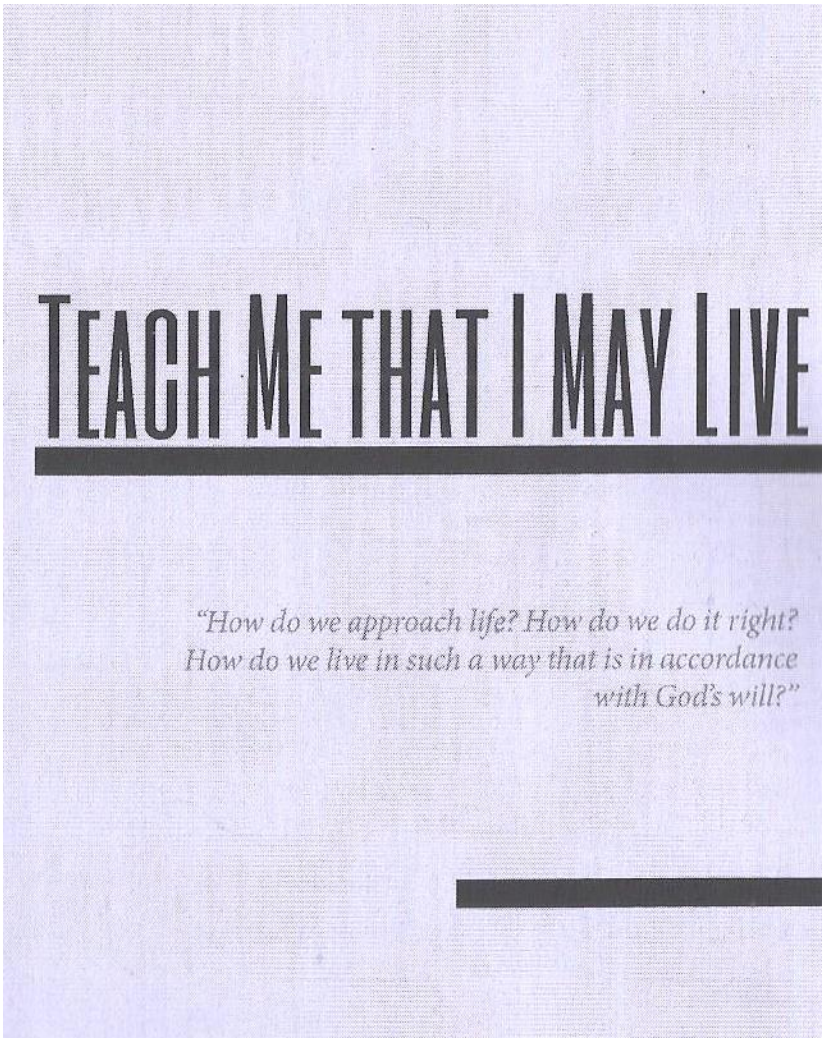
Teach Me that I may Live
Go to the ants…[1]



Meditation on Proverbs 6:1-11 by Margriet Gosker

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[1] I thank Rev. Harvey Richardson, Methodist minister in Britain, for his kind help in correcting my English.

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‘It is a matter of choosing or sharing’.

This is a Dutch proverb, used if a decision has to be made. Let’s talk here about how we make our choices. The deliberate making of good choices requires some courage, because it means that a decision is final. If you choose one option, the other options are mostly eliminated. And sometimes there are sudden consequences that you had not foreseen. This is why most of us prefer to be cautious, and protect ourselves from all kinds of risks.

We often look for a safe middle ground, a compromise. It helps if we can choose between different options, and we are glad if we can be free to decide for ourselves what we can or cannot do. Now I note that an atmosphere of non-commitment has arisen nowadays in our society. Our individualism wants to be free, but all kinds of organizations suffer a moribund existence.

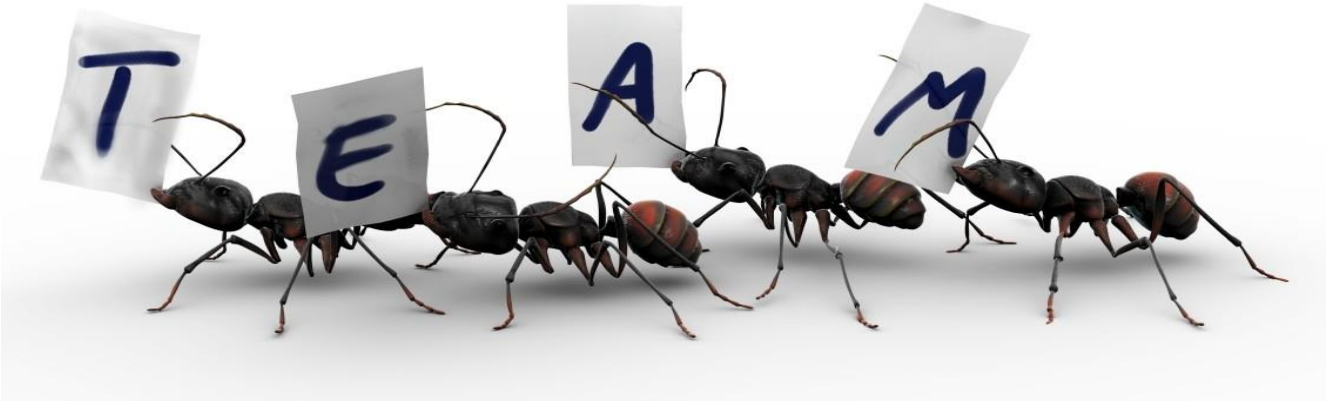
Volunteers are difficult to find. All kinds of initiatives do not get off the ground or have to be phased out, due to a lack of cooperation and involvement. ‘It’s a good idea, yes, and please let someone do it, but I do not have time for it right now. And I really have to think about myself for a while’. This is what I hear too often.

When people are stuck in fixed patterns, it does not feel good. But ‘non-binding’ is also not the best. In both cases, no real choices are made. Breaking free from rigid patterns is fine, but we should not let everything take its course, and then grumble because we do not like it. If we no longer dare to connect ourselves, things will not go well for us in the long run. Then everything will become vague and uncertain. Then there will be more and more floating voters and seekers, and fewer and fewer convinced people who really want to go for something. Therefore I say: we need convinced idealists again. No unworldly guests who know it all so well but who are going to

make the world a better place. Not that! But we do need people with commitment, with love and real involvement. Film is a mirror of reality. Films sometimes mercilessly show what is wrong and what fails us. I had the privilege of attending the 'Screen Priests and Screen Ministers' Conference in Sárospatak (Interfilm) in 2023.[2] I was really amazed. The images I see on TV in the West are all too often completely negative about everything that has to do with Church, Christianity and religion. Pastors and priests are often depicted as hypocritical, and mainly associated with sexual abuse and the abuse of power. So my expectations were not very high. But during this conference I saw positive film images of pastors who lovingly treat their fellow human beings and really show how we can radiate the love of Christ to our fellow human beings. It was almost too good to be true. I talked about it with the German journalist, Peter Paul Huth, an expert on film and cinema, who was also present at the conference, and he understood exactly what I meant. We all see with eyes influenced by our own context. We also saw images from 'The Young Pope', directed by Paolo Sorrentino (2016). The beginning of the film is a clear example of a choice (compromise) that turns into its opposite. A new pope had to be elected and it was clear that the 'papable' cardinals would all prefer to become pope themselves. But that was precisely what made them unable to reach an agreement, and therefore they were unable to make a good choice. When the white smoke rises, it appears that they have decided to opt for a compromise. A 'Young Pope' (Pius XIII) was chosen, but with that choice they ended up disappointed. They had thought that the forty-seven-year-old American would be flexible and open to change, but he actually turned out to be an arch-conservative. A fatal miscalculation. The film develops in an interesting way, but that is not my point. Instead I want to show that choosing for something (or not choosing for something) is also determined by our own context. And not every compromise always works out well, as we see in this film. I think Jesus was not interested in compromises. Jesus was not someone who constantly asked himself how to get profitable through life in the smartest and safest way. On the contrary, he was really convinced and committed to his calling. He made good choices and stuck to them, regardless of the risks. As a son of the ancient people and as a Jewish Rabbi, he was familiar with the Proverbs of Wisdom: that old book of Proverbs, which we know as a collection of all kinds of wisdom that relate to everyday life. He knew it and personally lived from that wisdom. Israel's wisdom was a very practical wisdom, and at the same time pious and full of human experiences, admonitions, warnings, comparisons, life lessons and beatitudes. Does the book of Proverbs have a central message?

[2] 'Interfilm' (founded 1955 by Protestant Film Associations in Europe) connects Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox and Jewish members, institutions as well as individuals. It promotes the dialogue between cinema/film and churches/cultures/religions. It shows the relevance of theology and religion for the world of film and cinema in an ecumenical context.

Of course it does. And I think that central message is still relevant. I see the central message of the book of Proverbs as: ‘How does a person become wise?’ And do not misunderstand it as ‘learned’ or ‘smart. Not even in the sense of some mysterious Eastern wisdom, but very practical: How do we approach life? How do we do it right? How do we live in such a way that is in accordance with Gods will?’ It is not about ‘doing as you are told’. No, it is about our own insight, knowledge, independence. It is about having the capacity and inner freedom to independently make our own decisions and make our own choices. And we may do that before God, because that is the beginning of all wisdom. Proverbs 6 shows us this in a very beautiful and recognizable way. We are all human beings before God and we must learn to make our own choices. And we should not let anything or anyone mislead us. Just keep doing what you are doing, without being distracted or discouraged by anyone or anything. But there is also a danger. Proverbs 6 talks about a dear son who always wants to be there for others. That seems to me like a good boy, with his heart in the right place, who wants to live according to God’s promises and commandments. We know such people. They are almost too good for this world. They give away their last Forints to charities and then they still want to help a friend out of trouble, who has been a bit too generous with his money. Such a person, such an unsuspecting boy, runs the risk of losing his way in this world. He runs the risk of being used or even blackmailed. Such a boy runs the risk of falling into the grasp of others, who are selfish and mainly think about their own interests. What is the good advice of the Proverbs? My son, if you become surety for someone else and you have promised that you will help that other person out of everything, be careful who you are dealing with. Because you may be honest and sincere, but before you know it, the other person has you in his grasp. He gains power over you. You give him power over you and after a while he can make or break you. Do not let it happen. Don’t give anyone else power over your own life. Free yourself from that tight grip. Take courage, approach him and set yourself free, for you are the only one who can do that. If you don’t, you will get into even more trouble. Then it’s possible you will become despondent. And at some point you will no longer feel like getting out of bed. You think: what am I doing all this for? And who knows, you might even lose your job. And then you wallow in self-pity, and that doesn’t make things any better. Things go from bad to worse, and in the end you can’t even take care of yourself anymore. Poverty becomes the trump card. So says the Proverbs poet. And it is so terribly true!! I have seen it many times in my life. Lovely people who completely collapse because they have been too trusting and have given up control of their own lives. Among the homeless there are many such sweet people who can no longer manage on their own. So the message is: take it all into your own hands and take responsibility for your own life. You have to do it yourself; no one else will.



Look at the ants, you fool, says the Proverbs poet. You miss your opportunities and get discouraged far too quickly. Watch the ants, you loafer, you who are afraid to make a choice and therefore leave everything behind. Don't think: 'Let it go'. Don't stay in bed, come on! Stand up. Come out and tackle it. Look at the ants, see what they do and become wise. Go and look at an anthill for a while. What do you see? At first glance you see a lot of wriggling of all those hymenopterans. But if you take a closer look, you see how all those creatures work together with a tireless commitment to the entire ant society. What a perfect collaboration. Every animal knows exactly what to do. They carry, carry, pass on, store, they make corridors and rooms, they stockpile winter supplies and everything is done very orderly and efficiently. That observation is so important, says the Proverbs poet. It shows you cannot simply solve things by running away from problems. There is no other option than to tackle and solve them. I started this meditation with the Dutch Proverb: 'Het is kiezen of delen'. It is a matter of choosing or sharing. The idea behind it is as follows: when two parties have to divide something (for example books or items from an inheritance), one party is allowed to divide the property into two parts, and the other party is allowed to make a choice first. It means that the dividing party is forced to take the choosing party into account.

It could easily have been borrowed from Jewish wisdom. It is striking how the apostle Paul tells us exactly the same things, yet in a different way (Eph. 5: 11-15). Paul urges the Ephesians to follow the way of Jesus, which is not the path of least resistance nor the way of an easy compromise. We have to choose always the straight path before God. Following Him is not looking for easy compromises. We should choose the light and avoid the darkness. We should wake up and rise from deadly despondency, and Christ will shine on us! Faith is not letting anything go, but always trying to make the right choices for a new perspective; the coming of the Kingdom of the Lord.