

It is time to speak of God



Pastoral letter from the Bishop of Mainz,
Peter Kohlgraf,
for the 2024 Easter penitential season

Umschlagmotiv und Details:

Paul Klee (1879-1940)

Feuer bei Vollmond (1933)

Mischtechnik auf Leinwand, 50 x 65 cm

Foto: © Museum Folkwang Essen – ARTOTHEK

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Herzlichen Dank für alle Hilfe bei den Übersetzungen!

Sisters and Brothers in the diocese of Mainz,

It is time to speak of God. In meditations by the theologian and resistance fighter Alfred Delp from 1944, I read the following thought: "How we have imprisoned the Lord God in the limits and boundaries of our usefulness, our individuality, our feelings, our self-realization, etc... God, like everything higher and spiritual and holy, was only recognized to the extent that he confirmed us and encouraged us in our self-awareness and self-will."¹

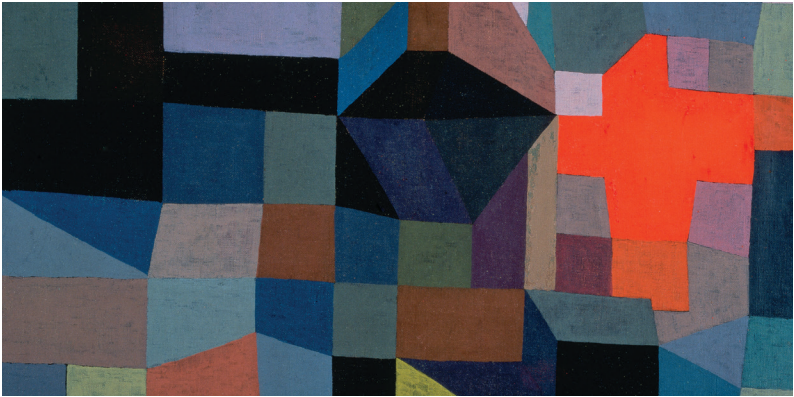
I admit that I am a little startled: 80 years after this text was written, the main assumption seems more relevant than ever. It is a fact: God and the search for him play less and less of a role in our time. Perhaps one reason for this is that there are enough other offers for supposedly useful things and things that promote people's ideas. It appears we do not need God to realize ourselves and our ideas or to find happiness and stay healthy. Even in the church, we repeatedly run the risk of only using God to justify our ideas and objectives. But this cannot be the God of whom the Bible speaks and for whom many people have given everything, even to the point of sacrificing their own lives. We do not need a God who is only useful; he has become superfluous.

¹ Alfred Delp, Meditationen „Gestalten der Weihnacht“. Roman Bleistein, Alfred Delp – Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. 4: Aus dem Gefängnis. Frankfurt am Main 1984, S. 200.

It is good that also in our times, many people find support, comfort and a foundation for their lives in God. They are involved in the church; they are committed to helping others in many ways because they know that you cannot keep the comforting experience of faith to yourself. Looking at the state of the world, however, makes it difficult for people to believe in God as he is often portrayed in the preaching of the gospel: How can a good God allow war, hatred, destruction, disease and endless suffering in this world? To this day, this dark reality of the world is the most powerful objection to the existence of an all-powerful, good and merciful God. It is certainly possible to explain away wars, hatred and destruction as the consequence of the abuse of human freedom. However, this justification is not satisfactory for many people. There is too much suffering that cannot be explained in any rational way.

This insecurity in faith is by no means alien to the Bible. For me, the most disturbing book of Scripture is the Book of Job. It is the story of Job, a righteous man who respects God, practices love of neighbor and lives in peace with his family. God gives Satan permission to tempt Job. Little by little, Job loses everything: his family, his possessions, his health. But he remains true to his faith in God and in that respect, the story has a happy ending. God rewards Job for his faithfulness. He gets everything back in many ways: possessions, health, family. One gets the impression that the author of the Book of Job could not bear the offensiveness and inexplicability of God's behavior himself.

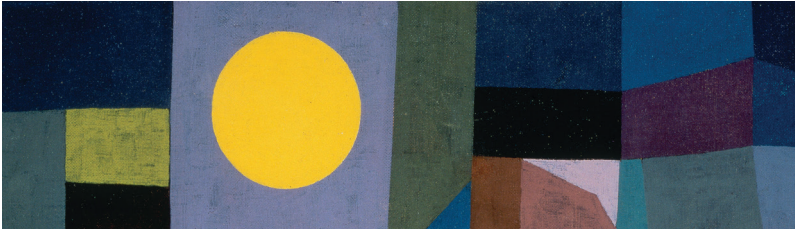
The long middle section of the book is particularly stirring. Here Job wrestles with God and comes to terms with his



friends. The friends offer the classic answers to comfort him. They want to explain suffering by ascertaining that it must be justice that lies behind it - God punishes the evil that Job must have once done. They know the answer to his current situation and provide clear explanations for the events in the world and in their friend's life. Suffering is punishment; man is responsible, God cannot be held responsible for it. Job, however, is not satisfied with these answers. The question of suffering remains unanswered.

God is not useful. God does not offer a simple answer to difficult questions that people are concerned about, not even today. It is easy to turn away from God because he is of no use to me. Avoiding questions about evil and suffering, however, does not seem quite so easy to me. It is certainly not easy to keep my God, who I feel supported by, out of this issue. God's answer to Job leaves me downright perplexed. God says to Job: the little man Job may not comprehend what great God is capable of. Man has to accept that he cannot see through God. God does not offer himself as a problem solver in the book of

Job either. And even when I look at the New Testament – for all the gladdening message in Jesus’ life – looking at his end on the cross, which is presented as the will of the Father, is truly not a simple solution for a real understanding of God’s will. Nor is Easter simply a happy ending to Good Friday.



It is time to talk about God. And, indeed, in the diversity of experiences of faith, because of course the experience of love, understanding, friendship and closeness remain. But there is also the experience of having to endure, of not understanding, and yet faithfully holding on to him in faith and hoping in the end: he means only well for me and the world. For some, the only prayer that remains is to complain and lament to God, an often forgotten attitude of prayer in the Psalms. Even if people do not believe in God, either because they cannot or do not want to, or because God is no longer an issue for them, God is there. God’s existence is not dependent on people’s faith.

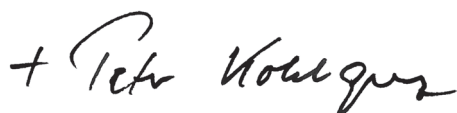
The experience of Job applies to believers: despite all the different approaches to faith in God, he does not serve as my or our instrument for human plans. We must not make things too easy for ourselves with God. Perhaps the best answer for Christians to the question of suffering and the role of God is that we allow ourselves to be called upon to actively change suffering, hatred, war and many other things to the best of

our ability. Perhaps Job's friends should have spent less time discussing God and more time actively helping. Our place as a church must always be at the side of those who suffer, and that remains the task of each one of us.

It is time to speak of God. Perhaps we can also turn that around: it is time to "act God".

I wish you a blessed Lent.

May the almighty and triune God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit bless us.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Peter Kohlgraf". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

+ Peter Kohlgraf
Bishop of Mainz

Mainz, on the 1st Sunday of Lent 2024

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