

Sermon, 19 March 2017, Swiss Church

When I was a baby, my parents decided not to baptise me, and to leave me to decide once I had grown older. I was baptised at the age of 15 during the confirmation service. For my parents, this was an expression of freedom of faith. Today many parents also decide not to baptise their children for similar reasons.

Through my work with the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women I've met my friend Maryana, a 34 year old woman from Minsk in Belarus. When Maryana was born in 1982, only two years after me, Belarus was part of the Soviet Union. Religion was forbidden in the strictly Communist state, the only authority was the Communist party. Both of Maryana's parents were Christians, but to practice their belief, and even more to baptise their newborn, was dangerous. Christians risked persecution and penalties. For Maryana's mother it was an expression of freedom of faith to have her baby baptised and so she asked a Priest to come to her house to perform the sacrament in secret. No one else assisted or knew of her baptism, not even Maryana's father or grandparents, in order to protect them.

Freedom of faith can mean very different things depending on the social, political or historical context. For my friend's mother, to be a Christian was an act of liberation from the oppressive structures of the state that forced religion into the underground. Whereas for my own parents in Western Europe, freedom of faith meant the liberation from a church that was closely intertwined with the state, and had pestered politics and society for many centuries with its moralistic views. In both cases, it was a form of rebellion against oppressive structures. It is astonishing that the act of baptism, the outer sign of our Christian faith, can mean such different things for different people: an act of liberation for some, an act of restriction for others. It shows how much our faith is influenced by the circumstances we live in, and that these circumstances often overshadow our own relationship with the divine.

Baptism as the outer sign of our covenant with, and faith in God, has often been a reason for dispute or persecution in church history. Whereas the very early Christians had to be baptised in secret to avoid state persecution, just as my friend Maryana in Belarus 34 years ago, baptism became an obligation for the subjects of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century after the Emperor's decision to make Christianity the state religion. To be loyal to God now meant to be loyal to the Emperor, and therefore it became politically dangerous not to be a baptised Christian. It was also during this period that the Church, which was now a state church, began to baptise infants instead of adult believers, as it was the practice in early Christianity. Baptism became a political act which signified loyalty to State and Church, hence to God and to the Emperor.

Now let's jump a good thousand years in the history of the Church, to the time of the reformation. The question of whether childhood or adulthood is the right age to be baptised flared up anew and led to another wave of persecution. It is no coincidence that baptism once again became the focal point of theological debate and practice. After all, one of the main requests of the reformers was to put the Bible back into the centre of our faith. No Priest or Pope, no Emperor or Queen should stand between the believer and God's word. Interestingly in the Bible we cannot find one single count of infant baptism which had been customary in the Church for centuries by then. According to the Bible, Jesus and his disciples baptised adults. However, infant baptism had given church and state power over their subjects for many centuries. The reformers knew that if they wanted to succeed and be recognised by the state authorities, they had to compromise. They had to row back from their initial confident rejection of Church tradition in favour of scripture alone.

But there was a group of reformers in the early days of the reformation movement, the Ana-Baptists, who were much more radical than Zwingli, Luther and the like. They challenged the state with their radical reading of the Bible and weren't so much about compromising. They defended the baptism of adult believers, and re-baptised believers who were already baptised as babies. The Ana-Baptists were particularly numerous in the city of Zurich and quite powerful in St.Gallen for a short period of time, and for a short time they even governed the German city of Münster. But they were perceived as troublemakers and a danger to the state. In Zurich, hundreds of Ana-Baptists were drowned by the city council in the Limmat. The cities of Zurich and Bern were particularly ruthless in their persecutions of Ana-Baptists that were sold into slavery or executed for more than a hundred years.

Church politics aside, the reformers also had very good theological reasons for infant baptism, and this is also the reason why we still mainly baptise infants in the reformed church today. They said that baptism as the outer sign of our covenant with God does not depend on our faith, but that we are part of God's grace from the moment we are born and that we don't have to do anything to earn it.

Faith can be dangerous, as this retrospect on church history shows. Faith has the potential to trigger war and oppression if we become too righteous about our views and beliefs. Christians have been both the persecuted and the persecutor throughout the centuries. Still today Christians suffer persecution worldwide and are even among the most persecuted religious group in the world. This is something we tend to forget in our context where religion is largely perceived as a private matter and where we have the freedom to change religion or follow none. There are a few particularly dangerous countries for Christians.

In North Korea, 70'000 Christians are held in labour camps where they are exposed to heavy labour and torture. It is very difficult to flee the isolated communist country. Worldwide there are about 100 Million Christians suffering from repression because of their faith, and the numbers are rising. More widely known than the situation in North Korea is the persecution of Christians in countries that are in the hands of radical terrorist militia, that attack not only Christians but anyone who gets in the way of their radical views.

I sometimes wonder if I would keep practising my Christian faith under such circumstances, knowing that it would put at risk my life and those of my loved ones, or if I would keep my faith a well kept secret. I am not sure, and I think this is a question that's impossible to answer from our safe haven. We are privileged to live in a part of the world where the law grants us the freedom to choose our religion, or no religion, and to practise our faith openly, which means in return that we also mutually respect each other's freedom in faith matters. For people who live in an oppressive environment, faith becomes existential. If a worldly system controls every part of life, the faith in God, be it Christian, Jewish, Muslim or other, offers an alternative, often the only alternative and it has led many people to free themselves from such circumstances or to keep the flame of hope alive. This is also true for our own lives. Life circumstances can trap us, and we can feel imprisoned, be it mentally or even physically. The loss of our physical abilities, our mental health or of our social or family network, the loss of people we love, or of our home and job and financial stability can leave us feeling trapped. Those who have been or are affected by such circumstances know how crucial it is to have faith to give us hope and a perspective to carry on.

Abraham and Sarah, the founding father and mother of our Judaeo-Christian faith, did not have a choice when they were called to set out for a place unknown to them. Through faith, they crossed foreign lands, living in tents with their sons, the children they thought they couldn't have because they were too old. They all died without having seen the promised land. They only saw and greeted it from a distance. Yet they never gave up faith. They never gave up hope.

Religion can be oppressive. Faith however cannot. It is the language of our hope, inscribed in our soul and heart.

Amen