

Bread & Roses
Sermon on Ecc 3, Luke 13:10-17 & Luke 13:18-19
(famine hanging 2004)



“We talked much about our hunger, about God, about life in Latin America and Germany. Sometimes we discussed passionately. But at the end of it we all painted one picture.”

This is the summary of a process in which 11 women worked together to produce a piece of art that talks about hunger & poverty, and the global connectedness in which we all – rich and poor – are living in the 21st century.

7 women who were imprisoned in the women’s prison in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, 2 painters and one prison chaplain worked together to produce the famine hanging that is hanging on the altar, and that can be seen in your bulletin. The painting is called Bread & Roses.

Bread & Roses...

...what a beautiful image!

And how appropriate to talk about Bread & Roses at the beginning of a new year. “Bread & Roses” is not only a theme for a service on one specific Sunday. Bread & Roses expresses my wish for all of us for this coming year. Bread & Roses symbolise the satisfaction of physical hunger, but also the chance to live life in all its fullness.

Bread stands for a filled stomach. And roses stand for all we need apart from stilling our physical hunger: roses are the joy of life, passion, love & freedom. Roses stand for education and opportunities, for beauty and happiness, for songs

and stories. We do not live by bread alone, but by every word... roses stand for faith and worship, for poetry and dancing, for parties and celebrations... Life is so much more than just surviving!

And yet: around 830 million people on our earth have not enough of their daily bread – not to mention whether they enjoy life, or whether they are happy, educated, free, respected etc.

830 million people... - and numbers are increasing!

When we looked at this painting in the women's Bible study sessions last autumn, we discovered how plentiful were the stories which it spoke to us. We were fascinated by how much we learned about other people and their life circumstances... And we were surprised how much we gained from it for our own life.

The “makers” of Bread and Roses, the women who made this cloth all come from different countries in Latin America. They all had been imprisoned because of drugs – transporting drugs from South America to Europe. Well – one could think, their own fault, hadn't they done it... But that would be a short-sighted approach to a difficult matter. That would be a thoughtless privileged western European point of view.

All these women had risked their lives because back in their home countries they had lived in unbearable poverty and never knew how to feed their children the next day. When the offer to be a drug courier came along, this was tempting: a quick job, they were made to believe, a 7 to 10 hour-long journey, - and at the end of it a lot of money... Money that would make all the difference for their families and their children's lives.

Despair can let you make dangerous decisions...

So these single moms left their children with grannies or other relatives, took on the job, swallowed these little plastic bags filled with heroine or God knows what, and got on an airplane to Europe. A few days later, they had hoped, they would be back safe and sound, and a completely new life would begin for all they loved. Instead they were controlled at Frankfurt airport, the drugs found and the women imprisoned. The police had discovered their smuggling. The risk they had taken for their very health and life had been in vain, and lost and gone was the dream of a better future.

In prison, when offered to be part of that project, the women planned their painting in the form of a computer screen. Main windows to open, and small icons to click on. In the main windows we can discover images of sharing bread and wine, blossoming roses, soup kitchens against injustice and poverty, and the rattling pots of women, making noise with their everyday tools to protest against their current life conditions – an old form of protest of women in Latin America. One window draws our attention towards a street child kneeling on the floor, people passing by. The dream of this child to play and to laugh is expressed in the football at his side – so close in the picture, but worlds away in reality. No games for these children, no fun, but grumbling stomachs, jobs that pay almost nothing and daily death threats, discrimination and persecution.

In the middle of all the windows the cross and the dove speak to us. They speak of peace, freedom, forgiveness and reconciliation. ...also of sacrifice and pain – but in the end there was and there is the resurrection!

The small icons (let us start in the top left corner) open our eyes towards the life situations and hopes and dreams of especially mothers & children in third world countries.

They show us a tree of life, and they remind us of our rooted-ness in the earth and in our faith. The tree may help them and us reflect our roots and our visions, and assure us that our life is nourished from above and below – as is the tree's.

The tree also stands for the kingdom of God, starting as a mustard seed and becoming a place in which the birds can nest. (Luke 13: 18-19)

Then, if we move down on the left side of the painting, there is this red heart with the blue wings. A symbol for love and freedom – a dream of mothers dreamt in prison: were they free they could give love to their children... yes, and one day, one day they will!

The next little icon down the side of the picture shows a Bible and a cross – for the women a sign of our faith that calls us to action.

Then come the ears of wheat, and the women tell the sad stories of thousands of small farmers in their home countries who are exploited, almost enslaved, live in awful poverty and eventually lose everything and have to leave their land.

Usually they end up in the favelas, the slums of the big cities where a single life is not worth a penny. The icon is supposed to remind us that different and fair economic conditions in our world could help such people, save their jobs, their homes and their lives.

The next icon reminds us of child labour in third world countries. Often these children are homeless, too. No parents, no roofs over their heads, free game for police and criminals, they live an inhumane and dangerous life that often doesn't last very long. And nobody cares...

The icon on the right side of the street child shows us a pot: a reminder that not only the children but all people should have enough to eat, and that there is enough food on this earth, it just isn't distributed in a fair and just way.

But – and here we come to the next little picture – often the positions and the networks of the mighty and the powerful, & their corrupt politics do not allow an equal sharing. Their greed enhances injustice to and exploitation of one part of the world's population in order to fill their own pockets. This is appalling! And so is the sight of these skeleton-like subjects of an obviously big, fat and over-eating king.

The following icon shows us money. Whether we like it or not, we need money.

For the poor people having money is an expression of food, power and dignity. It is an expression of opportunities you have or don't have, depending on whether you can pay for them or whether you can't.

The little prison window that now comes draws our attention to the situation and the life stories of the women imprisoned.

And by adding the icon of an airplane to it, these women reveal to us their hope for a world in which people world wide live with open eyes for each other, and care for each other because they finally understand their global connectedness.

The next icon at the bottom line of our painting shows a woman with a book. It emphasises the importance of women having access to education. Only then can they one day be able to stand up and fight the hunger in the world! If they are kept in ignorance, dependence and oppression they are like the bent-over woman that Jesus healed immediately when he saw her... (Luke 13:10-17) Where is the healing of the bent-over women today? And who are the healers?

This icon of the woman with the book is supported by the next: the rattling pot shows us that people are ready to name injustice and protest against the world wide economics that make 830 million people suffer from hunger every day. The protest of especially the mothers comes, because – this is what our next icon shows with the picture of a nursing mother – it is mainly mothers being responsible for their children and their children's future. Being a parent and seeing your child grow up deprived of the essential human rights that should be granted in our world, makes you demonstrate and fight... the future of our children lies in our hands. The future of all the earth's children lies in our hands, and therefore we must speak out loud that the welfare of children is a global affair, as you can see in the small picture of the globe that comes as our next icon.

In a new step our attention was drawn a bit further into the picture. On a green fertile background we see three pots filled with the same amount of food. Maybe beans... All have not only enough but the same amount – no matter whether their arms are black or brown or white! And: all have the same...

This icon of course corresponds with the window above: full pots, serving spoons and empty plates to be filled, plates of people of all nations, races, cultures and backgrounds.

We all know that the plates are not only empty for poor Latin Americans! And in every country we all are asked to turn our faith to action, turn it into love and justice and bread, and fill the plates of those who don't have enough.

At the top right corner we can find three more icons: the airplane again, a clock that shows us that time is running, and that changes for the suffering of this world must be brought about rather sooner than later. There is a time for everything... (Ecclesiastes 3)

And as a last icon we have people holding the globe – referring to the world community which we should be, so that if one suffers all suffer, and if one is helped we all are helped.

Whether we want it or not, our lives are interlaced with the lives of others.

The women show this in an impressive way by the network they've painted as the background of their "screen". It shows women woven together by threads and labyrinths, women reaching out to each other and establishing relationships... Women networking worldwide, which is shown in the meridians of the earth which are also painted in the picture.

All these themes are dominated by the – well, I'd almost say – main window of our famine hanging: the giving hands of God revealed to us in Christ... they can only give bread, share wine and grow roses if we human beings are willing to be God's hands in this world, in our time, and in our place.

Giving from above depends on those who work for God down here... What a challenge! What a privilege! What a task and what a purpose!?

The writing at the bottom of the painting expresses the hope that God will give the daily rice which his people need, confirms that in the blood of Christ there is life, and claims that Christ will still our hunger and our thirst...

While meditating this painting in several Bible study sessions, I could hardly read the newspaper without connecting the photos I saw in the papers with the icons and windows on our "screen".

I started reading and looking around with different eyes. I discovered so many similarities... Bread and roses became my motto to look at the everyday life and struggle of people everywhere.

I saw students protesting against the reduction of educational opportunities, I saw peacemakers out in the streets stand up against the Nazis, I saw women caring for children, I saw children suffering and children playing, children lacking medical support and children enjoying their lives. I saw women in business, I saw men in power. I saw famous people and nobodies, I saw the Barack Obamas and the Angela Merkels of the world, and I saw the women's initiative in India where each woman is given a sewing machine and some money to start her journey into an independent life of freedom and dignity.

I saw photos of bank buildings, adverts for credits, I saw money and military. I saw murderers and victims, pain and punishment. I saw photos of women's and men's handiwork, and the glimpse of hope in their eyes when the work of their hands was appreciated and valued – not only in the third world but also here in the firms of Daimler and Opel or in the department stores of Karstadt and Quelle.

Reading the newspaper through my "glasses of bread and roses", I saw so much... ...and biblical stories came to my mind: three of them you've heard as readings today...

Through that whole process I understood once more how in a way all belongs together.

No one is an island! We are not alone, and we cannot live alone.

We all are the result of who brought us up, which opportunities we were given, which country we were born in, which time... which influences...

Interlaced as we are, we are as different as one can be – what hold us together are the dove and the cross: peace, love and the chance of new beginnings... for the women in prison, for their families and nations, for the people of this world and for all of us today.

To overcome differences and diversities and to fight injustice and poverty, only one thought helps: whoever we are, wherever we come from, we are all children of a loving and forgiving God... all longing for bread and roses, which **we** will be given at communion in a moment.

May the bread on this first Sunday in the New Year still our hunger, and may the roses nourish our desire for peace, joy and justice.

Amen.