be righteous. To take in fact, the place of the, our former, victim.

This is again a very big theme and in the same time the kernel of life. Can we understand to stand beside of the victim, the person in need, to take his, her place and her, his predicament, to bring her, him out of that situation.

That can be very dangerous, even for our life. In Northern Ireland it is not very difficult to understand this and experience this. Can we find examples?

9. The deliverance out of ritual life

It belongs to ritual life, that we make differences between good people and bad people, between those “of us” and “them” there. In ritual life there are always the good ones and the bad ones. This worked for many, many centuries and those on the good side of the line had a good life. Amos experienced and we experience, that ritual life does not work any longer. We do not believe any longer that there are intrinsically good people (us) intrinsically bad people (them). Although we do not believe that any longer, we go on with our rituals, with our flags, our marches, knowing deep down that it does not work, that we are making things worse. And so we become more frantic, worsening everything again because we do not see another way and because we think doing nothing is worse of all.

If you go on with this, Amos says, certainly you are not doing the will of God, even if all priest are very sure that that is not true, even if it is preached from all the pulpits that we have to go on with our rituals.

Not doing the will of God is, and that was the experience of the Israelites, disaster. And there is another way.

When we leave ritual life behind us, when we stop killing in all the manners we are killing each other, we still need rules, to keep our life going. They are not any longer rituals, excluding everybody who does not belong, does not comply, does not know they manner we do things. They are rules, which always include everybody and exclude nobody. Rules

which give the possibility to live to every human being around us. Listening to amos means to learn what justice is. Listening means to learn, maybe very slowly and as much as possible together, these non-ritualistic rules.

“Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law? Jesus said, ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it; You must love your neighbour as yourself. Matthew 22, 36-39. This is the command against all ritual and all ritual law. Nobody is excepted. We find already the same in the Old Testament, Deut.6, 5., Lev. 19, 18. this again is the reflection of the insight the wisdom of Amos. This commandment, too is the measure of all non-ritualistic rules. Any rule which does not fit in in this commandment is again ritualistic, is destroying. Could we find new rules.

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