

Sermon 20 February 2011

Subject: Art in a church?

Dear Parishioners

You might have been wondering what is going on in our church with these installations standing in front and on the sidewalls. Maybe your first thought was that this has something to do with the building works that have started again. But then if you have a closer look at it you notice that this can't be the case and that it looks very deliberately put there. The big work that you can see on the sides is created by Davide Cascio and the video work was done by Ilona Sagar, whom you might have met because she came to church events several times. The exhibition has been opened last Thursday and I think between 150 and 200 people came to the Swiss Church for this occasion. Some of the parishioners came to help with the catering and some also came to see what it was all about.

So today I would like to explore why it makes sense to have some art work exhibited in our church and what Biblical references we can find that show a link between art and church. The second reading from the Old Testament today was about the decoration that was made for Salomon's temple in Jerusalem. In the book of 1 Kings we have a detailed description of what was done in order to decorate this place of worship of God. And it is indeed mind staggering to read about the pillars and statues and about the stones and bronze that were being used. It is impossible to imagine how this must have looked like. Nonetheless many artists over the centuries have tried to capture that image of the temple by painting it. But of course the ideas of how the temple of Jerusalem looked like vary very much. Also I have to say that archaeologists didn't find a temple of that size which could underline the words that we have just heard. So it is all up to our imagination.

Nonetheless this text shows very beautifully how the Israelites cared so much about their God that no effort was too much to make this place indeed very special. And it also beautifully shows how human beings interlink worshipping God with human art. And

this is something that one can observe also in other cultures: wherever people worship God their creativity is being activated. The spiritual belief of artists has created the most wonderful paintings and also of course pieces of music in human history. Whenever we go to a church or a cathedral such as the St. Pauls Cathedral in London, the Sistine Chapel in Rome or the Sacrada di Familia in Barcelona we are reminded of the power and creative energy that is being released by faith and dedication to God.

Our reformed Swiss Church is of course quite the opposite of all that with its white décor and simple chairs. The reformers Martin Luther and even more so Huldrych Zwingli, didn't want that "junk" at all - as they would have probably called it - in the church. They felt it didn't help to worship God but on the contrary distracted people from the message and that decorating the church with gold and paintings was only a human way of showing off. So this example shows very well even historically there was a tension whether churches should be a place, where art is celebrated or whether not. Even though the Bible gives us an example of how important decorating and art in the temple in Jerusalem was, during the reformation for some people this didn't seem appropriate any longer.

So today and for one more week we have the pleasure of looking at this Art exhibition that has been especially created for our church. Maybe not so much to make it look nicer but it has been created in dialogue with what our church stands for. So for me it was very interesting to understand a bit of Davide Cascio's thoughts behind his constructions. He actually quotes texts from the Old Testament in his brief about his exhibition and that's why we listened today to two of these texts mentioned by him. In Exodus 35 people who are skilled with Art works are being asked to contribute to the decoration of the temple with arts and crafts that they were good at. So in some respects David's installation is referring to this order by Moses as described in the book of Exodus. And for me to actually learn about the process of making such huge cloths for these two art works was very impressive – what an amount of work and dedication it needed to actually have them fabricated. This is what we can see from the outside, but what the arts works could actually signify is of course up to our imagination.

The second text from the book 1 Kings is more about the idea of creating architecture as a place for God to live in. For the Israelites it was of prime importance to have such a place of worship. To have this detailed description of how the temple should be built shows very well, how much they cared about this matter. It was so important that was even worth being included in the Holy Scripture. Davide provided in his brief about the exhibition some images of how Salomon's temple might have looked like. And for those of you, who are interested you can take a copy of it with you at the entrance. So the thought of architecture that is being created for a sacred purpose might also be one central point of the artist's intention behind the art work.

As a conclusion I would like to say that even though art in a church might look for some of us a bit unexpected or even inappropriate, there is a long history of a connection between art and churches or sacred spaces. Human beings have always created beautiful things for God be it for decoration or for the place of worship. This thought might help us to have better access to this art works, which may also challenge us to think differently.

Amen