

Predigt aus der Reihe „Menschen im Advent“: Last Generation 27.11.2022

A group of climate activists using biblical language and apocalyptic images disrupts the public order - to an extent where lives are at risk. Is it possible to justify their deeds from a Christian perspective? And if so, what does that mean for me – asks Karen Siebert in today's homily about the "Last Generation".

Introduction:

Two months ago, a group called *Last Generation / Letzte Generation* addressed staff members of the Catholic and Protestant Church to join their ranks.

Ups, that is me, I am a staff member of the Catholic Church. How should I react?

Who is *Last Generation*?

Let us start at the beginning:

Who is *Last Generation*?

They are a group of climate activists. They chose their name, because they see themselves as the *Last Generation* who will still have the power to stop the earth from reaching the climate tipping points.

Last Generation's goal is to put pressure on politicians so that they take up measures against climate change.

Last Generation demands for example:

- The introduction a speed limit on German motorways or
- The cancellation of debts for countries in the south.

What measures does Last Generation take to reach their goals?

They try to reach their goals by disrupting the public order until their demands are met.

There have been massive disruptions on different levels:

- The blockage especially of motor ways and busy roads by gluing themselves to the street is one example.

Only 4 days ago, they managed to enter Berlin's airport runways blocking 20 planes from taking off and landing.

- They attacked cultural goods by throwing for potato soup at works of art as done with a Monet picture in November in Potsdam.
- Or by gluing themselves to the conductor's desk in the philharmonic of Hamburg as done 4 days ago.

According to themselves, *Last Generation* is committed to the principals of "Civil Disobedience".

"Civil Disobedience" meaning,

- the breaking of the law
- in order to make people and politicians aware of their requests
- while at the same time remaining peaceful and non-violent.

Is *Last Generation* successful?

But are they able to make people and politicians aware of their requests?

Does Last Generation make people aware of their concerns / their requests?

If you follow the debate about *Last Generation*, you will find, that it mostly evolves around the legitimacy of their actions, but not around their concerns for the climate.

- Hardly in any comment does anyone mention the words "climate tipping points".
- Hardly anyone speaks about *Last Generation's* motivation: saving mankind.
- Hardly anyone (and certainly not the politicians directly addressed) speaks about debt cancellation for countries of the south or of the introduction of a speed limit on German motorways.

Has Last Generation been able to gather people behind their goals? To raise sympathy?

Whereas most Germans say that they support the goals of *Last Generation*, 86 % of people asked were of the opinion that the actions of *Last Generation* are contra productive to the protection of the climate.

This implies that *Last Generation* missed their goal of raising awareness! They try to make people aware of something people say they are already aware of.

Even worse: the answers of the German population implies that instead of causing sympathy and support for their cause, *Last Generation* rather puts people off the topic.

Or as I read in Berlin's newspaper *Tagesspiegel* the other day: "This end of the world atmosphere is not going to motivate anyone."

Are they peaceful and non-violent?

Are they peaceful and non-violent?

Although *Last Generation* has not directly attacked or harmed people and not permanently damaged any goods, at least in the minds of many people their peacefulness and non-violent stand are open to debate. Reactions to their activities have been mostly negative.

They have been called anarchists, vandalisers or even bio-terrorists, implying that their actions have – or soon will become – acts of terrorism.

This thinking seems to be especially prominent with the Bavarian government who put members of the *Last Generation* into prison for 30 days without being sentenced calling it a prevention method. (They were released yesterday by the way).

The debate about how peaceful and non-violent *Last Generation's* actions are, became even more virulent last month, when a cyclist in Berlin was trapped under a lorry in a traffic accident.

The rescue vehicle was stuck in a traffic jam due to *Last Generation's* street blockage.

The cyclist died several days later in hospital. Although the cyclist could probably not have been saved anyway, for many politicians and media the culprits are *Last Generation*.

Reading *Last Generation* from a Christian perspective.

All I just said, tells me not to join *Last Generation* and their activities.

I could easily deny their claim for me to join their ranks, answering from a Christian perspective:

- Christians also are morally obliged to recognise the law
- Christians are morally obliged not to endanger or hurt people
- Christians are morally obliged not to use blackmail.

But of course, this strict "No" to *Last Generation* holds the danger that I and we reply with simple answers to highly complex moral questions.

Luckily, a Christian perspective has more to offer:

Prophetic behaviour

Firstly, as a Christian, I can try to interpret the actions of *Last Generation* in a prophetic light.

Surely, *Last Generation* do not see themselves as Godsend. However, what they do is pointing loudly and drastically to the wrongs in our society and especially in our leaders.

- Like prophets, they annoy and anger people and rulers.
- Like prophets, they do not shut up in the face of power even risking to be put in prison.
- Like prophets, they don't stop talking about the deadly consequences our behaviour will have in future.

And although *Last Generation* may be off target – by drawing more attention to their activities than to their goals – they keep the public debate alive: despite other burning topics that tend to draw our attention like war, the energy crisis and inflation.

Minus Malum

Secondly: There is a theological principle that implies that under certain circumstances an evil can be tolerated in order to prevent a greater evil. This principle is called “Minus Malus” or “the lesser evil”.

Cannot the actions of *Last Generation* and their consequences be seen as the lesser evil compared to the risks to so many people's lives due to climate change?

Although every life lost is one too many, why do so many scream and shout about the death of a cyclist, but not mention the 15,000 that died of heat this summer in Europe alone? Who is responsible for their deaths?

Should we not at least – if we do not actively support the activities taking by *Last Generation* – be the voice that asks about all the other deaths, when the public and politicians point at *Last Generation* blaming them for endangering people?

Reading Last Generation in the light of today's scripture:

Thirdly, I would like to attempt to read *Last Generation* in the light of today's scripture readings:

The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give light; the stars will fall from the sky; and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.

"Catastrophes, hunger and misery will plague the earth (...). Wars will be waged for the last remaining resources (...).

For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark (...) until the flood came and took them all away.

Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

For we are the last generation that possibly can prevent the total collapse of the earth.

As you noticed, what I just recited was a mixture out of today's scripture reading and a text from *Last Generation*.

The text of the Gospel is written as if in the words of Jesus. It is more likely however, that the evangelist Matthew wanted to give a message to the early Christian community.

Directly after the death and resurrection of Jesus, his followers had been expecting his immediate return. It was therefore important to live a life according to the gospel if you wanted to receive salvation. Something that is easier done (for example leaving your home and your parents behind) when the end is immediately in sight.

But as time passed and Jesus had not yet returned, people started to behave more laxly. People maybe even have started to doubt that the end was near.

Matthew's intention was to keep people alert and watchful. He intended to remind people to lead their life in a Christian way,

- emphasising that the end would come when least expected.
- Emphasising that the consequences for those not alert would be devastating.

Matthew's intention was not to scare people, to manipulate them or to blackmail them into rightful behaviour. His words speak of his true concern for the people.

And his words speak of his absolute belief in the quickly approaching end of all times (*Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened*).

The direct comparison shows, that *Last Generation* is using biblical language and apocalyptic images as a means of expressing their honest despair and their sense of dread concerning our future.

Although there might be some amongst them who may be attention seeking, I believe that the majority of *Last Generation* are truly concerned.

I think, it is of the utmost importance to take seriously, that there are people within our society who feel that way. Instead of criticising *Last Generation* for their actions, it is necessary to ask how is it possible, that the current political climate creates a group of people who feel that all is lost unless they take to drastic measures.

It is necessary to discuss their statements and not their activities.

Giving in to blackmail is not what a politician should do. But looking at the concerns behind blackmail is their responsibility.

Hope against Hopelessness

Finally, I also take another lesson from the comparison of today's reading with *Last Generation*.

That as Christians we should keep on hoping against all hopelessness. Although Christ has not immediately returned as the early believers expected, we Christians keep on believing that all will be well in the end.

St. Paul asked us in today's reading to put aside the deeds of darkness and to put on the armour of light. Maybe this is our responsibility as Christians:

To be as alert as the bible and *Last Generation* want us to be. But at the same time to be optimistic in our outlook. To mobilise people for actions against climate change without painting the blackest picture.

Last Generation and me

So how can I reply to *Last Generation* asking me as a staff member of the Catholic Church to join their ranks?

Here it comes:

Dear Last Generation,

I am highly thankful to you, for being prophets of our time. For keeping the debate alive.

For putting a finger in the wound. I value, that you follow your conscience.

I value that you directly addressed me as a staff member of the Catholic Church, thereby forcing me to wake up from slumber and to make up my mind.

Our Apostle Paul spoke of putting on our armour of light. Having looked at your positions and activities, I come to the conclusion that you are a vital part of the world wide movement to save us and our climate.

However, you are not the right armour of light for me personally.

I need to actively search for groups, organisations and activities

- *that are aiming at winning the hearts of the majority of people.*
- *that are giving people hope that change is possible and that not all is lost.*
- *that are putting pressure on our politicians while being inspired by hope.*
- *And I will join these groups starting this Advent. Because Advent means "The beginning". And I believe that we are at the beginning. Not the end.*

Yours sincerely

Karen