

'When the tickets to the future are no longer valid' **A reflection on hope for 'criminals'**

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First of all I would like to thank the organisation of this conference for the invitation to speak here on the world congress of the 'commission with the long name', as we in the Netherlands often call the ICCPPC. I want to thank them, in the second place, for the question they laid before, not in spite of, but *because* it is a tough question: what to think of the criminal who was crucified with Christ and who 'jeered at him'? Is their hope for him? Though, only Luke (23:39-43) makes a difference between the two criminals who died together with Christ. Of course this is essentially a theological question (we have heard some interventions on the issue), but my approach will be mainly philosophical, not just because philosophy is my discipline but because I think that in our 'secular age'¹ we as Christians must also be able to explain our concerns to a non-Christian audience.

I will interpret the question presented to us as the question of hope, the question about the status and the relevance of hope as a theological virtue today (II), and about the relation to the notions of justice and mercy central in this conference. (III) But I begin with a section on the 'signs of the time' that we, as Christians, have to read and decipher according to Vatican II. (I)

I. Two utopias dismantled

There is much talk about 'bubbles' today, about living in a bubble and bubbles that are dismantled or that even explode before our eyes. I will give an example that is very relevant for the current situation in the world, an example that also makes very clear why 'hope' is not only a relevant category for people like us who work with prisoners but also urgent for the future of our planet and for humanity. Not long after the election of Donald Trump as the next president of the United States, the well-known French philosopher Bruno Latour wrote a short essay about what we can learn from what he called 'the tragedy of Trump'.² He writes that the election of Trump made clear that 'Brexit was not an anomaly. (...) The ongoing pattern of voluntary resignations is now terribly clear: first England; six months later the United States, which aspires to the lost grandeur of the 1950s. What next?' Latour observes that especially nations that contributed to the universal horizon of conquest and emancipation – he mentions my country, the Netherlands, among them – are now withdrawing from institutions invented two centuries ago.

It is in this context that he talks about bubbles and living in a bubble. Latour tells us that he spent the last six weeks before the presidential elections at American Universities, but 'I have yet to hear a single account of those "other people" - the people who made this outcome possible – that was 'realistic enough to truly unsettle us'. The people who voted for Trump are, he writes, 'just as invisible, inaudible, and incomprehensible as the Barbarians outside the gates of Athens. We, the "intellectuals", live in a bubble – or perhaps better, on an archipelago amid a sea of discontents.'

Perhaps someone says: sorry, what's new, did intellectuals not always live in a bubble, according to the famous metaphor of the 'Ivory tower', the reversal of the well-known narrative of Plato and his 'myth of the cave' where the mass of the people live in a bubble of illusions and only the philosopher sees the light? But Latour's point is more severe and disturbing. In his diagnosis, the real tragedy is, that the millions who voted for Trump 'live in a bubble too: a world of the past completely undisturbed by climate change, a world that no fact, study, or science can shake. After

¹ In the sense of Charles Taylor, *A secular Age*, 2008:

² Bruno Latour, 'Two Bubbles of Unrealism: Learning From the Tragedy of Trump', in: *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, november 17, 2016.

all, they swallowed all the lies of the calls to restore an old order with perfect enthusiasm, while the alarm bells of the fact checkers went on ringing unheard. A Trump goes on lying and cheating without remorse, and what a pleasure it is to be misled.' The real tragedy is that both bubbles represent utopias that are not only unreal but in the end catastrophic. Our countries, he writes (because this situation not only describes the United States, but for example also France and the Netherlands), our countries 'are often split in two: the first half - let us call them the globalized - believe that 'the horizon of emancipation and modernity (often confused with the reign of finance) can still expand to embrace the whole planet'. The second half has decided for 'dreaming of a return to a past world.' So we can keep mourning about the defeat of the democratic candidate, but the situation would not be much better and more sustainable had the utopia of the future triumphed instead. Why not? Because, according to this philosopher, 'there is no real, material world in the offing corresponding to that vision of a promised land' - let us pay attention to the Biblical metaphor here. 'Just one year ago, the United Nations Climate Change Conference served as a solemn declaration of this impossibility: the "global" is simply too vast for the Earth. Beyond these limits, our tickets to the future are no longer valid'.

So far his diagnosis, his reading of the 'signs of the time'; there are, at the moment, much more readings in this style, some are even more grim; I mention here only the one of the brilliant South African political philosopher Achille Mbembe, who sees the 'age of humanism' that began after two world wars now 'ending' - not only because of the election of Trump, but because neoliberal capitalism will transform politics 'in a barely sublimated warfare'.³ My point here is not that Mbembe's or Latour's analysis cannot be open for discussion or stay unchallenged, but that it stages a more or less classical case for the relevance of *hope*, which is exactly the situation, 'where our tickets to the future are no longer valid', in Latour's words. Let me, in order to make this proposition more plausible, first reflect a little bit on the status and topical relevance of the well-known so called *theological virtues* faith, hope and love.

II. *The Christian 'addition' to the classical virtue-ethics*

Several ethicists and specialists in the history of philosophy and theology have observed, that the Christian reception of classical virtue ethics as established by Aristotle was not without creative translations, re-interpretations, and also additions. As we know, the classical virtue-ethics was an ethics of the self-realization for the well-off, the aristocratic citizen who had to take responsibility for the community, the *polis*. And politics could be described as an activity that carries on this ethical education or *Bildung*, as the Germans call it.⁴ Christian virtues as humility, voluntary poverty or care for others are hard to find in the universe of this formation of character for male aristocrats. And totally new were the virtues the Christian tradition from the church fathers up to Aquinas did add to classical virtues like justice, friendship or moderation. One of my Dutch colleagues, the ethicist Paul van Tongeren, describes them as follows. The theological virtues of faith, hope and love 'differ in several respects radically from the former. They are not the effect of our own activity but are a gift of God; they do not result in our success in the political community but direct us towards another, higher bliss or felicity; they do not bring to perfection our aspirations or our knowledge, but our will; and all of them have an element of what we can call "irrationality".'⁵

Why are these virtues, for example hope, 'irrational'? It is because this hope differs from what we can call reasonable expectations, based on experience, rational calculations and, perhaps, an

³ Achille Mbembe, 'The age of humanism is ending', in: *Mail & Guardian*, 22-12-2016.

⁴ Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis*.

⁵ See Paul van Tongeren, 'De politieke betekenis van de christelijke deugden', in: *Christen Democratische Verkenningen*, Herfst, 2012, 109-114; 112. Zie ook id., *Deugdelijk leven. Een inleiding in de deugdeethiek*, Amsterdam: Sun: 2003, vooral Hfst. V: De deugden, 67-94.

optimistic attitude or character.⁶ The same is true for the other theological virtues. Faith is believing in something or someone you can't control. And Christian love is not a passion nor reasonable devotion. This kind of love 'loves what in reasonable terms just cannot be called attractive, this love is dedicated to people who our political community – mostly for good reasons - did exclude, such as prisoners.'⁷ Even stronger: in this kind of love we are invited to 'see in the prisoner, the sick, hungry or thirsty person, the stranger, the naked and the dead person: Christ himself.'⁸ Now we get an idea of the 'irrationality' of the Christian virtues. In fact, people who visit prisoners, especially when they do this as volunteers who are not professionals nor family of the inmates, these people often must account for surprise or even scepticism or sarcasm: why do you waste your time with this trash? The cover of the celebration book *For Justice and Mercy*⁹ that was launched by ICCPPC last November is a good example of the surprising and seemingly 'irrational' reversal that is so characteristic of the Christian idea of hope. On the sculpture of Timothy Schmalz called 'When I was in prison' we see a person behind bars, a prisoner with the stigmata of Christ.

Can these explicitly religious virtues still be relevant in a secular world? I will give a recent example of someone coming from a non-Christian, even atheist tradition who stresses the relevance of this contra-intuitive idea of hope, especially today.

Hope without optimism

The last book of the philosopher and literary theorist Terry Eagleton, author of many books, among them *On Evil*, and *Why Marx was Right* is a critical investigation on the difference between hope and optimism and has the remarkable title *Hope without optimism*.¹⁰ As its motto, it has a quote of a priest, Herbert McCabe: 'We are not optimists; we do not present a lovely vision of the world which everyone is expected to fall in love with. We simply have, wherever we are, some small local task to do, on the side of justice, for the poor.' Partly, his book is a critical discussion with contemporary rationalist and 'scientistic' optimism, with authors who see the modern age as a runaway success story marred by certain residual pockets of deprivation. Yet, the first sentence of the book can also be read as a subtle critique of an attitude that some associate not totally wrongful with Roman Catholics, a certain invincible 'positive' and optimistic outlook on life, the ability always to look at the bright side of life. 'There may be many good reasons for believing that a situation will turn out well, but to expect that it will do so because you are an optimist is not one of them', Eagleton writes.¹¹

The image of the glass that is half full half empty is already instructive in this respect. After all, you see the same amount of liquid whether you are of a carefree or morose turn of mind. 'How one feels about the glass, is purely arbitrary'- there can be no arguing over the matter, it is a question of temperamental cheerfulness, of pure subjectivity, in other words. Eagleton develops the proposition that optimism and pessimism are in fact two forms of 'fatalism'. Like pessimism, optimism spreads a monochrome glaze over the whole world, blind to nuance and distinction.¹² Optimists, he argues, are a kind of conservatives, because their faith in a benign future is rooted in their trust in the essential goodness of the present. Therefore, we don't have to be surprised that optimism is a typical component of ruling class ideologies. In the Netherlands, for example, most politicians are eager to boast on their 'optimism' – even when it is very likely that their party

⁶ Van Tongeren, 'De politieke betekenis', o.c., 113.

⁷ Van Tongeren, 'De politieke betekenis', o.c., 114.

⁸ Van Tongeren, 'De politieke betekenis', o.c., 114.

⁹ Ryan van Eijk, Gerard Loman & Theo W.A. de Wit (eds.), *For Justice and Mercy. International Reflections on Prison Chaplaincy*, Wolf Legal Publishers: Oisterwijk, 2016.

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Hope without Optimism*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2015.

¹¹ Eagleton, *Hope without optimism*, o.c., 1.

¹² Eagleton, *Hope without Optimism*, o.c., 12.

will probably perform very badly at the next elections. And in the Dutch Roman Catholic church you notice that our cardinal, who faced a decimation of his church buildings in the last decade, remarks in every interview that he is still very 'optimistic' about the future of his church. The background of this kind of wooden positivity of rulers is, according to Eagleton, probably, that 'the alternative to a bright-eyed citizenry may be political disaffection' - and disaffection can be a goad to reform.

As I remarked, in his book Eagleton deconstructs several doctrines of progress or 'optimistic fatalism', especially from the nineteenth century on, for example those of Herbert Spencer, August Comte and, earlier already, Leibniz famous theodicee that he labels 'optimalism', the idea that we inhabit the best of all possible worlds and that there is for that reason no call for change. But, 'only if you view the situation as critical do you recognize the need to transform it.'¹³ Here we meet the case Latour sketched once again, the situation when we realize that 'the tickets to the future are no longer valid'.

The 'idiot' event of goodness

It is at this point that Eagleton turns to the theological tradition of the theological virtues faith, hope and love. Authentic hope, he writes, 'needs to be underpinned by reasons. In this, it resembles love, of which theologically speaking it is a specific mode. (...) Otherwise it is just a gut feeling, like being convinced that there is an octopus under your bed. Hope must be fallible, as temperamental cheerfulness is not.'¹⁴ Judeo-Christianity, he reminds us, breaks the link between hope and the doctrine of progress. There may indeed be progress in history from time to time, but it is not to be confused with redemption. For the New Testament, the eschaton or future of the kingdom of God is not to be mistaken (...) as the triumphal conclusion of a steadily upward trek, but as an event that breaks violently, unpredictably into the human narrative, upending its logic, defying its priorities, and unmasking its wisdom as foolishness.'¹⁵

Or, as the German theologian Johann Baptist Metz in the seventies argued in discussion with representatives of the Frankfurt School, emancipation is not the same as redemption (*Erlösung*).¹⁶ This is so, because emancipation has no answer to the question of the fate of 'those obscure strivings for justice which have been melted and left no trace behind them in the annals of official history.'¹⁷ We must stand by the difference between emancipation and redemption in the name of anamnestic solidarity or *Anamnetische Vernunft*, as Metz calls it. Of course, in the case of Christianity, the messiah has arrived already, but - another 'irrational' and paradoxical aspect of this faith - 'in the guise of a tortured and executed political criminal'.¹⁸

We can say that Eagleton discovers the ethical and political fruitfulness of the so called eschatological reserve of Christian theology. But breaking the link between hope and trust in a final plot of history does not mean that there is no continuity at all between our historical strivings and the end of history. In this Jewish and Christian view, as Eagleton summarizes excellently, it is 'as though there is a coded pattern of hope woven into the fabric of history, a subtext whose letters are dispersed throughout its texture and will be assembled into a fully legible narrative only of Judgment Day.'¹⁹

The same is expressed in a beautiful text of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas called 'the small goodness' (*la petite bonté*), where he writes: 'Amongst all degeneration of human relations, goodness persists. She keeps possible, even when she cannot evolve to a system or

¹³ Eagleton, *Hope without optimism*, o.c. 5.

¹⁴ Eagleton, *Hope without optimism*, o.c., 3.

¹⁵ Eagleton, *Hope without optimism*, o.c., 27.

¹⁶ Johann Baptist Metz, 'Erlösung und Emanzipation',

¹⁷ Eagleton *Hope without optimism*, , o.c., 29. See also Christian Lenhardt, 'Anamnestic Solidarity. The Proletariat and its *Manes*', in: *Telos* 25, 1975, 1330154.

¹⁸ Eagleton, *Hope without optimism*, o.c., 30.

¹⁹ Eagleton, *Hope without optimism*, o.c., 28.

social regime. Each effort to organize humanity is doomed to fail. The only thing that keeps vital is the small goodness of daily life. She is fragile and provisional. She is the goodness without witnesses, she comes about silently, unpretentiously, without triumph. She is gratuitous, and precisely because of that eternal. The people who defend her, and whose concern it is that she resumes the thread, even when she is totally defenseless against the powers of evil, these people are “vulnerable souls”. The small goodness works itself ahead, like a trampled down piece of grass. Perhaps she is crazy, an ‘idiot goodness’, but she is at the same time the most human in man. She never wins, but at the same time she is never superseded. She is the spark of the Infinite in the finite!²⁰ Once again, in the thinking of this famous Jewish thinker, we encounter the ‘irrational’ element of the attitude he defends, a ‘crazy goodness’ that is perhaps Levinas word for mercy. Eagleton’s version of Levinas’ message goes as follows: ‘Given that the most glaringly obvious fact about the Messiah is that he does not come, it falls to each generation to exercise a small portion of his power on behalf of the oppressed, bringing the poor to power in the hope of hastening his advent.’²¹

Mercy without optimism

It is at this point that I see the relevance of the meaning of this vision for prison chaplaincy, for a ‘chaplaincy without optimism’, and for the relation between justice and mercy. First of all, the understanding that the theological virtues are not completely our own performance and is based in the trust that what we cannot realize ourselves will be given to us as a gift makes possible an honest realism. As we know, it’s easy to get cynical when you work with detainees, especially recidivists - in the Netherlands we talk about ‘revolving door criminals’ or about people with a long criminal ‘career’. In this context, ‘hope’ has before everything else to do with being alert to the possible, even improbable and not to the already realized in the life of an inmate. ‘Hope’, according to a definition in a recent book on the subject, ‘is our sensibility for the gift of the possibility of the good.’²² It also means, secondly, that we learn to distrust a little be our own capabilities to practice the theological virtues. Aristotle already knew that practicing the virtues is a question of a tricky balance, and the Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal added that we must not ‘molest perfection’ because ‘man is neither an angel nor an animal, but the unfortunate truth is that someone who tries to be an angel, behaves like an animal.’²³

A good example of the necessity to put in perspective our ability to practice the theological virtues is the discussion on euthanasia or ‘mercy-killing’ in my own country. Not so long ago, our minister of public health used the word ‘mercy’ when she announced a new bill to facilitate old people who don’t want to live any longer to make an end to their life. The best comment to this reference to the concept of mercy came from a woman who gave us the advice to learn to distrust a little bit our own good intentions and feelings of love: ‘You, and your so-called merciful love’, she wrote, ‘these two have their own life; do you really understand the need of the other, your beloved ones.’²⁴ Our love is only seldom without self-interest, and the strange thing is that the claim ‘I am merciful’ constitutes already a betrayal of this virtue.

In my contribution to your celebration book *For Justice and Mercy*, I do a proposal to interpret, following a Flemish colleague, the Christian virtue of mercy, as unfold in the well-known ‘works of mercy’. My suspicion is, that the traditional works of mercy perhaps have less to do with encouraging us to force ourselves to be more helpful, more warm, more patient than we are now (or more than others are), but with giving a humane answer in dead-end-situations and moments of ultimate powerlessness. For example, the assignment to ‘endure wrongs’ is perhaps not meant to neglect our realism and to suppress our cynical impulses, but to acknowledge that

²⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, ‘La petite bonté’, in: *Altérité et transcendance*, Montpellier, 1995, 117-119.

²¹ Eagleton, *Hope without optimism*, o.c., 27-28.

²² Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Hoffnung*, Berlijn/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016, 5.

²³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Nr. 357. Quoted in Martin Seel, ‘Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe – drei nicht allein christliche Tugenden’, in: *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, Vol 65/4, 2011, 67-81; 68.

²⁴ Marjoleine de Vos, ‘Helaas, uw liefde is zelden belangeloos’, in: *NRC-Handelsblad*, ‘Opinie en debat’, 22/23-10-2016, 4-5.

there is a limit to ethical accountability and reciprocity. Every one of us knows people who have lost their sensibility for good advice, for consoling words, for moral discourse, temporary or even permanently. It's even worse: perhaps every one of us has such a dark side where moral reciprocity stops and our impenetrability and insensitivity begins.

Well, my proposal is: could the virtue of mercy not be interpreted as the adequate *human* attitude when we stop demanding other people 'to behave responsible', when we stop trying to 'empower' someone, when we give up asking a detainee finally to 'pass the buck to someone' or to stop sticking to his role as a victim of others etc. At these moments, we feel that persisting to make demands to someone in itself begins to be an act of cruelty. In this kind of circumstances, 'mercy' has the meaning of enduring the other in his or her blunt insensitivity with regard to everyday moral transactions of meaning.²⁵

This is not a plea for fatalism or quietism, but for acknowledging that the moral universe is finite, that some people, committing crimes, in a certain sense no longer know what they are doing, that they are imprisoned in evil. An attitude of mercy in these circumstance is simply to endure these people and to treat them humane. It is also realizing that in the end, our hope is not founded on ethics, let alone on our ethical behavior, but on something the tradition calls salvation or redemption or resurrection of the dead - something we cannot realize ourselves, we even cannot make it more explicit without violating it.

The second criminal

We all know what Jesus said the moment he was crucified between two criminals: 'Father, forgive them, because they do not realize what they do'. (Luke 23: 34) As I observed at the beginning of my argument, only Luke makes a difference between the two criminals, the other evangelists let the both sneer at Jesus. After the moment he confessed his crime ('we deserved our punishment'), recognized Jesus' innocence ('that man didn't do anything unlawful') and asked for his intercession, Jesus answered: 'I assure you: today you will be with me in paradise'. (23: 43) As a child, and even now, I always trembled, when I heard in the church the sound of the periscope following after this reference to paradise, in a certain sense a reference to hell: 'About noon, it got dark in the whole country because of a solar eclipse. The darkness lasted for three hours.' I always had the intuition that this darkness had something to do with the critical dimension of history, with history as crisis, with the moments where 'the tickets to the future are no longer valid', in Latour's words. These are the moments of judgment *and* of hope. To be positioned between judgment and hope – isn't that what makes our existence as human beings both vulnerable and tense?

Allow me a personal note, to end off my lecture. Last year, at the eleventh of May, my mother in law, living in a small village near Cape Town, South Africa, was murdered. She was assaulted in her own house, tied up, robbed and after that strangled. Her husband, eighty-three years old, found her in the kitchen, already dead. Only a few days later, two suspects were arrested, almost with certainty the offenders. One of them was a friend of the family, an eighteen year old boy coming from poor circumstances, a young man who the mother of my wife had helped in many ways for the last ten years. My mother in law, a writer and a very active citizen in her village, was too aware of the fact that the system of Apartheid, that she had more or less accepted as normality for many years, had left deep scars in South African society. She wanted in her own way to contribute to the new South Africa, a country full of promises and hope after Apartheid. She wanted to support this boy, and improve his chances, and she was involved in other projects too. You can imagine, that my family is in deep mourning since then, and especially her husband experienced something of the darkness described in the gospel. At this moments, the two suspects are still remanded in custody, the lawsuit still has to start. But I noticed that I silently prepare myself for the possibility that we will never get a satisfying answer to our question, why this young, talented boy, killed our mother, grandma and mother in law. The only

²⁵ Theo W.A. de Wit, 'The Wounded Community. A Philosophical Essay on Imprisonment and the Notion of Mercy', in: Ryan van Eijk, Gerard Loman & Theo W.A. de Wit (ed.), *For Justice and Mercy. International Reflections on Prison Chaplaincy*, Oosterwijk: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2016, 305-321; 315.

thing left is hope. Of course: hope that justice will be done. But also: that the members of our family will not be nailed down in resentment, that the community of the village of Wellington will find the resilience to keep working for a new South Africa, and that the two suspects will not lock themselves up in an obstinate silence, or develop to hardened criminals.