**The Swiss Church in London**

**Audio service, 21 June 2020**

**Welcome**

“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you”, says God. (Jeremiah 31:3)

“Mit immerwährender Liebe habe ich dich geliebt. Darum habe ich dir beständige Güte geschenkt”, sagt Gott.

Dieu dit: «Je t'aime d'un amour éternel, c'est pourquoi je te conserve ma bonté.»

**Opening prayer**

*“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10)*

Lord Father,

You say do not fear, you are with us and you will strengthen us.

We pray and ask this to be reality for us. We are still in an unusual situation. We still cannot meet at church and listen to this service on our phones, tablets or laptops. Some of us are anxious and concerned as the Covid 19 situation is dragging on. Yet Lord, by faith and in confidence as we gather all over the place, we thank you for all you have done in our lives. We thank you that we are your children. We praise and worship you. We are grateful this is the day you have made, and we rejoice in it. Lord, as we continue this service, help us focus and concentrate on you and let us be encouraged by Carla’s words. Fill us with your joy and refresh our spirits. May we feel not fearful but strengthened at the end of this service and through that let us see and realise your glory and power.

Amen

**Reading Revelation 1:12-16**

Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

**Sermon**

*Was Jesus white?*

When I read the Bible, or any book for that purpose, I create an image in my mind of the people that appear in the story. Mary, Jesus, the Prophets, Sara, Isaac, Adam and Eve and many other figures. From early on it has been suggested to me that they have a white skin, in paintings, children’s Bibles or most strikingly on devotional cards. Even though I know that realistically as a man from Palestine Jesus had more likely a darker complexion, I find it hard to change this image in my mind. It’s somehow engrained in me.

Where does the dominant whiteness of Christ in Western Christianity come from?

There are only two descriptions of Jesus’ visual features in the Gospels, in Matthew 14:36 and in Luke 8:44. Both are a description of his cloak. Another description of Jesus can be found in the Book of Revelations 1:12-16 where the hair of Jesus is described as white like white wool, his eyes like blazing fire and his feet like burnt bronze.

In early Christian communities when the new religion was illegal there was an avoidance of putting images of Jesus. Artists had to be discrete with their work and use subtle imagery and only very few of these images are known today. This changed in the 4th Century when Christianity became state religion. The images of Jesus became more imperial and were widely spread.

The conventional image of a fully bearded Jesus with long hair emerged around 300AD and became established in Eastern Christianity in the 6th Century, and only much later in the West. The images tend to show the ethnic characteristics of the culture in which the image has been created. The image of Jesus with a fair skin and blond hair is a relatively young image and came to us from Northern Europe. It underpinned the racial power dynamics in the Western world. In the 19th Century, theories that Jesus was of Aryan race were developed. These images and theories were adopted by advocates of racial antisemitism and are still present today.

We might never know what Jesus looked like. What we do know is that images are incredibly powerful and are hard to get rid of once they are in our mind.

If you would like to learn more about the image of Jesus, there is a link to a short youtube video clip on the webpage:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfJCyDmTwyg>

*Taking down statues*

Portrayals of significant historic persons have been much debated in recent weeks. Statues of persons linked to the slave trade have been taken down, some of them forcefully by demonstrators, others by official decision of the local council. The reactions are various. Whereas Home secretary Priti Patel has condemned the forceful removal of statues as ‘disgraceful’, many local political leaders have thought about the controversial meaning of those statues and took action to lawfully remove them. For some people, this is an act of liberation and justice, for others an unnecessary fussing about the past.

Images shape the way we see the world. They can manipulate. They can suggest a one-sided worldview that in reality may be much more diverse. But images can also do the opposite, open our mind, show us realities that we don’t know from our own experience. With images from all corners of the world now widely available on the internet we can make this a deliberate decision, how selective or varied we want our images of the world to be.

*Revolutionising the moving image*

As an example of the manipulative power of images, I would like to talk to you about a film maker who has revolutionised the moving image and counts as one of the technically most talented film makers of her generation.

Leni Riefenstahl was born in Berlin on the 2nd of August 1902 and became one of the few women in Germany to direct a film during the Weimar Republic in 1932 titled ‘Das Blaue Licht’. Adolf Hitler was a fan of her film and saw talent in Leni, and this is how she became closely involved with the Nazi party and put her skills into their service.

Leni Riefenstahl is the film maker behind Hitler’s propaganda film ‘Triumph des Willens’ considered the greatest propaganda film ever made. It shows a Nazi party rally in Nuremberg with nearly one million Germans attending. The extravagant and innovative filming technics gave the images incredible manipulative power. For that reason the showing of the film is still partly prohibited today, unless specifically shown in an educational context to explain the horrific consequences of the rise of the Nazi party that ultimately led to 10 million deaths in concentration camps and on battlefields.

Leni Riefenstahl was never a member of the Nazi party, and in the denazification proceedings after the war was classified as a ‘Nazi sympathiser’ only. For the rest of her life, which was a long one – she died in 2003 at the age of 101 – she said that she was politically naïve and ignorant, calling her meeting with Hitler her biggest regret. Riefenstahl later travelled to Africa filming the Nuba tribes, which were criticised by influential voices for their ‘fascist aesthetics’. Riefenstahl consequently refrained from filming people all together and resorted to underwater films.

She remains a controversial figure, and her work has without doubt massively contributed to rise of the Nazi party and the horrors that unfolded.

The Nazis were very aware of the manipulative power of images and symbols. Monumental architecture and town planning, suggestive photography, Führer icons, and the party’s symbol, the Swastika, played a crucial role in the Nazi’s success and today remain banned.

*The good use of symbols*

But symbols and images can also trigger the opposite: they can heal. They can bring together and trigger positive emotions and memories. They can bring out the best in us.

The Bible is a book full of symbols and uses various different images to describe God. God is the bread of life, the light; God appears in the shape of a burning bush, or as a column of fire leading the Israelites out of Egypt. God is the holy trinity, parent, son and holy spirit. God is life-giving water, and the shepherd who cares about every single one of his sheep. The mystery of God can only be described in a multitude of images.

In the most symbolic act in our Christian churches we share wine and bread, symbols of Christian unity in memory of Christ’s last meal with his friends. Sadly, in reality this powerful symbolic act of togetherness and reconciliation is very controversial in our churches and often divides rather than unites. Some church denominations exclude members from other church groups from the sharing of communion in their churches. This dogma is painful for believers across all church families. Isn’t it interesting that the symbolic act of sharing can cause so much friction? The symbols of bread and wine are used to underpin the power structures in our church. That’s how powerful symbols are.

Symbols can divide, symbols can unite. Symbols can hurt and bring up the ghosts of the past, and they can open the wounds of our ancestors anew every day. Symbols can emphasis and reinforce privilege and inequality. But also, the creation of new symbols or the alternative use of traditional ones can shift power structures and make us look at the world from a new perspective that we haven’t considered before.

This shift is nowhere more visible than in the symbol of the Cross. This horrific torture instrument stood for political power and served to silence people. When the Son of God, seen by many as the redeemer and liberator, died on the Cross, something unexpected happened, a complete shift of meaning. The disciples witnessed the resurrection of Christ, and the symbol of the Cross gained a brand-new meaning. It was no longer the symbol of oppression and of silencing, but instead of the victory of life over death, of healing and of liberation. It became the symbol of the strength of the powerless. What a shift!

The Cross remains a thorn in our eyes. It is not a pretty symbol for a religion. Until the reformation in the 16th century crosses had a figure of the dying Jesus attached to them in all churches. The Jesus figure was removed from the crosses in the churches that followed the reformation, as were all images in churches. We call this event the ‘Bildersturm’ – in an attempt to observe more strictly the biblical law that we shall not make an image of God.

Perhaps the bare Crosses that decorate our Protestant churches today can be an opportunity for us to allow a multitude of images of Christ in our minds whenever we look at the Cross. It can be an opportunity to challenge and dismantle our one-dimensional imagination and to allow new images to form.

It is in our minds that we start changing the world and challenge preconceptions. For me personally the way I imagine Jesus is a good way to start.

Amen

**Announcements**

The Swiss Church Annual General Meeting was due to take place today. Under the current lockdown rules still in place the meeting has been postponed and be held on the 19th of July at 11am at the Swiss Church. The documents will be made available online shortly and have been sent out to our members with information how to participate in the meeting without having to be physically present. We thank you for your understanding.

Office and Hirings administrator Emily Rose Simons will return from her furlough leave on 1 July. The Consistoire and team will work together on establishing guidelines for the reopening of the church and share them with everyone. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to contact me.

We are very grateful for all your donations that help us managing the financial impact of the coronavirus crisis. You can find the payment options for your donations online.

**Prayers of Intercession**

Loving God

On this Father’s Day, bless all the fathers in the care and nurture of their children.

Give them love that will never let go,

compassion to guide and encourage,

wisdom to inspire.

Comfort those who are separated from their children.

Heal injuries and frictions in our families. Mend our broken hearts.

Bring us all together in your family.

*Kyrie Eleison*

We pray for the members of our congregation and for the members of our church groups, the Mothers Group, the Frauenverein and La Causerie.

Some come out of this crisis stronger, some have had a very hard time.

Watch over us that we may ever be held in your protection.

Strengthen our friendship so we may find understanding and comfort.

*Kyrie Eleison*

We pray for those who are abused and whose dignity is violated;

whose trust is betrayed by acts of violence and humiliation.

Restore them to wholeness of mind,

free them from the anger and shame that destroys from within.

Liberate is, good God, to walk in your light, life-giving and life-affirming.

Amen