

Sermon of Ulrich Jahreiss on 1 Kings 21:1-21a

About 120 years ago, the Russian author Leo Tolstoi wrote a so-called "folk story" about a merchant who was accused of committing a crime, a murder. In fact, the merchant was innocent, but he was condemned to lifelong hard labour in Siberia.

Years later the really guilty criminal was delivered to the same labour camp and it came to light that the merchant was innocent.

Now he could have been set free and could have returned home. But in the meantime this poor man had died.

Leo Tolstoi gave this folk story the title:

"God sees the truth, but he doesn't pronounce the truth immediately."

That also is the problem in this awful story about Naboth and his vineyard: God keeps silent -- until it's too late and Naboth is dead. God only appears in the person of his prophet Elijah, when it is too late for Naboth.

Where was God in the story of Naboth, when Naboth was still alive?
Why didn't God intervene earlier?

How many times in our lives do we ask "Why?"
"Why didn't you, God, help in time? Why did you come too late?
Why didn't you answer when I prayed?" And so on.
We all know the questions too well.

Are we allowed to ask God "Why?"
The apostle Paul cuts us short (Romans 9:20) "Oh man, who are you, to argue with God."

I am convinced that we are allowed to ask God in such a way, we must if we want to be honest with God, if we want to take him seriously.

But let us first look at the story of Naboth, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel:
Naboth possesses a vineyard next to the palace of King Ahab.
King Ahab wants to buy the vineyard of Naboth to turn it into a vegetable garden.

In the beginning, Ahab's offer is fair:
"I'll give you a better vineyard in another place—or I'll give you its value in money."

However, Naboth refuses to make the deal with the King!
Why?

Behind the refusal of Naboth is a command of God. According to old Jewish custom no family in Israel should ever sell its land, because none of God's people should become rich, and no one should descend into poverty. Land must not be sold to accumulate riches.

King Ahab is furious -- he goes back to his palace, lies down on his bed and refuses to eat anything. Is he going to respect Naboth's refusal?
Naboth is totally right--but Ahab is the king – powerful and mighty. Ahab has the say.
And it is as usual—always and everywhere it is the mighty who trample brutally on the weak.

Now Queen Jezebel enters the scene – this woman who never gives in -- she never accepts defeat.

King Ahab had married Princess Jezebel of Tyros--a heathen woman who was not at all interested in God's commands or in Israel's customs.

In Ahab's name she writes a letter to the nobles and elders who lived there with Naboth in the city of Jezreel. Two scoundrels shall witness against Naboth and accuse him of blasphemy. "Naboth has cursed God and the King!" – is what they are supposed to say. The accusation is ridiculous--Naboth a blasphemer, an atheist, a revolutionary--that's crazy! But in the end Naboth, who simply followed and practiced and obeyed God's commands, is stoned to death!

The behaviour of the nobles, the responsible people of the city of Jezreel is spiteful and appalling.

And the fellow citizens of Naboth? Intolerable – they are all enslaved by King Ahab.

What was the sin of the nobles and the friends of Naboth? It is only and simply that they kept silent!

What would we have done in such a case?
What would our reaction be?

Robert Kennedy, later a victim of assassination himself, once said: "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who have nodded silently, consenting to all that happened."

Ahab's part in the sinful doings is comparatively small: he only said nothing, when Queen Jezebel planned and carried out her evil action.

At the end of the story God speaks loudly--pronouncing the judgement on Ahab and Jezebel: V. 19: "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood."

The question in the beginning was: Why does God see the truth, but not intervene immediately? Why did God come in so late?

Would you know such an experience, or a similar one, in your own life, or in the life of a good friend of yours?
Why, my God, don't you speak out loud? Why? The truth is so evident—why are you silent?

The answer for me is quite simple: God has us to speak out loud. If we want to be followers and imitators of Christ, then we have to act.

Sometimes it is so crucial to stand up and say: NO!
...claiming that there must be other solutions than keeping quiet!

In such a case we all tend to make excuses, we wriggle out: we are too weak to withstand, we are too few... we are too scared... we can't take the risk...

It is essential that we accept our responsibility for things which are happening in the world around us, that is, God's world.

When we stand up and speak out the truth we risk of coming under pressure ourselves: to fall out of the favour of the powerful and mighty and to be victimized ourselves.

The story of Naboth did not come to an end then, it still happens now; it is repeated day after day... and it's absolutely essential for us Christians to interrupt the vicious cycle of hatred and oppression, of injustice and indifference.

Wherever such evils occur in this world -- there is our place; this is where God is sending us.

God sees the truth, but he doesn't intervene immediately!

Maybe it's only a small consolation, when we realize: God sees the truth!

That's the dispute in Psalm 73 between lamentation and trust:

v. 3: I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

v. 5: They are not in trouble as others are;

v. 8 They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.

v. 9 They set their mouth against heaven
and their tongues range over the earth.

But finally this anguished person comes to the conclusion:

v. 23 Nevertheless I am continually with you, my God-- you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me with honour.

Who do I have in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.

I admit: it is hard not to lose our confidence in a God, who sees! And who will act on and react to injustice when it is his time. It is hard to accept and respect God's timing!
Not only for us...

Do you remember: The last words which Jesus spoke on his cross were (Mark 15:34): "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" -- Why? -- that is the expression of utmost desperation, of the deepest loneliness, that a person must suffer.

God does not answer his son immediately. It is only after three days, on Easter morning, when the sun rises over an empty cross and an empty grave, that God father calls his son to a new life!

I wish for all of us that we experience the presence of our Lord in our lives, and that we never lose trust in our God, who sees!