

## A service of celebration to mark the inauguration of Reverend Dr. Dagmar Pruin on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021

Sermon for the inauguration on 30.9.2021

Congregation:

The sermon text is in the fourth book of Moses, Numbers, Chapter 6, Verses 22-27.

*22 And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, 23 Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, 24 The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: 25 The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: 26 The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace. 27 And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel; and I will bless them. Amen.*

Today's sermon text is read at the end of many church services across the world: Aaron's blessing. Bible verses poured into an act of worship, which usually feels the words instead of investigating them. The blessing is the most beautiful dance of hope and like many beautiful and life-saving things, simultaneously useless and indispensable, as Fulbert Steffensky once said. Like a lovers' kiss.

*The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.* When people in Biblical times prayed for the Lord's blessing, it was first and foremost a prayer for protection: protection from persecution, drought and tempest, from illness, and above all from enemies. The blessing has, to use our phrasing, a profound humanitarian dimension.

Human life is fragile. Even the most heartfelt blessing does not simply and automatically lead to success, it is not a magical act – and it also does not mean that *everything will be fine*.

The people that transcribed our words of blessing knew what they were talking about.

These are words written in exile. At the end of the 6th century BC, the Babylonian world power led the struggle for dominance in the Near and Middle East with great success and, as was often the case in the course of the centuries, the comparatively insignificant Israel fell amidst the power games and was crushed under the wheels of history due to its geographic location between the power centres. The temple, where the Lord God was prayed to and which was a symbol, indeed more than a symbol, a manifestation of heavenly protection, was razed down to its foundations – and thus along with it all associated security and hope. And as a further measure of the occupation, the ten thousand most prominent citizens were led to Babylon with their families.

After a march of 900 kilometres from Israel into present day Iraq, after losing their home, after many of the old and weak or even children likely did not survive the horrors of the journey, words such as "everything will be fine" lost their resonance. Many of the people in the Global South, with whom we, *Brot für die Welt* and *Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe*, cooperate, have had to endure such or other abysmal experiences. I think of the Rohingya in the huge refugee camps in Bangladesh, who have lost everything and have, above all, lost their loved ones and are only currently protected from severe weather by thin tarpaulins.

Even in a strong and wealthy country such as ours, the people in the west of our country, befallen by the flood catastrophe, have learnt what vulnerability means and how terrible random factors can determine that some families live and others die. Even with everything that we and other organisations might intend to do there, it is certainly not the case that *everything will be fine*.

**A service of celebration to mark the inauguration of Reverend Dr. Dagmar Pruin on  
30<sup>th</sup> September 2021**

*The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.* The exiles in Babylon, even after the horrors of the journey, did not give up their belief in the Lord's blessing – *I will not let you go, except you bless me.* When, just a few metres from here on Museum Island on the Prozessionsstrasse, I stand before the famous Ishtar Gate with its depictions of Ishtar, Adad and Marduk, the main Babylonian deities, and can feel but a little bit the power expressed by this massive display of strength from the size and power of the images, I stand there and I can imagine what strength, what trust in God and what "chutzpah" the homeless Israelites demonstrated. After all, in the Ancient Near East the power of the deities was reflected in the visualisation of their size and strength. Yet the people with the destroyed temple in their homeland stood up before the foreign deities' superpower and their images. Israel held tightly onto its own belief and said: *"No, our God is not powerless – even if He no longer has a temple. Our God is in fact the only one who exists – and it is in the weaknesses where He is powerful. It is under this God, this blessing that we stand. It is this God who does not abandon us – even if all appear to be against us – and against Himself."*

*The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee.* When a face was described as shining in the ancient Near East, the image is always a sun with its shining rays. When the people in exile phrase it in this way they are sharing an experience: When life shows cracks, begins even to crumble, the rays of God's love can nevertheless, or even for that very reason, pierce through. The moment of powerlessness can also be a moment of opening up oneself. And the shards of life reflect the sun.

In this way – and this dimension of the biblical discourse is important! – the rays of this love do not cover up – they actually reveal. This is also what is meant when we talk about the Lord's face. We learn at the outset of the Bible how Cain kills his brother, hides from the face of God and then must flee from that very face. The light of the face of God always makes injustice visible, one's own and that of others. *Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations,* it says in the splendid Psalm 90 / *Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.* But then just a few verses later: *Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.* The prayer for blessing does not cause the contours of reality to blur into another. It causes them to emerge even stronger.

The Israelites in exile have a clear perception of their reality and with this clear perception they use these verses of blessing to phrase the hope that everything can change again. "In hope the soul overleaps reality" – as Hannah Arendt once said.

Other partners in the Global South can tell us of such hope, and of successful change for a better future. I think of the project of our partner organisation, the Kachin Baptist Convention, which funds tuition and school materials for 1,500 internally displaced refugee children in Myanmar. You can read about what that means for 16-year-old Nar Ra Bauk and her elder sister. Nar Ra Bauk would like to become a doctor and, despite all her terrible experiences, is deeply filled with the hope of a better future. Such signs of hope are visible and tangible in many of our projects.

To pass on such hope and to insist again and again on such hope against all forms of societal and political fatalism, that is what makes a church agency. We can do our work because Nar Ra Bauk and our partners have something to say to us and the world. In this work the speech of hope does not

**A service of celebration to mark the inauguration of Reverend Dr. Dagmar Pruin on  
30<sup>th</sup> September 2021**

cover reality, it enforces a sharp analysis of the political situations and injustices in which we live. Those who believe in the sense of the biblical blessing, do not close their eyes against reality, they open them.

However, at the same time the limits of our work are not the limits of God's blessing. Blessing can be found in that which we believe to have failed, when we have to retreat from a country due to political situations, although we know how much our work is needed by our partners there. When we are no longer there, it does not mean that God is no longer there. And vice versa: when we believe the work has succeeded, when it is efficient and meaningful – we cannot summon God's blessing, instead we must place ourselves as individuals beneath Him and receive Him together in the One World. In the moment of prayer for blessing any asymmetry in development cooperation work ends.

*The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.* For the exiled in Babylon *one* hope was fulfilled – the return to home in Israel. After the Babylonians, the Persians gained supremacy in the Near East and let the exiled return home and build a temple. And the blessing went with them and was given new life as a story. The Persians were rulers who knew the significance of religion for the cohesion and stability of a people and a country. At the temple they let the priests transcribe the people's stories of creation, of Abraham and Sara, the exodus from Egypt, the desert wanderings and the endowment of the commandments, and to give them a form: the form of the five books of Moses as we know them today. This blessing from exile was incorporated into the texts, becoming a blessing that had always been with the people of Israel and had wandered through the desert.

And thus today the blessing is found incorporated into the narrative and the context of the extensive commandments and laws of the Hebrew Bible, the religious regulations of which are sometimes strange and incomprehensible to us – sometimes I imagine I can sense the exuberance and the happiness about the new temple! – unlike elements such as the consistent partisanship and the consistent advocacy for widows and orphans, women and children and indeed also for refugee strangers, which are so politically relevant to us in terms of human rights.

The words of blessing and the commandments are included in the story of the Saviour Lord, He who preserved the people in the famine and freed them from Egypt. And the Lord that led them out of Babylon and before that out of Egypt now gives them the commandments to shape this freedom themselves. A freedom that can only be shaped with the strong and the weak, the givers and the takers, the widows and the strangers – otherwise it is no freedom. And the Lord promises His blessing to the shaping of *this* freedom, which encourages community and ends every asymmetry.

I would like to go back once more to the temple and finish telling a story about a blessing which I have thought a lot about in the last few days. When I was studying in Jerusalem the western wall of the temple, often referred to as the Wailing Wall, was one of my favourite places in the sun. I would sit there for hours on end. What really stood out to me here was the manner of the beggars and above all of one woman beggar. None of them showed any feelings of submissiveness, especially her. Quite the opposite: when someone gave her some shekels, she kissed her hand, laid it on the head of the giver and spoke a blessing.

Behind her self-assured conduct was the acknowledgement that we are placed by the Lord in different positions. Some have – at the moment anyway – money to give, but it was *she* that gave them the opportunity to fulfil the Lord's commandment – to care for the weak. And thus *she* blessed the giver.

**A service of celebration to mark the inauguration of Reverend Dr. Dagmar Pruin on  
30<sup>th</sup> September 2021**

The blessing is the most beautiful dance of hope. It is – here I do not agree with Fulbert Steffensky – not useless at all, but definitely indispensable. Like the lover's kiss.

*And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.*