

**Prof. Dr. Klara Butting:**  
**Resisting the Spirituality of Growth**

**Lecture on Nov 2nd; Reception of the Reformed Alliance in Germany**

**Psalm 2**

*To what end do the nations rage  
and the peoples meditate in vain?  
2 The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,  
3 "Let us burst their bonds apart  
and cast away their cords from us."  
  
4 He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
the Lord holds them in derision.  
5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath,  
and terrify them in his fury, saying,  
6 "As for me, I have set my King  
on Zion, my holy hill."  
  
7 I will tell of the decree:  
The LORD said to me, "You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you.  
8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.  
9 You shall break<sup>l</sup> them with a rod of iron  
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."  
  
10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
be warned, O rulers of the earth.  
11 Serve the LORD with fear,  
and rejoice with trembling.  
12 Kiss the Son,  
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.  
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Everybody going through this world with open eyes will see that our western civilization has reached its limit. An economy based on overconsumption and greed destroys our life. A fundamental change of our culture of life is needed. This includes the liberation from an „individualism of money „that ignores the fellowship between human beings and the rest of creation.

Yet in spite of the financial crisis and the climate change mass-demonstrations of protest are not characteristic for of our times, at least not in Germany. Instead of protest movements we observe a spiritual movement. We rather go for pilgrimages than for marches and we prefer to

experience spirituality in silence rather than in occupying banks. People affected by the centrifugal forces of society seek to be close to creation in silent meditation surrounded by nature.

I don't want to condemn this individualistic approach. I want to take it seriously as the political context in which we live. Where dreams of a united Europe and of the One World are pushed aside by the vision of one's own increasing poverty, people will necessarily look for their roots and spiritual ties.

But it is just as necessary to gain a new understanding of the political dimension of our relation to God – as it is part of our faith tradition.

I work at a place called the Woltersburger Mühle, where we ask how the individual, seeking quietness, nature and trying to be in relation with God, can find his way back into society.

### **„Woltersburger Mühle“**

is a vast area near the town of Uelzen, owned by an organisation working with unemployed people. There is a permanent workshop for young women and men between the age of 16 and 25, organized to guide them and to help them find back into a somehow more structured life-style.

These people are not only unemployed but they also carry bundles of problems: Suffering from depression, overweight and learning disabilities. In their past they did not get even half of the love and the feeling of security a young person needs to grow up. Some of their stories leave us with the question how it will ever be possible for these young people to live and work in stable relationships.

My working place, the *Centre for Biblical Spirituality and Social Responsibility*, is located in the midst of this project This of course is no coincidence. We believe that our search for God leads us to the poor. By our educational programs we want to share this experience. The question, how individualized persons, seeking quietness and nature can find their way back into the community, is rooted here.

And this question brings me to the Psalms. I am convinced that the Psalms address precisely the problem that urgently needs to be resolved for the sake of our survival: How can individualized, isolated people, powerless in the face of an international elite and its politics, find their way back into solidarity and fellowship with others?

### **The social context of the Psalms**

Usually we read the psalms verse by verse or we have our favorite psalms. But what applies to every biblical text applies to the psalms as well: They are part of a literary context that interacts with a specific social and historical context. The psalms speak of liberating those from bitterness and isolation who are individualized and broken by a global economic order. The isolated individuals become political actors, who are responsible for the community to which they belong - irrespective of how large or small their radius of action is and whether they like it or not.

The beginning of the Book of Psalms tells us about the social context that is being addressed by the editors of this book. The introduction, the overture is in Psalms 1 and 2, both are no prayers. Psalm 1 is a small teaching-poem about God's law. Psalm 2 is typical for prophetic speech. Both Psalms stand at the beginning of the Book of Psalms to remind the reader of the two large collections of scripture, the Five Books of the Torah and the writings of the Prophets.

This gives us an indication about the age of the Book of Psalms, since the Torah and the Prophets were already known. Both became part of the biblical canon in the 4th or 5th century when the province of Judah was occupied by the Persian rulers. These scriptures were a kind of a Constitution for the new beginning of the people of Israel after their return from exile. It was to guide them in their Life and Faith. The Book of Psalms Psalter knows about this new beginning.

There is also another indicator that tells the date of book of Psalms: It witnesses to the failure of this Constitution and of solidarity in the country. The life of the community is dictated by the „wicked“ – I call them the winners of Globalization. They appear right at the beginning in the very first verse of the first Psalm:

*„Blessed is the man and the woman,  
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked.“*

The Hebrew term is „rascha“; in New-Hebrew it means „criminal“. 84 times it appears in the Palms. The book of Psalms is the story of a dramatic fight between those who seek communion in solidarity and those „wicked“, those criminals. They are committing economic crime acting in the midst of society.

Vers 1:

*„Blessed is the man and the woman,  
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.“*

The „wicked“ determine society-life. In „walking, standing, sitting“ - in every part of life – their power is present, leaving little space for alternatives. The way of solidarity can only be described as a call to stay away from them..

Psalm 1 is a call for Boycott. Three times „No“ – This is how the Book of Psalms starts. In all areas of life one needs to be careful not to follow the political principles, the life-style and the business-manners of a ruthless elite.

I called them the winners of globalization for they are – as Psalm 2 illustrates – part of a global movement. Psalm 2 speaks of an international uprising that had captured all nations:

*„To what end do the nations rage  
and the people meditate in vain?  
The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,  
Let us burst their bonds apart  
And cast away their cords from us.“*

Nations are in rebellion against God. An international elite leads them. This international leadership is characterized by its propaganda of freedom. They want to get rid of the bonds of the Eternal God and his Messiah.

*„Let us burst their bonds apart  
And cast away their cords from us.“*

They want to get rid of all commitment, the commitment to solidarity for which the God of Israel stands. Instead, they promote the freedom of power-players.

This call to freedom mirrors the social and political developments in Juda after the return from Exile. Global trade relations define the benchmarks - the local legislation by comparison seems old fashioned. Plantations are now the places for production in order to make more money with sales to other countries, while the Torah stands in the way, as it wants to reduce accumulation of wealth and speaks in favor of solidarity between the families in the land of Juda. The laws that regulate the Sabbath and try to control economic developments for the benefit of local communities seem anachronistic.

The call to freedom is at the heart of the so-called Hellenisation of the Mediterranean area and the Orient. Hellenism is an era of Globalization. Monetarism is enforced by violence and the spreading of monetarism has drastic impacts on all areas of life and leads to a new economic order. The ownership of huge agricultural surfaces grows next to extreme poverty. Mighty families prosper while free farmers lose their land. God reigns in heaven but the earth belongs to business life which is shaped by global trade, export and spreading monetarism.

### **Spirituality**

Blessed will be those who meditate God's order of life. It becomes clear: the spirit of the age („Zeitgeist“) is determined by a different spirituality. The expression „to meditate“ again shows up in the beginning of Psalm 2. The elites meditate as well. The freedom of the power players is their mantra.

Money generates ruling power and allows a quality of life that is not bound to solidarity. The credo of autonomy is the mental sphere that comes along with the importance of money. An Ego-Spirituality accompanies the globalization of trade and markets.

The social conflict is also a conflict between different forms of spirituality and in reality these different forms of spirituality are seldom separated from each other. The elites - by their influence on language and along with their success - shape the mental orientation of everyone. Being aware of this, the first psalm warns of such an adjustment.

Especially the losers whom the Psalm lends its words by its lamentation and those who are threatened, go to rack and ruin, are in danger of being caught by the Ego-Spirituality of isolated market actors. Disappointment and loss feed the fear of being dependent on others. It is such defeats that inspire the dream of the autonomous individual who can survive alone in the world.

The Psalms intervene in a time of outer and inner threats. The battle doesn't take place only outside; our own body is a battlefield as well, where different spirits of the time are in conflict with each other. Everyone has to ask herself or himself :

What spirit do I grant space in myself? Which philosophy do I follow? How can I be freed from patterns of violence? How do I become part of the common mode of life our mothers and fathers did follow, in their hope for justice?

These are the questions of the Psalter.

## **Understanding politics**

Spirituality in the Psalter is a genuinely political one, this we can hear immediately in the beginning.

Psalms 1 speaks to individuals and recommends the exercise of meditation: murmuring old texts.

In Psalm 2 we see: Their search is part of a global battle of God concerning the transformation of the entire world.

The Psalter points out clearly: Even if we think that we aren't able to change anything, and that we are not at the controls of world politics, we still are a part of this global battle for solidarity and justice.

At the beginning of this journey we find God laughing:

*„He who sits in the heaven laughs“.*

This laughter tells us:

First: This international Leadership is no serious opponent for God. Their actions are in vain.

Second: Not murder nor homicide but God's laughter stands against the violence of the winners. This is a very different, unthinkable, maybe laughable way to beat them.

This laughter becomes reality in a king and this is God's counteraction:

*„As for me, I have set my King  
on Zion, my holy hill.“*

God presents his King against the kings of the world, his Anointed one, hebrew.: Maschiach= Messiah; greek.: christos = Christ.

At first sight God's reaction is surprising: The „kings of the world“ are the protagonists of the globalized injustice. They represent the global law of the jungle. They represent an unjust political system and the call for a king means to turn away from God. And now God reacts by choosing a king. This godly reaction is typical for the God of the Bible and typical for the messianic project. The God of Israel enters the disorder of this world. God does not leave the world to the raging violence of Empires. In „Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed“ this typical aspect of Godly becomes visible.

The Messiah is God's promise: God will not abandon the world to a failing political system. This is what the Messiah stands for.

There is a conflict associated with the very title of „Messiah“ and this conflict is similar to today's conflict around globalization: The institution of monarchy, of having kings is in itself a globally unjust institution. And the God of Israel stands against this institution. He stands for an alternative, not yet visible. Politics, now dominated by global structures of injustice, shall become the scene for God's justice and for human rights. This is what God wants to achieve with the Messiah, to find ways out of a dead end. What seems to be impossible will be possible, Just as powerful as the global leaders and yet entirely different: That is what a laughter can do.

## **What does this Messiah look like?**

The editors of the book of Psalms when they mention the Messiah do not have a particular king of history in mind. Even if an old hymn about a King was the literary background of

psalm 2, for the women and men who placed psalm 1 and 2 at the beginning of the Psalter, monarchy was a thing of the past.

Psalm 1 illustrates their reality: a life totally determined by foreign powers. In this situation the Messiah is a figure of hope, a guarantee that God will impose a limit to the raging violence in the international power play.

Yet: the use of the title „king“ within the language of hope is not without danger. There is a risk that the dreams of those who dominate and their phantasies of abuse will be mixed with one's own visions. We do have many examples for this to happen, even in Psalm 2 (2,7-9). But in spite of this danger the poets don't want to abstain from the title „King“ when they share their hope. The reason – as I understand it – is that, to speak of a king convey an essential message. It is about the ability to act in the realm of politics. Referring to God's King Messiah on Mount Zion declares politics to be God's own business. God claims the centre of political power as his realm and the Messiah is the representative of this claim. The Messiah is installed as God's symbol of the salvation that we are to expect from God in a concrete and worldly shape.

We get here to a fundamental problem of Christianity: Jesus Christ became a religious figure. We use the title „Christ“ as if it were a last name. When Jesus at his baptism is called to be Christ with the words of Psalm 2 „You are my beloved Son“, we do not associate with this the promise that goes with this title, the promise that God will not abandon the world to the raging violence of the Roman Empire. But this is exactly the message that the gospel is telling us by quoting the psalms to speak of Jesus as Messiah in the face of his suffering. From baptism to his death on the cross it is the psalms that have provided the words to tell the people about Jesus being the Messiah.

Related to this title of Messiah is the expectation that God does not abandon the world to political failure and its laws.

### **The congregation**

But how will God stop global leaders with his little king on mount Zion? What kind of a person is this Messiah? First of all: He is not a national war hero, fighting against the nations. We can see this in Psalm 2, in spite of the heroic language.

The King on Mount Zion talks to the kings of the world. In the last verse he calls the kings of the world to repentance. The Messiah embodies a universal perspective. He brings to the nations the promise of happiness and fulfillment of life that Psalm 1 addresses to a suppressed minority. The promise: „*Blessed are all who take refuge in him*“ stands at the end of the overture of the book of Psalms..

Still it remains unclear who sends this messianic call to repentance addressed to the rulers of the nations. Exegesis is debatable. Who is the „I“ in the fourth stanza? Is it the King who speaks in the third paragraph? Or is it the prophetic „I“ from the first stanza?

This lack of clarity is part of the way of the Psalms; the „I“ of the Psalms is often ambiguous. It is a cooperative identity. When we read the psalm, we ourselves will become this „I“ – and this, in a certain way is the victory of God. The Messiah takes the shape of the women and men who identify with the psalms.

Women and men in despair discover in themselves that they are capable of putting up resistance against the powers of destruction.

And we begin to ask the provocative question:  
*„To what end do the nations rage?“*

What for and where does this lead us?  
We assume the messianic identity. We take up the challenge.

And we get to know ourselves as people who are able to shape their own life and the life of the community as well. Even when we think there is nothing we can do, even when the scope of our action is limited to the care of our own needs and ailments, or reduced by the political powers, when we read the psalms we become people who do not accept the world as it is. We discover ourselves in these psalms as the people that are needed for God's transformation of the world.

(When we read further it will become clear by the person of David. He or she who reads the psalms „becomes“ David. Almost half of the psalms by their headline „ledawid“ (by/for David) are related to him. This doesn't mean a historic outline of the age of David. He is not part of the past. Remembering David shapes the future. David's name symbolizes a community that can be formed. He guides the attention away from the laws of globalization and focusses on one's own history, failures and its potential for hope.)

(Übersetzung: Sabine Dreßler/Paul Oppenheim)