

“Gib dem Evangelium (d)ein Gesicht”

Let your face reflect the Gospel

(Literally: *Give the Gospel a/your face*)

Sermon preached by Manfred Scheuer on 09th August 2003 in St Radegund

“You’re not in a good mood today!” - as children in the Special School told me a few years ago. They find it difficult to express themselves verbally and they have particular difficulties with concentration. And yet they perceive from the face whether someone is in a good mood or bad. The face betrays how long or how short the previous night was. In the eyes one recognises tiredness, alertness, health, sickness, or the consumption of alcohol. The face shows fundamental characteristics and fundamental attitudes to life such as sadness, bitterness, worry; it may also show confidence, happiness or composure. With a blank look, life is experienced as a deep hole; when the eyes dart here and there, there is no resting place, no stopping.

The unique identity, the innermost soul is shown in the face. The face also expresses relationships. We experience benevolence and healing in loving attentiveness; we sense how important it is to be seen, heard and esteemed. It can be wounding, however, when someone who is present in body is elsewhere in thought. Looks can plead and implore, I need you, don’t let me down, don’t leave me alone. A look can demand, You must help me! You must not kill me! Or, look me in the eyes, that is, tell me the truth.

Looks and facial characteristics can also signal coldness, indifference and contempt. Without words someone can say: You are of no use to me, you are nothing but rubbish and trash, to be used and then discarded, you are nothing, a cost factor, which we won’t want to tolerate any more in the future. Looks can control, monitor, record and paralyse. In everyday speech it’s called ‘if looks could kill’ - not without reason.

“The Beatitudes reflect the face of Jesus and his Love” (Catechism of the Catholic Church nr. 1717). We have no authentic picture of Jesus, no photo, no films, no written documents, no signature, no genetic code, but: The Beatitudes reflect the countenance, the face, the identity of Jesus, they stand at the heart of Jesus’s sermon. This face of Jesus conveys who God is for us people. Jesus’s gaze on humanity does not stop at made up, prettified, stylised superficiality. Jesus’s gaze goes deep, it conveys dignity, affection, life and hope. In Jesus, in his Beatitudes, God writes the sovereign sign of his love and dignity on the forehead of each and every person, friend and enemy, poor and lowly. We are forbidden to think of ourselves, of others, of the weak, as lowly and despicable. If we did, we would despise God himself, and hold him in low esteem.

In the Beatitudes God’s foresight is pronounced. “The Angel of History must look like this. He has turned his face to the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees there a complete catastrophe, which relentlessly heaps rubble upon rubble and flings it at him. He may well linger, wake the dead and piece together what was shattered”. (Footnote 1). In the Beatitudes Jesus pieces together the shattered things and the shattered people, rescues the lost, revives the broken, dries tears and gives hope to the dead.

Franz Jägerstätter has given to the Gospel a countenance, a face, a voice. His way of life, his decision and his dying are steeped in the Gospel. Pfarrer Karobath sent him a Bible as a wedding present. He read it daily. The Bible is for him orientation, guiding principle, commitment and promise. In the Bible God himself gives us the basis of unshakeable hope (193). In his notes he frequently wrote down sentences from scripture, which were important for him. His biography is contained in the Sermon on the Mount.

“What Catholic dares to assert that these raids, which Germany has already carried out in several countries and continues to carry out, constitute a just and holy war?” - as Franz Jägerstätter writes in the fourth of his 10 (11) questions. In May 1942 he posed the question in earnest: did it really not matter, if one waged a just or an unjust war? “Is there anything much worse than my murdering and robbing people who defend their Fatherland, just to help bring to victory an anti-religious power?” (160). In this quest for justice he looks on the victim and does not allow himself to be stultified by reports of victory and by propaganda. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice!

His clarity of thought and judgment is impressive. His conscience persuaded him, absolutely, that he must follow the will of God. This in turn influenced his decisions and his actions. Franz Jägerstätter did not wish to offend God through his sins (62.76), nor to prolong his own life through a lie (57). The purity of his heart and the clarity of his judgement showed itself in his readiness for forgiveness and reconciliation. “Most people make life itself a misery through their failure to be reconciled” (51). Forgiveness is particularly important when others are easily insulted and are liable to take offence (114). Whoever cannot forgive himself or others, is dominated by anger. Then poison spreads. Without readiness to forgive, an injustice that is experienced becomes a growth hormone of resentment, of a craving for revenge and retribution. Anyone who is not reconciled, cannot think properly and also cannot pray.

His loyalty to the truth, recognised in conscience, his clarity of purpose, the purity of his heart and thought and also his readiness for forgiveness and reconciliation reflect the clear heart, which is promised to see God.

In contrast to those disposed towards National Socialism, he does not pray for victory but for peace (48.51.163) and for enemies (184). This prayer should not be in word alone but should also affect our actions (Footnote 2). He chooses to refuse military duty, rather than kill others. There are circumstances when one must obey God more than man; because of the commandment “Love your neighbour as yourself”, it is not permissible to fight with the sword.

Franz Jägerstätter’s thinking stems from the biblical principle of non-violence. “The motto of the Christian in battle is not: ‘Fight Might with Might’ but ‘Patience and Perseverance in Faith’ ”(Footnote 3). In his writings he emphasised that Jesus did not want to repay evil with evil (142) and never described injustice and violence as good (190) - Jesus traversed the darkness and the malice of humankind in his suffering. From his rootedness in God, Jesus broke the disastrous chain of violence and counter-violence. On the cross, the peak of the love of one’s enemy, of readiness for forgiveness and reconciliation, Jesus is prepared to take upon himself the

transgressions of others and to allow them to come to a stop. In this way he overcomes evil with good (Romans 12, 21). In him is also shown the difference between the true and the false God: "The false God turns suffering into violence. The true God turns violence into suffering" (Footnote 4). It would be the worst idolatry, to get rid of others or to kill them, in order to overcome suffering. In order, on the other hand, "to emulate divine love, one is never permitted to use force". (Footnote 5). Atonement is the realisation of reconciliation in the area of human freedom and human community; and particularly where freedom and relationship are warped through and through, stuck fast, set in monological cement, arrogantly puffed up, narcissistically poisoned, exhausted of their own possibilities and run to death. Jesus breaks open the logic of evil from the inside out and overcomes it. Only this way is the merry-go-round of violence and counter-violence interrupted - Franz Jägerstätter has lived the command to love one's enemy; he resolved not to counter violence with violence. It is because Franz Jägerstätter understood his life and also his dying in this way, that his memory today can become a spring board for story, confession, remorse and amendment, forgiveness and hope. His witness ignites hope, a hope which also enfolds the perpetrators and those led astray. Thus he embodies the beatitude of the meek, of those who use no force.

Franz Jägerstätter paid for his obedience to his conscience and for his witness with persecution and execution. He also experienced at first hand not being understood, calumny, hate and contempt. - Blessed, those who are persecuted for my sake and for the sake of justice. The Beatitudes are reflected in the face of Jägerstätter, brokenly, of course, for he too bears the treasure in vessels that are earthen, breakable. His eyes shine with the search for God and for his truth. In his eyes one recognises the dignity, the regard that God gives to people.

Franz Jägerstätter also possessed the foresight of the Beatitudes. "Oh these devils in human form, they lead you to believe that they are handing out pure sugar and honey, but the moment you take a bite you find it's pure poison inside". (86f.) He saw through the masks of seduction, he knew about the manifestation of evil in the form of good deeds. In his dream soon after the invasion of Austria by the German army it became clear to him that the pull of the ideology and barbarism would lead to the ruin of millions of people. The ability to discern has to do with being open to the workings of one's mind, open to developments which are basically there already but which can become eclipsed by all kinds of things. This ability looks behind the rhetoric of seduction, looks at the tail-end of developments; looks for example, at what is really meant by: national pride after "humiliations", promises of work and bread and great victories, among other things.

Discernment has to do with the thinking and feeling through of drives, motives, forces, trends, tendencies and possible decisions in the individual sphere, but also in politics.

The Beatitudes are spoken into the open or subtle discourse of might and powerlessness, of suppression or justice, of lies or truth, with a view to the end, to the completion. They are everything other than an expression of resignation and paralysis. Franz Jägerstätter is witness to the hope that apparently unavoidable, valid practical constraints will be overcome, burst open at the seams and be replaced by happiness in God (48.61). He interrupts the incessant flood of mistaken thinking. Against death and against deathly powers Jägerstätter testifies that God is the

creative source of life. In the light of death and resurrection Jesus releases the hope that at the end it is not nothingness that awaits us, but the creative love of the one who has created us. The Gospels proclaim that death and resurrection transport Jesus into a new life. Thus he is the bearer of hope in the possibility of going with him into the new life, as the Beatitudes make clear.

The face reflects our interior, our soul.

In our face our relationships are embodied. .

The Beatitudes reflect the face of Jesus and his love.

Franz Jägerstätter has given a face to the Beatitudes

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Note 1 Walter Benjamin, Historical-philosophical Thesis IX

Note 2 Erna Putz, Letters from Prison and Writings. Franz Jägerstätter refuses to undertake military service in 1943, Linz-Passau 1987, 163 (loose sheets II,25)

Note 3 Letters from Prison and Writings 206 (Issue 4, 187)

Note 4 Simone Weil, Gravity and Mercy. Translated and with an afterword by Friedhelm Kemp, Munich 1952, 104

Note 5 Simone Weil, Life before Christ, translated by Fritz Werle, München-Planegg 1959, 54