Though He Liberated Others, He Could Not Liberate Himself

Instead of a Christology: A Meditation

Jesus is the Messiah, his people’s promised liberator (Yehoshua = YHWH liberates)? The image we have of him is when he has been crucified. Is it not impossible to reconcile such an image with the idea of a liberator? The messianic community did it. They avowed that Jesus is kyrios – as the master who renounces acting as lord. And they avowed it in their practice of a lifestyle free of domination. It could seem all too easy for us to believe this avowal, which was so practical – if we too readily began to avow that the crucified one is risen and has ascended into heaven, there to establish his rule. He is the elevated Kyrios. Our avowal – the crucified one is risen – would be nothing but the tracing of his movement upwards without us as a community being brought into the movement of the trace by the crucified one. But to avow is to do what he modelled for us to do. This doing is the power of the resurrection, which brings about the role model of the crucified one. That is why Paul can write:

I decided to know nothing while with you
except for Jesus the Messiah, and him crucified
1 Cor 2:2

The perspective is determining: are we seeing the image of the crucified from above or from below? Where images are concerned, this is a matter of aesthetics. Looking at the image from below is the task of ‘aesthetics of resistance’. Peter Weiss opens his novel of the same name with such a viewing from below. The year is 1935 in Hitler’s Germany. Three young antifascists are standing in front of the famous Pergamon-Altar in the museum – a recognised pinnacle of Greek culture. The frieze depicts a battleground where the Greek gods are holding down the barbaric Giants with the use of extreme violence. The three

2 Weiss 2005.
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men can see this, too, but they see it through the eyes of those who suffer from this violence themselves: ‘The subjugation of the Gallic tribes invading from the north and turned into a triumph of aristocratic purity over wild and base forces, and the chisels and mallets of the stone carvers and their assistants had displayed a picture of incontestable order to make the subjects bow in awe’. The view from below exposes the view from above – as just that: a view from above.

The image of the crucified one can also be viewed from above in this way. Then we might see a human who suffers the insufferable, who sacrifices his life to a bloodthirsty God so that we can celebrate that as our deliverance. The view from below is different: here, we see a victim of the Roman rule of violence, executed because he interfered with this rule. Only those who see like this can even begin to understand what it means to avow this human as kyrios. They will also be able to see how a sculptor might imagine letting the crucified one descend from his cross in order to make him into his liberator, as well as the liberator of this like him. By doing this he would also be following the Torah’s aesthetics of resistance: the cry of the slave people (my God, my God, why have you abandoned us) which triggers their exodus.

In the ruins of the Franziskaner-Klosterkirche in Berlin, there is a sculpture by the GDR sculptor Fritz Cremer, who designed the memorial in the former concentration camp Buchenwald, among other things. The sculpture is called ‘He who is detaching himself from the cross’. It shows a well-built man who is in the process of descending from the cross to which he has been nailed. With his right hand he pushes the crown of thorns from his head. The cross already appears to be falling down behind him.

We know this man. We know him from Christian art: Jesus nailed to the cross, the head bent to the side under the crown of thorns, finally dead after infinite suffering. Jesus Christ caught in an aesthetic of suffering, the ‘Man of Sorrows’ who delivered us through his suffering, who died for our sins.

This image of the crucified Christ contradicts what the Romans were intending to demonstrate through him. After all, it is an image intended to provoke sympathy. The Romans, however, wanted to make an example of him: a rebellious slave has no chance, see him hanging there, he wanted liberation from slavery, forget about it, those of you watching now. Those who rebel against their fate end up on the cross. Simultaneously, though, the Christian image of the man stapled to the cross (fixed to the cross = crucifixion) reinforces the moral of the Romans: the crucified Christ does not resist but remains passive,

3 Weiss 2005, p. 5.