

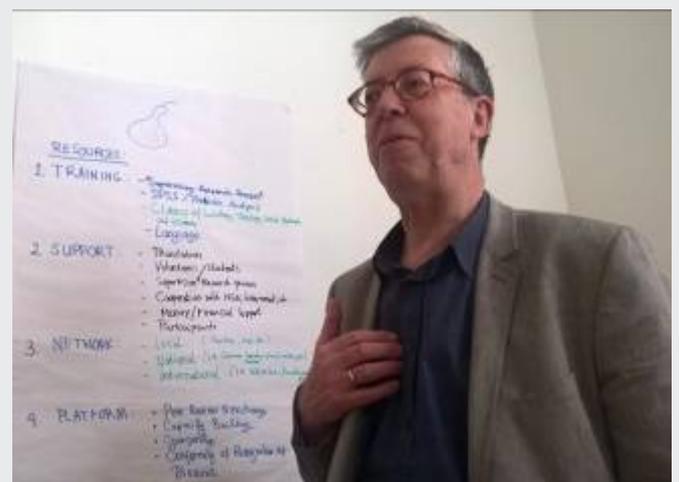
## CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD – DIACONIA AS ACT OF RECOGNITION OF HUMAN DIGNITY

by Herman Noordegraaf

### Introduction: Created in the Image of God

In the research project on 'Ecclesiology and the Theology of Diaconia and Christian Social Action' a lot of questions are dealt with in the six articles on diaconal work in six countries in Eastern and Central Europe and Central Asia. These focus on the self-understanding of churches and church organisations on diaconia. Fundamental questions (views on being church and doing diaconia) and practical questions (organisation, activities, finances and more) are analysed. Because of differences in confessional background (Armenian Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Lutheran, Serbian Orthodox, Pentecostal, Reformed) a variety of views and ways of working are given, but of course there also are similarities. In this contribution I will reflect on one issue that can be found in several articles and that is the fundamental theological concept of human dignity. This concept is not found directly in the Bible but is especially founded on the biblical statements that the human being, as well as the whole creation is created by God and that the human being is created in the image of God. As we can read in Genesis 1: 26, 27 God created the human being in his own image. Mostly the Hebrew word 'Adam' in these verses is translated with 'man', but the Hebrew word means 'humankind', the all the human beings, not only the males. As we can read at the end of verse 27: 'male and female he created them.'

In Genesis 1, as in all the stories of the ancient history of mankind (Genesis 1-11) much material was included from stories from other peoples in what is now called the Middle East. It was, however, also a critical response to these. Genesis 1-11 constitutes a determined answer to the awesome and prestigious culture of Mesopotamia and Egypt. In that culture the image of God concept referred to the king or the pharaoh. Thus, the royal-priestly system in which people had to work in service of king and temple, were legitimized by this view.



In Genesis, on the other hand, all humankind, men and women, ordinary people and not only the power elite, were created in God's image. This view is also found in Genesis 5: 1 and following, where Adam (and not the king) is the bearer of

God's image and he passes this on to his son and subsequently to all people. The genealogy that follows lists no kings.

All this is of great relevance for diaconia. This fact of faith implies that every human being is of value, matters unconditionally, that is to say regardless of gender, physical and psychiatric ability, intelligence, economic position, age, ethnic background, nationality or any other criterion whatsoever that posits human beings as having higher and lower value. Every human being has a dignity in his or herself. This is a way of looking at the human being in a specific way: that a human being living in the gutter and dirty, is created by God in God's image and is a child of God. This is so to say a confirmation of faith that also has the character of an appeal: it contains an appeal to go against all those practices and human concepts that take no account of such dignity and it is a positive appeal to create opportunities for life for every human being. So, for instance, we can read that when God makes a new beginning after the flood, he says: "whoever sheds the blood of a human being, by a human being shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God has God created humankind." (Genesis 9: 6) What are the implications of all this for the diaconate? I make some remarks about this.

## Act of recognition

Diaconia implies affirming people in need in their dignity and for that reason opposing humiliation, oppression and horrors. Material and social needs are mostly connected with a lack of respect for people in need, the way they are seen or not seen and are treated. Showing to people that they are worthwhile and that every human being counts is also important because self-respect strongly depends on being treated with respect. Human life is always living in relationships. We can only develop ourselves in interaction with others, and the way the others perceive us influences the way we see ourselves. Being neglected and humiliated can promote low self-esteem and a lack of self-respect. That causes suffering and hinders the active involvement of people themselves in improving their conditions of life.

How does the act of recognition get its shape in the diaconal work?

## Seeing and hearing

A first condition is that people in need are really seen and heard.

The words 'seeing' and 'hearing' in the Bible refer to the perception of the suffering of people and the recognition of their needs. Thus, the fundamental experience of the exodus harks back to God hearing the cries of the people in Egypt and seeing their fate (Exodus 2: 23-25). Seeing is connected with being moved by what is seen and going on to act:

'He heard their groaning, and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; he was the plight of Israel, and he took heed of it.' (Exodus 2: 25)

Here we see the movement of God who goes down to his suffering people. This God opposes the other gods, that are made by people themselves from wood, stone, silver or gold and who do not hear and see (see for example Deuteronomy 4: 28; Psalm 115: 4-7; Psalm 135: 15-17). The same is at issue in the parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus (Luke 16: 19-31). The word 'seeing' is not used as such but it does play a role. The rich man must have seen Lazarus, that is to say sensed his presence, because Lazarus lay at his gate and could not have been overlooked, the fact that the rich man knows of Lazarus appears further on in the parable when he asks Abraham to send Lazarus. He therefore saw Lazarus, but not really, because he lived his life as though he had not seen him, because he was not moved by seeing Lazarus, he did not change his life and did not go on to act. And so, people can be seeing yet blind and hearing yet deaf

We find the compassion and the deep rooted involvement in the life of people in need in the word that is used to characterize Jesus' way of acting. The Greek word *splangnizomai* that is used means to feel pity, being moved by mercy. It refers to deep inner feelings. It characterizes Jesus when he is moved by the need of people (Mark 1: 6 34; 8: 2; 9: 22) and is used in parables as, for example the Samaritan reacting with mercy (Luke 10: 30-36).

So, really seeing and hearing people in need is linked with the dignity, because you take the other seriously and recognize her or him as a subject and do not treat her or him as an 'object'. Diaconia means opposing indifference with regard to people in need within the churches and in society at large and it is against neglecting them and against the way they are stigmatized in a bad way. Furthermore, we should be aware that much of this happens unconsciously. For that reason, diaconia has always to do with becoming aware of your own judgment and presuppositions. Raising awareness within churches and in society is also of fundamental relevance, because when people are not really seen and heard it is not possible to improve their living conditions. Many historical and current examples can be given that illustrate that the recognition of people as human beings is not self-evident and that such recognition as there is stems from a long lasting battle. For instance a history can be written about how people with a disability were seen and treated, or about how colonised people were brutally exploited and so on. Not being seen and heard has the consequence that you are excluded from the mainstream of society.

### Way of working in diaconia

There are also a lot of implications of the act of recognition for the way diaconal work is done. It implies working *with* people. The preposition is important: working for should be imbedded in the working with. We can say: diaconia is pulling together. There is time to listen to people, to their life stories, to hear what their needs are, what is meaningful for them, what are their sorrows, but also their joys. Having time for someone shows that the other person is worthwhile for you. Attention is a key word in this. There is attention for their objective living conditions (income, source of income, housing, education, access to health provisions and so on) and the way people experience these within the whole of their life. Mostly this experience contains implicitly or explicitly formulated questions of life:

- Existential – who am I? The questions of identity.
- Relational: How is my relationship with God and with other people? How do I look at them and how do I think that they perceive me?
- Limitation and finiteness: suffering and death.

Attention is also needed to the use of language: which words do we use for people in need, for people who do not belong to the dominant groups and culture. For instance, it is important to reflect on how we talk about people when we pray in church services and which words are used to indicate people.

The openness to the other also implies that we become aware of the critical questions that are posed explicitly or implicitly to the church, to the person who gives support and to society as a whole. This is part of the diaconal learning: preparedness to be interrupted in your existence and way of thinking by the questions of the other in need and to work to change your life and work for change in society with an eye to the improvement of the living conditions of people in need.

### Different levels

The words respect and recognition especially evoke associations with the microlevel, the direct relationships between persons. It has to do with the attitude and ways of acting as found in the face to face interaction between people. We spoke about that previously. This is the basis of diaconal work. However, this microlevel should be connected with the meso- and macrolevel. Recognition and respect should be expressed in the way of working of organisations: how are persons treated, are there fair procedures, is there a right to complain, is there an entitlement to assistance (material and immaterial) and so on? The least that can be said that organisations should not function in a way which humiliates people.

The macrolevel has to do with the ordering of society and with laws that regulate rights to freedom, political, social and cultural rights. The main point at stake here is that people should have access to the means of living and that they should have the possibility to participate in society. This ought not to be dependent on the preferences of those who have the power to decide about these things but should be anchored as rights that can be effectively implemented. Rights that are really rights protect a person against arbitrariness and one-sided dependence on the subjective insights of others. Being entitled through rights promotes the dignity of a human being.

The social laws in the Old Testament are laws based on rights given by God (and not by the king). We give an example:

The oldest Biblical socio-economic laws are probably found in Exodus 22. In verses 21-23 the rule sharply condemns the bad treatment of aliens, widows or orphans, who were the most vulnerable people in the old Israelite society. Following this, we find a rule that sharply condemns the exploitation of people in need:

'If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest. If you take your neighbour's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.'(Exodus 22: 24-26)

This rule echoes deeply on the social issue par excellence in the then Israelite society: the relationships of dependence and exploitation that arise when a farmer ends up in debt. The moneylender was a person who acted without mercy, as is evident from the story in II Kings 4, where the children of a widow are threatened to be sold in captivity, among other places. The rule of law is meant to ensure that the emergency situation of someone resulting in one-sided dependence may not be abused to rob that person of the necessities of life, such as a coat to protect from the cold, and to take advantage by demanding interest, causing the needy person even to further problems. Here we find God given laws that aim to protect the needy and other vulnerable groups, to afford them access to the necessities of life and to offer them opportunities to participate in society. They culminate in far-reaching stipulations including about the remission of debt and redistribution of finance and land, as these can be found regarding the Sabbath and the year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25)

## Dignity and diversity

We wish to draw attention to the fact that this process of reflection, in terms of 'equal dignity', should be connected with a view on diversity. In every society there are dominant norms and views on what is 'normal'. Who is the 'normal' human being? Is this the white, healthy, educated young man? The big question is: who is determining what is normal? Is this the white, healthy, educated

young man? Because those who do not meet the requirements of these norms do not have the possibility to have a meaningful life lived according to their own views. We can think about the debates about gender (putting in discussion the male views), to people with a disability, religious minorities, cultural minorities, people with psychiatric illnesses and others. For that reason, in diaconal work, alongside the attention to questions of material assistance and care, there should be attention to the way of life and culture (norms, values, views on the human being) of people who are 'other'. This again shows the relevance of really seeing and hearing: do we also see and hear the other in these dimensions of their existence and in our diaconal work, do we also critically reflect on the dominating norms, values and views in the society? In conclusion, we can affirm that equal worth should be connected with diversity.

Therefore, as I have tried to argue, the biblical vision of the human being (anthropology) leads us to the concept of human dignity and the worth of every human being as preceding every other characteristic. This implies that every human being has the right to a life in dignity and that presupposes treatment with respect, access to the means of life and to the possibility to participate in society. Diaconia should affirm this understanding of dignity and become an act of recognition on all levels: in the way it is working in direct relations, as an organisation and in promoting a society with access to the means of life for everyone.

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