

Three Sermons by Niels Henrik Arendt (1950-2015)

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(Translated by Edward Broadbridge)

1. God so loved the world

Sermon text: John 3: 16-17:

For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Amen.

We go around making images of each other – and of ourselves. Sometimes we look very much up to another person and even boast about them, because we have the image that they are persons of consequence. At other times we look very much down on people because in our image they do not live up to our ideals. Sometimes we ourselves are the devil of a fellow in our own eyes. At other times we are poor down-and-outs because we cannot live up to our own dreams and ambitions.

I have to tell it as it is. Our images do not always correspond at all to reality. We are not world champions in seeing the truth about one another. What is more, we are also good at hiding behind other people's images of us, especially if they are flattering. We do not walk into the light for fear that our deeds will reveal who we truly are.

It can come as a dramatic shock to be shaken out of the delusion when we discover we have the wrong image of a person. This is true, for instance, when we fall in love and believe that the other one is a hero or an angel – until something suddenly happens that shows them to be only human. And the same is true when we have a negative prejudice against someone only to suddenly discover shamefully what a great mistake we have made. We learn something about ourselves when the truth is revealed.

When the veil is lifted from our eyes, when the moment of revelation arrives, we may feel relieved, set free – everything was after all better than it appeared at the time – or we may feel weighed down to the ground, pierced to the heart, even crushed.

This is what happens in the Old Testament and the Epistle readings from today. They too present us with images that reveal cracks. The story of Abraham is hard to take – he is to sacrifice his son to satisfy a bloodthirsty God! Can this really be true? Is this the image of God that Abraham must carry with him for the rest of his days? No, this image of God is no longer valid. Abraham receives a lesson that is more than harsh. He is shaken out of his old tribal image of a God that restricts him. But then what is the image of God that *now* remains? This is not completely clear. As the narrative goes, we do not know what Isaac and Abraham said to one another afterwards or to Sarah when they got home. It is a quite incredible story to find at the beginning of the Bible. I am shaken to the roots every time I hear it.

Then there is Judas. He too makes images – including one of Jesus who as a king will be lifted up to glory and radiance. Perhaps Judas can even help Him to this end. Jesus is a devil of a fellow, he thinks – someone who can even turn the history of the world in the right direction. But then Judas's image *also*

proves false. Jesus does not want to be the hero-king that Judas believes in. Jesus will not by force bring about a kingdom of glory. And Judas discovers that his rambling plans lead directly to Jesus' execution. He is shaken to the core, he is crushed. What a tragedy!

We have just heard two verses from John's gospel. They are sometimes called 'the little Bible', because the whole message of the Bible is summarised in these words: "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."

Jesus comes and reveals this. What is unclear to Abraham and Judas comes into the light when Jesus gives Himself up – or rather, *God* gives Him up. Then it is revealed that God's love for the world is so boundless that He rejects all sacrifices and all power to show us this.

When we fall in love, we can often deceive ourselves about the other person. Our self-love can really give us a false image of ourselves. In His love for us, however, God sees very clearly. Indeed He sees all of us so clearly that in order to tear us out of ourselves and all our delusions about others and about God nothing less is needed than for Him to sacrifice Himself, to give Jesus to the world that He loves.

God did not love a phantom image of humanity. If He had, then His love would not have cost Him anything. God loved us with a love that both acknowledges reality as it is, yet knows something about the beloved that he or she perhaps does not even know about themselves.

God's love for us is not an infatuation with a phantom image that He has made of humankind. On the contrary, He knows precisely what we are like – and *still* He loves us. The truth about us does not *destroy* God's love for us but calls us to His mercy. We can only really express His love by wrestling with our language: God loves us as we are and as He knows us. Yet He loves us *in spite of* what we have done with ourselves. He loves us towards what He wants us to be; that was His idea from the first and it is the goal of His love for us.

In the narratives about Jesus we learn what God is like: that He *wants* us, that He wants us so much that no price is too high. But we also learn what we ourselves are like: that we have to be more or less dragged into the light so that the truth about us can be revealed.

Also on this beautiful Pentecost Monday in these woods comes the moment of revelation. We learn that things are so serious with us that the dearest price must be paid if love is to reach its goal. But that is not the end of it. For God too is revealed – not as the God of human sacrifice, and not as the God of triumphant power, but as the inexhaustible wellspring of comfort and care and pity and love that will embrace us more and more until we become what He had imagined when He chose us to be His dearly beloved children.

Honour be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.

2. Jesus, the Mirror of Heaven

Sermon text: John 15:26-16:4

“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father – the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father – he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning. ‘All this I have told you so that you will not fall away. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when their time comes you will remember that I warned you about them. I did not tell you this from the beginning because I was with you.”

There are two poles in what Jesus says to His disciples: “You have *received* [or you will receive] – *and* you must *pass on*. I have been with you – *and* you must be my witnesses. You will receive the Spirit from God – *and* it must be visible in your lives.” This in all its briefness is what Christianity is about: something comes to us from God, and that something we must pass on to other people. It lives in this ‘passing on’. If we come here to Church and are glad for the peace we find in a busy, confusing life, then we must take that peace out to our surroundings. If we believe that light has been shone on *our* lives, then we must also shine the glow from that light on those whom we meet in our daily lives. If we feel comforted or encouraged by the stories we find here about how much we and those we love mean in the eyes of God, then we must walk out of here showing others how much *they* are worth.

As in one of Grundtvig’s words, we must be a ‘mirror of heaven’. We must be like a satellite dish that receives something and passes it on. In a park in London there is a work of art called ‘Mirror of Heaven’. It is simply a huge mirror, slightly inclined so that you cannot see yourself in it. All you can see is the sky, heaven. The mirror draws heaven down to earth, the blue space and the white clouds.

Jesus was just such a mirror of Heaven. He drew down the light of God to earth, down to us. The disciples who were together with Him for a while were ‘in heaven’. We sense this in two brief remarks that Jesus makes: “You have been with me from the beginning” and “I was with you.” When He looks at them, they felt that it was God looking at them, and a boundless joy, an exhilaration, sent a thrill running through them. They received the radiance of heaven.

But now His time together with them in the flesh is soon over. So He tells them, “Now you must witness for me. Now the light that I have shone on your lives must be shone on other people’s lives. For that light must never go out – I have brought you something, I have given you something that from now on must never disappear from the world. And you must make sure of that.

He said ‘You’ to them. But today He says ‘You’ to *us*. If the words of Jesus, if our faith in Him *gives* us anything, we must make sure that it does not disappear out of the world. We, you and I, must wrap every person we meet in the radiance from God’s heaven. And that, in a way, is perfectly simple, it is easy, it is a matter of course: to pass on something good after you have tasted it yourself.

And yet, it is not *so* easy. For who says that your recipient *wants* it? Jesus prepares His disciples by telling them that many will try to blow *out* the light. In fact He predicts how badly things can become: “the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.” I think it is difficult to read those words these days without thinking of the warriors who use God as a justification for killing Christians and others. They push their obedience to God before them as a shield between themselves and the light coming from Jesus Christ. For they think it is a *wrong* light. They do not want heaven, they do not want God down on earth – they think that this dishonours Him and is blasphemy.

The dreadful thing is that God is being used now as a justification for killing people. It demonstrates the worthlessness of such a view – that if you do not believe the same as them, they kill you. The truth is that every single person belongs undeniably to God. And in a way it is equally dreadful that we do not know how to combat it. We are fighting against religious terror, and do not misunderstand me, we have to do this in order to save innocent people. But what happens is: instead of shedding heavenly light on our opponents' lives, we shed bombs over their heads. That is *our* dilemma. And it shows our impotence. In a sense we all know that we are not creating peace by what we are doing. We are trying to halt them so as not to let down those in danger. But at the same time we are sowing the seeds of new conflicts, new hatred.

No, it is *not* easy. If we turn back to our own lives, we know that passing it on, and being a witness, it is all more difficult than the pastor preaches. It may be true that no one will assault us if we try to let the encouragement, the comfort, or the peace that we have received shine its light on our surroundings. But there is sure to be someone who thinks we are naïve. There is sure to be someone who thinks it is just too much. And plenty who just do not care.

You must show me your world in your words and your lives, says Jesus. And to avoid misunderstanding: this does not mean that in and out of season we must be talking about Jesus as certain pious people interpreted it a hundred years ago. But what Jesus is, is a heavenly light, a divine light over our lives that must shine on. From us. It has come into the world. And it must not go out, however it is received – even with the most hateful opposition or the most thundering indifference.

It is difficult. And not least because the enemy of that view is also found within ourselves. Also within us is the resistance to always seeing other people as of boundless value. Always to see them with a look that acknowledges, that sympathises, that embraces. Also within ourselves there is something that protests: No, Lord, this is just too much!

But then we must check ourselves! We should not be the ones who let the light go out. Let me tell you about a priest I have known, or rather, he was a bishop for a small branch of the Anglican Church in Sierra Leone. His name is Sam Gbonda. He is modest in stature, he is not charismatic or an intellectual. When he became bishop, it was more or less a solution to an embarrassment. It happened during the terrible civil war of the 1990s. As the clouds gathered ever more heavily over his home town, he was asked to evacuate. He said no, "I have to stand with my flock" was his reason. "I cannot let down those who are entrusted to me." That was the best reason he could find, but it was enough for him.

When the rebels entered the town they searched for people hiding in the bishop's palace. And do not imagine it was an imposing building; it was no more than 1½ metres of clay wall. Sam Gbonda walked outside the wall and stood before the rebels. He said to them, "You stop here! If you want to go any further, you must kill me first." Then the unbelievable thing happened. They did stop – and then they withdrew. When the war was over, Bishop Sam was among the foremost to bring the warring parties together to bring about reconciliation. And all could see that that he had a towering credibility in his work. Everyone – naturally the victims but also the child-soldiers, and even the brutal warlords – had a value in his eyes. Now he is an old man, and worn out. But for me he is an example of a person who in his allotted place made sure that the light Jesus brought into the world did not go out. In his simple way he was a mirror of heaven.

And now I come to what finally belongs together with today's text. That is what can happen when in our guardianship of the heavenly light we are not left alone. Jesus promises that we shall not be alone when we represent him. He speaks of an advocate – an advocate who is our 'representative'. And we are forced to face up to the fact that we too are 'representatives' of Jesus. We are the advocates of Christianity on this earth. That is a role we can find it hard to see ourselves in. But then Jesus says, "Cheer up, don't lose heart. There is another advocate besides yourselves." And who might that be? It is

Himself! – It is the Spirit in which He is always present, both when we succeed, and when we fail in our clumsy attempts to help people feel the joy from God on high.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Amen

3. Jesus and Zacchaeus

Sermon text: Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.' So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.' But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.' Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.'

There was a man called Jonah. We find his story in the Old Testament. God ordered Jonah to go into the city of Nineveh and tell the people that God had decided to destroy the city because of its wickedness. This was not a particularly pleasant message to deliver, and Jonah tried to get out of it. Not because he felt sorry for the people, but because he thought that someone else could do the job.

But Jonah could not get out of it. So he went off to Nineveh and said what he had to. The citizens were shaken to their roots; they were well aware that Jonah was right. And Jonah himself knew that he was right, so he built himself a little shelter outside the city and waited for justice to take its course. There he sat day after day gazing alternately at the city and at the skies from which he thought the punishment would come.

But God took pity on the citizens of Nineveh and did *not* destroy the city. This made Jonah a bitter man. In fact it is not too much to say that God's mercy created a crisis in their relationship. Then God decided to teach Jonah a lesson. In the night a wonderful tree grew up outside Jonah's shelter, providing him with shade. All next day Jonah sat under the tree out of the sun, and his bitterness subsided. Then God realised that He Himself had gone too far, that Jonah was right, and that now something had to be done to soften his justified bitterness.

But next morning, when Jonah woke up, the tree had withered. Its leaves hung like thin strips from the branches and the sun beat down mercilessly. Then all Jonah's bitterness returned with double the strength. But God said to him, You thought *you* could decide to whom I can show mercy or not. If it was left to you to decide, all life would be as withered and barren and meaningless as this tree. But trees exist to take the heat out of the sun. And people are created to look after each other and show mercy. And to whom should I show mercy if not to those who are lost?

It is strange how our sense of justice is always on its toes when we feel that others get off lightly. This is true of children, but it is very true of adults as well. We must have justice, we say, meaning primarily that others cannot get off more lightly than me. Only if it is ourselves who get off a little more lightly do we willingly close our eyes. This sense of justice is so ingrown in us that it is impossible to ignore it when we organize our society. Dissatisfaction and rebellion would be the result if society were built in sympathy rather than retribution. That is how realistic we have to be.

And yet fortunately life is arranged so that now and again it does not give a fig for our sense of justice. We are gripped by sympathy before we have realised it, we make allowances for one another or we protect someone so they are not hurt too much. Parents stand in front of their children to protect them. And that is as it should be. That is what we are there for.

Burning *justice* can scorch all the life out of our existence. Now and again we have to seek shelter, to hide under a shady tree before we are again called out and the called to account. And the fact that it can happen is because life is more merciful than we are. It is less barren, less futile than we often make it out to be.

Of course, trees do not exist only to provide shade for us. As every healthy child can tell you, trees are also for climbing in. And children exist among other things in order to climb trees. What can compare to the feeling of freedom when you have climbed right to the top and can sway gently to and fro and feel that you own the world?

There was once a man who was suddenly reminded of this feeling of freedom. His name was Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was little ruffian, to put it bluntly. If there was *anything* he had put behind him, it was the childlike spontaneity and feeling of freedom. The only person on whom he had had pity on over the years was himself. Everyone else had felt his kind of justice. In full force.

Zacchaeus's life had become barren, parched, futile. All he had left was that outer dignity that he put on as he walked round the streets of Jericho and people spat behind him. Free and unrestrained was certainly not what he felt.

But then came a day when everything was different. It began with Zacchaeus actually laying aside his outer dignity and climbing a tree. The Chief Tax Inspector of Jericho – aloft in a tree!. But there was someone whom he simply *had* to see. And he would prefer to see him without being seen himself. So when Jesus came walking into town, Zacchaeus was hidden in a tree. The childlike feeling of freedom and triumph and richness had been replaced by a feeling of emptiness and abandonment. What was left for him? True he had a den of money. But he had never felt so poverty-stricken.

Zacchaeus was sitting in the branches of the tree. But on this day they gave him no shelter. Zacchaeus was seen and called down. But to his surprise, and everybody else's he was not called down to be called to account and scorched with the fire of justice, but in order to meet mercy. You have no need to hide in a tree, and you have no need to hide behind your outer dignity, Jesus told him, You can hide behind me. I will give you shelter. When people spit at you, I will stand in front of you and they will hit me instead.

That day in Jericho people kept back from spitting. But Jericho was the last stop on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. A couple of days later Jesus was there. And that is where the spit hit *Him*. The spit that was really meant for Zacchaeus and many others. But Jesus had come between them. And in the meantime the tree had been felled, all the branches and leaves that gave shade had been removed, and the wood banged together into a naked cross that gave shelter to neither the heat of the sun nor the anger of the people. On this they hung Jesus up. And if at this moment of pain He could remember the childlike feeling of freedom and triumph, it was replaced here by emptiness and abandonment

Back home in Jericho Zacchaeus went round feeling like a child again. He felt free and rich, even though he had given all his money away. Is *that* what happens when you climb trees? No, it comes from meeting mercy. From being called forward not to be called to account in all your nakedness but to be clothed in sympathy.

Of course there were those who grumbled when Jesus went home to dine with Zacchaeus. Their sense of justice had been violated. Petty-minded like us they probably were. Zacchaeus got off lightly. Jesus's mercy gave rise to a crisis in their relation to Zacchaeus.

But Jesus began to speak. You thought *you* could decide to whom I can show mercy or not. If it was left to you to decide, all life would be as withered and barren. And then it would be worth living even for you! Then you yourselves would be scorched with the fire that you had thought to grill Zacchaeus with.

But God is more merciful than you. So I ought to go to Jericho today. For I am that tree under which people can seek shelter. And I am that person who exists in order to protect my brothers and sisters and show sympathy. And to whom should I show mercy if not to those who are lost? Amen.