

The art is to learn to see the non-freedom in freedom

Beloved person,

A teacher held up a rose. 'What do you see?' he asked. 'A flower,' said a pupil. 'That's right. But what else?' Another said: 'I see a red rose.' 'Indeed,' said the teacher. 'But there is more. Who sees it?' After a short silence it sounded: 'I see leaves, a stem and thorns.' 'Exactly,' nodded the teacher. 'A rose consists of different components. Together they form the rose. But... do you see anything else?' There was silence. Then, after a short pause, he spoke: 'Can you imagine that there is a seed in this rose? Without a seed, no rose. And that there is actually also soil in it? Without soil, no roots, no growth. And can you see that the sun and rain have nourished it? Without light, without water, no life, no flowering.' He looked around, as if he were pointing to something that cannot be seen with the eye alone. Then he said: 'You are not looking at a rose, but at an interplay of the entire universe. A rose is not a thing, but a process of coming into being, existing and passing away. The art is to learn to see the non-rose in the rose. That is where the reality of the rose lies'.¹

The art is to learn to see the non-rose in the rose...

Every year, in the Netherlands - on 4 and 5 May - we take extra time to commemorate and celebrate our freedom. You could say that we 'hold up' freedom for each other. And what then do we see?

I see *gratitude*. For what has been done *before* us and for *us*. That we may live, think, speak in freedom... That our freedom is rooted in what has been sown, cherished and preserved by others makes me grateful. Let us never take it for granted. Gratitude reminds us that freedom is not a possession, but a gift that must be received again and again.

I also see *discomfort*. Discomfort about how we, humans, can deal with our freedom, how we use it and sometimes abuse it. History teaches us - and how relevant that is - how difficult it is to *truly* live together with dignity. Dignity in the interpersonal, where obsession with power has caused untold suffering. And dignity in our dealings with the earth, where human freedom often comes at the expense of all other life.

I see *responsibility*. Freedom invites not only to receive, but also to respond. Certainly for those who believe that all life stems from one origin and that that source, that origin, can also be active in people: in attention, in care, in humanity. In this way, freedom is not an end-point, but always a beginning: a religious-humanistic invitation to loving action. Freedom therefore asks not only what we are allowed to do, but especially what we make possible; for each other, for those who come after us, for the life that transcends us.

I see *connectedness*. Because freedom does not stand alone. It gains meaning in relation to the other; to people, but also to the world that supports us. Just as a rose cannot exist without soil, sun, rain and time, so freedom cannot exist without history, community and attention. Freedom is an interplay, an interweaving of lives that make each other possible. And for that there is silence: the silence of May 4. No words, no opinions: only presence. Being silent together ... perhaps that is the purest form of connectedness.

The art is to learn to see the non-freedom in freedom. There, right there, lies the reality of freedom. What do you see?

With a warm-hearted greeting,

brother Marten van der Wal



Attention for our promise of baptism

¹ Based on a contribution by Kees Klomp, delivered during a lecture at the Centre for Religious Humanism on Thursday, April 17, 2025.

On Thursday, May 4, Sister Annemiek Floor-Schreuder will represent us all at the National Remembrance in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam and will then lay a wreath for all victims at the monument on Dam Square.