

NRS Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

It is not obvious that we hear *gospel*, a *góód* message, in the message that God is with us.

We are more honest, more realistic, closer to the truth perhaps when we admit that we prefer to live without God. Maybe we live a happier life without Him.

Just like King Ahaz, we might refuse the sign of God's presence. God is an inconvenient, an embarrassing reality.

He hinders us in our plans and strategies, in our Realpolitik.

Even if we are – like this Judean king – caught in dilemma's, enmeshed in power games and in constant search for allies and coalitions who can help us survive – let's, anyhow, make that an affair of honour: let's live our life as if God is not present, *etsi deus non daretur*.

It is a matter of intellectual honesty, and it comes closer to our human, much too human truth.

The Dutch philosopher of law Hugo Grotius introduced it in the 17th Century as a principle of international law: without the presence of God, advocated by believers, there will be more world peace than with the presumed presence of God.

Until the 21st it seems that his scepticism has proved to be right.

Let's live our life *etsi deus non daretur*, go on living as if there is no God with us.

How painful it might work out, the pain is at least our *ówn* pain, the god forlornness is our *ówn* god forlornness. The struggle for life is *óur* struggle. Living without God is a sign of moral honesty.

A few years ago the Dutch singer-songwriter Maarten van Roozendaal performed a cynic song, directed against religious fanatics:

Lighten a candle

Put a funny hat on

Slaughter a lamb

*Put a note with prayers into
the wall*

But don't save me

<i>predict the future</i>	<i>A heaven with you</i>
<i>but don't save me</i>	<i>Is my hell with you</i>
<i>Let your beard grow</i>	<i>Just leave me my godless song</i>
<i>Dress yourself in a long robe</i>	<i>Put your hand towards heaven</i>
<i>But don't save me</i>	
<i>Your heaven is a hell to me</i>	<i>But don't save me</i>

Though a believer, I can share his anger and scepticism. Do we really want to be saved? By others, by God? Being saved presumes losing our pride, presumes no longer putting hope in ourselves, trust in our autonomy, no longer relying on our desperate creativity. Do we really long for God to be with us?

So the world goes on working on peace and justice, celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 60th Birthday, and yes, thanks to the principle of *etsi deus non daretur*, progress has been made – though we still have a long way to go.

And yes, we have high expectations of Barack Obama. And yes, we hope he will contribute to a solution for the Palestine problem, and yes we hope that Mugabe will resign, and yes, we hope that there will be a diplomatic solution for the Congo region.

Though we are weary, we have the feeling that we are on the right track. Even if there is no God with us.

So do we really long for 'Immanuel'? Do we really want to be saved? This is the first thought I would like to share with you. Perhaps we do understand this king Ahaz far too well in his rejection of a sign of Gods presence. We will save ourselves, even if it will mean our defeat in the long run.

The second thought that imposes itself reading Isaiah 7 is: if God is with us, thwarting our resistance against his presence, he certainly is with us in an unheard-of manner: God is with us. How? He is with us in a pregnant woman, bearing a son.

It is a sign of a provoked God, angry and wearied by the so called realism of leaders as king Ahaz. It is a sign of a God who judges that this cannot go on any longer.

Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? (Isaiah 7:13)

An angry, weary God is judging us by this sign. His poignant judgment is present in the vulnerability of a pregnant woman, in the frailty of an unborn child.

It is a presence that we could not have invented.

It did not come up with us.

It is a revelation.

Reading Isaiah, the sign of God's presence literally falls from heaven. It does not come from within. It is not a projection of our desires and longings. It is a critical, godly action of discontent with how things go. A sign from the other side.

'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.' (Isaiah 7:14)

In the midst of our realism this sign incarnates another reality:

A young woman conceiving and bearing a son.

What is more common than a pregnant woman? the Realpolitiker will say.

But beware, take a closer look: What is more astonishing than a pregnant woman? God replies. A different way of seeing reality, a different language is introduced.

A language from below, concrete and close to flesh and blood, against the calculating abstractions from a view from above. A language of hope, against our weariness.

God is with us in the silence of a woman, listening patiently to her body, waiting for the day of birth of her child to come.

The day of delivery, as it is called. Of being in labour. For bearing a child means living between hope and fear, joy and suffering, life and death. Means living at the edges of life.

Taking the woman's perspective means looking at reality from a different angle than the King's point of view. The perspective people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer shared, people who 'learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled — in short, from the perspective of those who suffer.'

Those who discover that below, those who are in the company of Immanuel, 'learn that personal suffering is a more effective key, a more rewarding principle for exploring the world in thought and action than good fortune,' Bonhoeffer concluded.

God is present conceiving and giving birth.

I think we cannot take this sign too literally in its particularity. This is a last thought that I would like to put forward. God is present in the body of a pregnant woman. We should not let this child, her son, be born too quickly, and call it Jesus too soon. Jesus, Jeshua, God saves.

But before God delivers us from evil, before God saves us, the child has to be expected, has to be born in pain and suffering, has to be cherished and taken care of, has to be raised and find its own place among the people.

We should not expect Immanuel to grow up too quickly. Gods coming takes time and struggle, asks for patience and perseverance. Deliverance is a delivery.

Who is this woman, who is his mother? Is she king Ahaz's wife, the mother of Hizkia? Is she called Maria, the mother of Jesus?

Maybe she is every woman bearing life. Her child will bring radical newness in the world, opens a future that could not be deduced from our weary past.

Maybe every childbirth can be experienced a sacrament of God, a sign of God-with-us, a God who does not want ourselves tied down to our past.

Maybe we needed this one unique birth we celebrate with Christmas, we needed the birth of Jesus Christ, to understand the meaning of all those others.

Prayer of Invocation

Almighty God, we seek the privilege of your presence.
In the name of Jesus, receive us that we may worship you.
Look upon us with mercy that we may live.
May your Holy Spirit honour us in this hour,
bringing into our lives the profound experience
of your grace to us this day. Amen

Benediction

‘May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all’