

Foreword

Seelsorger: A Journal for the Contemporary Cure of Souls, 1/1,
2015, 3-4

John W. Kleinig

“The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the Lord has made them both” (Prov 20:12).

I have just returned from a holiday with my wife in Eastern Europe which revolved around a cruise down the River Danube from Vienna to the Black Sea. There were many highlights in our journey through countries which are still recovering from the devastating effects of communism and the earlier Turkish occupation of the region. But the most memorable highlight was a visit to the city of Veliko Tarnovo, the ancient capital of Bulgaria, a beautiful place steeped in history and a flashpoint in the conflict between Islam and Orthodox Christianity. There we visited the medieval church of St Peter and Paul which has been kept in working order since the beginning of the thirteenth century. It contains some lovely frescos of these apostles and other local saints. They survived the long Turkish occupation of the city only because the eyes had been removed from their glowing faces. Yet that was barely noticeable. They still seemed to look at us with gentle compassion.

Since the superstitious Muslim conquerors feared the spiritual power of these saints, they did not destroy the frescos but sought to render them harmless. They believed that since the saints depicted in them had no eyes and could not see, they would be unable to help their fellow Christians and avenge those who had been killed in that church because they refused to renounce Christ. Yet oddly, the eyes were not restored, when the church was reconsecrated after the expulsion of the Turks. This was

done quite deliberately because Christ's apostles and their successors do not need physical eyes to see human need and deliver Christ's blessings to people in trouble; they see with their ears and bless with mouths that convey His gifts with hands upraised in benediction. Though damaged and somewhat faded, those plaster paintings still reflect the glory of Christ and call on those who visit that church to glorify Him as they receive His blessings.

Seelsorger is a journal that is dedicated to the practice of pastoral care in a desolate world that is both increasingly hostile to Christ and increasingly hungry for spiritual sustenance. As its first edition is issued with essays from Collegium, the fellows of Doxology, its purpose seems to me best summarized by those lovely fescos that were created to encourage God's people in adversity and provide a vision of His glory in ugly times. They do not just tell how God works in a hidden way through His saints here on earth; they show how He provides embodied pastoral care for His people through the ministry of the apostolic gospel, the gospel of Christ which discloses the glory of God the Father graciously through His human servants. This kind of pastoral care was modelled by Jesus in His varied, personal dealings with the people that He met, each in their particular circumstances and in keeping with their unique character. It follows no set program or method, nor is it based on any abstract theory or ideology. Instead, it is offered face to face by a pastor as Christ's representative to particular people in whatever situation they happen to be. It is incarnate, embodied care that involves the ears and the eyes, the mouth and the hands of the pastor. Its purpose is bring Christ and deliver His blessings to each person or group of people. He uses the

human face of the pastor to show His disciples how He hears and sees, addresses and blesses them.

Pastoral care depends on a special sort of hearing, the exercise of a hearing heart. Proverbs 20:10 reminds us that even though we have only one face and only one mouth, God has given us a pair of ears. Two ears are needed for the provision of pastoral care. We do not provide pastoral care for people routinely with a set spiel, a predetermined procedure which governs what we say and do. Instead of that, we meet with people to hear what they have to say even when much is left unsaid, so that we can respond appropriately to them as agents of Christ and ministers of God's grace. Yet it is not enough for us to listen actively, attentively, and empathetically to what they say and allude to. We need to fix one ear on them and the other on what God is saying to us and them there and then. We do this by hearing what they say in the light of God's word and praying for them and us as we are guided by the Holy Spirit through God's word. In practical terms this means that we pray silently as we listen and listen in order to discover what to pray for. By praying we place ourselves and them before God and rely on the direction of the Holy Spirit. We refer them to God and put ourselves at His disposal. In this way we listen to them with Christ's ears as we hear what is on their hearts and what troubles them in their conscience. We practice prayerful hearing.

Prayerful hearing results in reflective seeing, seeing with the eyes of the heart. As we listen we aim to see what they say. We listen with both ears in order to see what is otherwise hidden in the dark from human eyes; we gain insight into the hidden depths of people's hearts as well as the hidden work of God's Spirit and the evil spirit in them. We don't see everything but only what is needed to provide the help that is needed.

Proverbs 20:10 reminds us that our eyes are paired with our ears. God has given us two eyes, eyes that see what we hear with our two ears. And that from two points of view! With one eye we see what people are say and try to understand why they say what they say. We therefore need to take care that we do not impose our preconceptions on them but seek to understand them contextually within their own frame of reference. Like good historians, we discover their story, the story which shows us who they are and why they are as they are. With the other eye we try to see how Christ has been and still at work with His Spirit in their lives, even though that may be largely hidden from them. We discern that by paying attention to God's word as it applies to them there and then and interpreting their experience of life in its light from God's point of view. We help them discover the hidden glory of Christ's presence with them and His engagement with them at that stage in their journey through life. Like a lamp in a dark place, God's word shows them and us how Christ is dealing with them to bring them out of the darkness into the light of God's face.

Prayerful hearing and reflective seeing leads to appropriate speech as guided by the Holy Spirit, speech which does not usually offer instruction or advice but encouragement and help from Christ by speaking the gospel to them and blessing them in His name. Such evangelical pastoral care does not burden them by making new demands on them but delivers a gift to them, a gift from God that sustains them and helps them to take the next step on their journey through life together with Christ.

Like Doxology this journal explores how best to offer gracious pastoral care to uneasy consciences and burdened souls in an ever-changing world. It is motivated by Christ's promise to pastors that whoever receives them receives Him and whoever

receives Him receives the Father who sent Him (Matt 10:40; John 13:20). That kind of care brings both Christ and the Father to people wherever they happen to be here on earth.