In one of the early analysis of the COVID19-crisis, published in May 2020, ‘futurologist’ Matthias Horx writes:

“It is astonishing that God and religions in their well known and institutionalized form almost do not play a role in this crisis. The churches are empty because they have to empty, but also the sermons in the internet sound empty in a strange and particular way.”¹

Sermons that sound “empty.” This is a harsh critique – written after some weeks, in which many priests and pastors did their very best to reach out to their congregants and the whole society in many different and often very creative ways. New forms of internet worship services were created, pastors found new ways of preaching in the Social Media, words of hope were written with chalk on sidewalks, ‘sermons to go’ were presented at the fences of church buildings, etc.

This is immense energy – and Matthias Horx speaks of ‘emptiness’? For me, Horx is surely not the most authoritative source for homiletical critique. But I admit that his words struck me, and many questions came to my mind.

Might we have started to speak too soon? Might we have tried to ‘offer’ something to the people who were (and are!) longing for comfort and perspective in times of crisis? Might we have attempted to show how ‘relevant’ we still are as a church in our days? Might we even have tried to functionalize and instrumentalize the crisis to show the importance of pastors, church, and sermons?

¹ Matthias Horx, Die Zukunft nach Corona. Wie eine Krise die Gesellschaft, unser Denken und Handeln verändert, Berlin 2020, 19. The sentence is my rough English translation of the original German: „Erstaunlich ist ja, dass Gott und die Religionen in ihrer bekannten und institutionalisierten Form in dieser Krise kaum eine Rolle spielen. Die Kirchen sind leer, weil sie leer sein müssen, aber auch die Predigten im Internet wirken auf eine seltsame Weise entleert.”
These are very critical questions – but sometimes, some critical self-evaluation might make sense. And especially we, the Protestant ‘church of the Word’, might quite often be the church of too many words. Might our wish to be ‘helpful’ and close to the people, have had a paradoxical effect of not being helpful at all?

One of the most striking pictures I saw in the last months was to see Pope Francis on March 25th – almost alone on St. Peter’s Square in Rome at a rainy evening –, spending the blessing “Urbi and Orbi” at an extraordinary time of the year and then praying in silence for minutes. A film director couldn’t have thought of a better staging – and in fact, there were many film and theatre directors who said how impressed they were to see what was happening in Rome on this rainy spring evening.2


The Pope’s action stressed the moment of crisis – showing the world that the situation is difficult, and it is time for extraordinary action. He staged the loneliness of social distancing. And at the same time, he used the ritual possibilities: blessing the people on TV with the Urbi et Orbi-blessing, kneeling in prayer and adoration. Well, he also said some words, he preached – but the words were surely not the most striking and impressive sign for me, but an empty square.

Could there have been a better staging of our situation towards God? We do not just ‘have’ answers and share them with those who still want to listen to us? We ourselves have to listen in the situation of disruption. We have to pray and to lament. We do not know from the outset, who ‘God’ is and what s/he does – but we are missing him/her and longing for him/her …

I think that (1) we Protestants again and again have to learn that words are not everything we might have, but it is about words and ritual. And that (2) words in a time of crisis have to express doubt and fear, have to show longing for God and the fear not to ‘find’ him/her, have to be homiletical ways of lamenting. People have a right to know that we do not ‘have’ God and know his/her plans, but wait and long for him/her. I think that showing this in our words is a chance for preaching in our times of the Covid19-pandemic.

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