**The Swiss Church in London**

**Audio service, 18 April 2021**

**Welcome**

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,

 because the Lord has anointed me;

he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,

 to bind up the broken hearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives,

 and release to the prisoners;

to comfort all who mourn; (Isaiah 61:1)

„L'Esprit du Seigneur, de l'Eternel, est sur moi

parce que l'Eternel m'a consacré par onction pour annoncer de bonnes nouvelles aux pauvres; il m'a envoyé pour guérir ceux qui ont le cœur brisé,

pour proclamer aux déportés la liberté

et aux prisonniers la délivrance,

pour consoler tous ceux qui sont dans le deuil.”

„Der Geist Gottes ist auf mir, weil Gott mich gesalbt hat, den Armen frohe Botschaft zu verkünden; er hat mich gesandt, zu verbinden, die zerbrochenen Herzens sind, den Gefangenen Befreiung zu verkünden, und um zu trösten alle Trauernden.“

Amen

Welcome to the audio service at the Swiss Church in London! It is a particular pleasure today to have new organ recordings from Peter Yardley-Jones and recordings from the High Holborn Chamber Choir. I hope the music brings you much joy.

After almost a year of restrictions, with a short sense of freedom over the summer, we are now coming out of lockdown and hopefully for good. Although the lockdown has been hard on everyone in some way or other, many of us have also felt privileged during this time. We have a roof above our head, neighbours looking after us, a network of friends and financial stability to buy food and heat our flat.

As we come out of lockdown it will become evident that some groups have been more privileged than others. The pandemic has exposed and deepened the cracks in our society. So today I would like to challenge you to think about your own privilege and what that means, but also to think about the times in our lives when we have felt left behind, invisible, unheard. God wants justice for everyone, yet it often seems impossible to achieve. As we come out of lockdown, let us become more aware of how we can support each other so no one will be left behind.

Let us pray.

**Prayer**

Loving God,

I thank you for your constant guidance throughout my life, for your assurance, your encouragement and your support you have given me in times of weakness, fear, oppression and doubt.

Teach me through all I have experienced to trust you more completely in the future, confident that whatever may be asked of me, your hand will hold me firm.

Unite us in your spirit today as we are yet again worshipping together apart, and send your light into our living rooms and into our hearts.

In the name of your son Jesus Christ.

Amen

**Reading Genesis 3:1-7; 22-24**

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Then God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”— therefore God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove them out; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

**Sermon**

Dear parishoners, dear congregation, dear brothers and sisters in Christ

*Let’s talk about privilege*

Today, I want to talk about privilege. I have been thinking about it a lot recently. More and more people are beginning to point out conscious and unconscious bias that they experience on a daily basis at the workplace, in public life and in our communities. Things have to change, and we all have to be part of this journey.

Privilege is the advantage that a person or a group of people has, usually because of their position, wealth, health, gender or skin colour. In a position of privilege, we are allowed to say things or behave in a certain way that another person saying or doing exactly the same would be criticised for or even risk their position. Privilege helps us to jump the queue, to climb up the career or social ladder faster, to access better education, to decide freely where we want to live and where we want to travel – quite simply, privilege helps us to have a seat at the table. Privilege shows in the composition of our governments, the police force and company board rooms. It shows in our schools and in our courtrooms. Who makes the decisions? Who has access to information, top education, high paid job markets and the best health care? And whose voices are being silenced or ignored? The more privileges we enjoy, the less we think about it. Often it is only when our privileges are taken away from us that we begin to become aware of them.

*Riots in St.Gallen*

St.Gallen, my beautiful, small, peaceful hometown, has recently become the centre of youth riots. Young people from across Switzerland travelled to this rather underrated place in the East of Switzerland to demonstrate against coronavirus restrictions. Molotow cocktails, rubber bullets, tear gas, arrests… that kind of news! And then from Central Switzerland (Uri, Altdorf) we hear that hundreds of people are taking to the streets. They feel ripped off their human rights and freedoms due to the pandemic restrictions, and many of them are either affiliated with populist right wing parties or have been unpolitical to date and are being politicised. I do understand the frustrations, most of all those of young people on whom this pandemic has been particularly hard.

I must be honest, and I’m not proud to say this, that at the very beginning of the pandemic I was also slightly seduced by conspiracy theories. “They are taking away our freedoms!” – “They are manipulating us!” – “The pandemic is made up to take control and change the world order!” I thought that perhaps there was some truth in this. Until one evening a friend of mine told me: “You know, Carla, the people believing in these conspiracies are mostly people who have enjoyed massive privilege throughout their lives. It’s the first time they feel powerless. But most people on this planet have always been living with the feeling of partial or total powerlessness. Did the conspiracy theorists now claiming back their freedoms ever open the mouth in solidarity with those who didn’t have those freedoms before the pandemic?” I felt caught out and dropped my flirtation with conspiracy theories very quickly.

*Sit with uncomfortable feelings*

When privilege is called out, and when we are personally part of that privileged group, our first reaction is often to become self-defensive. “I am not like that”, we say. “I am not racist, misogynist, homophobic; I am not biased.” Or: “I matter, too!” As an example, the Black Lives Matter movement was met with the slogan ‘all lives matter’. And in the aftermath of the killing of Sara Everard, the slogan ‘not all men’ appeared. Both slogans come from a place of self-defensiveness. “We matter too!” – “We are not like that!” The problem with self-defensiveness is that it takes the focus away from those who already are systematically silenced, invisible or vulnerable.

So, what is the worst that can happen if rather than defending ourselves we acknowledge our privilege? If we say: “yes, it is true, because I’m a man, because I’m white, because I’m able bodied I do have it easier.” The worst that can happen is that it feels uncomfortable, because we know it is not just, and we know that each privilege we enjoy takes away opportunities from others. We also know that although we want to end injustice, we don’t necessarily want to give up our privileges, because they got us to the place where we are now. No one likes to sit with uncomfortable feelings, feeling guilty, insecure, caught out. We want someone to take those feelings away from us. And that’s the other trap. We want someone to say to us: “Don’t feel guilty. It’s not your fault. You’re not like that.” But it’s not someone else’s job to make us feel better about ourselves, because this again diverts the focus away from the other narrative.

In all this, I think it is important to say that we are never only privileged or only lacking privilege. We are never only victims and never only perpetrators. Our lives are messy and complex and multifaceted. We may experience bias in one context, but then be in a position of power in another context. And yet, due to historically grown systemic injustice some will experience bias more often in their lives than others.

*The end of paradise*

What can we change? Is there anything we can do to root out the imbalance of privilege and power in this world as Jesus would have wanted us to?

Let us open the Bible on the first page, the Book of Genesis chapter three where we are told about the first trespass of the first humans, which in the Bible is also referred to as the original sin, the very first time that humans acted against God’s will. It is one of the most famous Bible stories. Adam and Eve live in God’s paradise, a blissful, harmonious world. But then they are given the choice to eat a fruit that would open their eyes and would make them know the difference between good and evil. I totally understand why Adam and Eve decided to eat that fruit! Who wouldn’t choose wisdom over ignorance? Yet their increased awareness for right and wrong made it impossible for them to live in paradise. The gods were worried that they would want to be like them and become immortal. So, Adam and Eve had to be put in their place and they had to leave paradise to face the complex and messy world of humans. They entered the world of privilege and injustice. They entered a world of firstborn rights, sweaty fieldwork, painful childbirth labour, murderer, hubris and natural disasters as we can see in the stories of Cain and Abel, Noah’s Ark and the Tower of Babel.

After the expulsion from paradise human life became a fight for survival. Perhaps in Biblical time that fight was much rawer and cruel than today in our Western societies, yet we shan’t forget that the raw battle for survival is still a reality for many, even in our streets. But even where we don’t have to fight for our immediate physical survival we still have to fight for our place in this world, we still have to fight for our voices to be heard, for our needs to be met, for our situation to be considered, be it at work, in the courtroom, in church or in our communities.

We will never return to paradise. There is no return ticket to the Garden of Eden. An angel of God with a flaming sword keeps the gate. We have made our choice, and we have to live with the consequences, both the opportunities and joys and the disappointments and pains that come with it. In order to survive in the world outside paradise we will always to a certain extent seek advantage for ourselves, and this always comes at the cost of others. It’s part of the original sin, if not THE original sin.

*Jesus, the advocate*

Jesus teaches us one or two lessons about the handling of privilege and power. If the door to paradise is closed, what can we do? How much of paradise can we bring into this world? Jesus advocates and empowers. He advocates for those excluded from power and he encourages every person to claim their place. In John 14, Jesus says: “In God’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go and prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to it myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

In Biblical times they were the lepers, the widows, the orphans, the prostitutes, the persecuted, the blind, those who mourn and the disabled that Jesus either invited to his table, but more often, he accepted the invitation to sit at theirs. Throughout the centuries, the groups excluded from power may have changed. Today they are the man who sleeps in doorways, the youths who struggles to find a job because their name sounds foreign, the Syrian mother who has lost her child when crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

We cannot return to paradise, but we can follow Jesus and become like him, become advocates for each other in all our weakness and all our strength, and draw ever closer to paradise that still lives on in each of us.

“God prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

She has anointed my head with oil;

My cup overflows.” (Psalm 23)

Amen

**Prayer of Thanksgiving**

For our weaknesses and strengths,

for this wonderful messy world

we give thanks.

For all the blessings in our lives,

for the people who encourage and empower us,

we give thanks.

For your faithfulness, gracious God,

for our time in paradise and the wisdom we were allowed to take away from it,

we give thanks.

May the wisdom to know between good and evil

lead us on the right path.

May we share our blessings freely,

and may we accept the blessings that are offered to us.

May we find the courage to listen and to speak up.

May we be advocates for each other in times of need, and particularly for those who are being silenced.

May we be drawn towards justice ever more, build your kingdom in this world, and may peace reign in our hearts.

Together we pray, as Jesus Christ has taught us.

**Lord’s Prayer**

Amen