

Zacharias Mbizo: The Agnesbründl (The Agnes Well)

1. St. Stephen's Cathedral



Baptism – eternal life – resurrection of the dead: Anyone looking for the water of life in Vienna almost inevitably ends up at St. Stephen's Cathedral.

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Searching for the Undetectable

The search for the water of life turns out to be more difficult than expected. Much more difficult

Of course, "Vienna" is a more helpful place name than – for example – "behind the seven mountains, where the seven dwarfs dwell". But unfortunately, Vienna is not a village. Finding something here would require very specific instructions.

Something like: take tram no. XY to the district of ABC, walk from the market square in the direction of Brunnengasse, turn into the park at number 6 and look for a clay jug under the large weeping willow ... Without such a description, the undertaking is like looking for the famous needle in a haystack.

I can't believe I got involved in this! It's incredible that I actually travelled to Vienna! And it's incredible that I have even tried to reach the unattainable already!

The water of life ... Where can you look for it if you have no idea where it might be hidden? A bushman would probably have proceeded otherwise, a shaman would have taken a completely different path.

But for me, the most obvious chain of associations was: water of life – eternal life – resurrection of the dead. In Vienna, this almost inevitably leads to St. Stephen's Cathedral.



Inside St. Stephen's Cathedral

The atmosphere in the cathedral was anything but spiritual or shrouded in mystery. Nothing pointed to mysterious signs that could have helped me solve the unsolvable.

Instead, I was surrounded by the scent of countless tourists spreading like a viscous mass between the high walls. With their smartphone glasses in front of their eyes, they looked like an army of aliens, absorbing all the treasures of this place and leaving only empty shells behind.

Disgruntled, I drifted along in the stream of visitors. When I came close to the holy water stoup behind the entrance portal, I reflexively reached out my fingers for it, but immediately withdrew them.

A hint of rottenness seemed to emanate from the water, a kind of odour echo of the countless fingers that had left their traces in it that day. It

promised a life-shortening effect rather than the prospect of eternal life.

A feeling of shame rose in me. I was ashamed of my ridiculous intention, of my ridiculous behaviour, of the ridiculous existence in which I was trapped. My first impulse was to leave the cathedral immediately. But where should I have gone then? Outside it was cold, wet cold. Far too early, autumn had begun to poke around in the alleys with its scrawny, damp fingers.

So I sank down on a pew and blanked out for a moment what was going on around me. Behind the closed curtains of my eyes, the whispering of the onlookers gradually turned into a uniform murmur, and the murmur finally became a splashing – the splashing of a divine sea on which I was floating in the nutshell of my existence, carried by the rhythm of the tides to



the very place I was longing for in my innermost being.

The Baptism

"The baptismal font!" it suddenly flashed through my mind. "That's what I have to look for. This will bring me closer to the solution of my problems!"

I broke free from my daydreams and pulled out the old guidebook about Vienna that my mother had handed me just before I left: "It's from grandma – maybe it will be useful for you."

There was a separate chapter about St. Stephen's Cathedral in the booklet. "There it is", I murmured, reading half aloud. "St. Catherine's Chapel, located on the east side of St Stephen's Cathedral, is also the baptistery!"

Unfortunately, I lost all orientation as soon as I had rejoined the procession of onlookers. The cathedral became a labyrinth through time and space, an ever faster spinning carousel in which



the centuries flew past my eyes in a kaleidoscope of incomprehensible fragments.

When I finally arrived – without knowing how – in front of St. Catherine's Chapel, I found it locked. Through the bars of my narrowly confined existence, I looked over into that other world to which access was denied me. Almost like in real life, I thought, like in the suburban settlements, where everyone shields their private Garden of Eden from the "unauthorised" with the warning of biting dogs.

Through the iron grating, my gaze fell on the reddish shimmering baptismal font, whose rich decorations looked like a secret script in the semi-darkness of the chapel. Above it I recog-

nised a kind of wooden crown. In the dim light that broke through the church windows, it seemed to float freely in the air.

For a brief moment I was sure that this must be an embodiment of the Holy Spirit, raining down his sparks of light from up there into the baptismal font, where they would materialise into glittering drops of water – the water of life!

A penetrating scream put an end to my mystical speculations. Absent-mindedly, I turned around: A small procession led by a priest was moving straight towards me.

The siren wailing of the infant in their midst had a similar effect as the blue lights of the police on the motorway: the cathedral visitors obediently formed an alley, through which the group could



approach the chapel. Obviously, a baptism ceremony was to be celebrated here.



The priest, with a cheerful beer belly under his robe, gave me a friendly nod as he inserted his key into the lock to let the baptismal congregation in. With his jovial manner, he even reassured the little child, who might have instinctively feared being drowned.

However, precisely the rootedness in earthly matters that this servant

of God radiated made me suddenly realise the groundlessness of all my fantasies. If his head – like that of the mysterious monks in Gothic novels – had been covered by a dark hood, with a pair of piercing eyes underneath, I would probably have stayed in my castle in the air.

But as it was, in the face of a ritual that seemed more like a game, more like the faded memory of a mystery than a real initiation, I sobered up from one second to the next.

Protection Spell against Evil

What had I actually expected? That the baptised would all be anointed with eternal life? That there is a secret compartment in the baptismal font, in which the true water of life is hidden? That it only becomes such through a special refraction of the light in the baptismal chalice?

It is truly amazing what strange blossoms despair can bring forth ...

Out of inertia – and also because I was quickly wedged in a crowd of curious people – I stayed and watched the baptismal ceremony. The whole



thing had less to do with water than I – who had so far only attended my own baptism – had thought. The baptism was apparently more of a ritual to strengthen the bond with the church and to ensure adherence to the Christian faith – culminating in a triple-varied vow to "resist evil". A bold vow, I thought. How can anyone rule out serving evil with such certainty? Doesn't it happen again and again that we believe we are doing good, while in reality we are an instrument of evil? Who can claim to recognise evil in all the disguises in which it confronts us?

The Woman with a Child's Voice

A mobile phone melody, all too familiar to me, jolted me out of my philosophical flights of fancy – my mother! I ducked the indignant stares that met me and penetrated the wall of onlookers, grumbling as they cleared the way.

"Hi Mum," I whispered while walking towards the church gate.

"Oh – am I disturbing you?" she asked when she heard my subdued voice.

I cleared my throat. "No, it's just that I'm at St. Stephen's Cathedral right now."

"Oh, how nice!" she exclaimed, with a somewhat exaggerated joy that betrayed her disappointment. "So at least your stay in Vienna is not completely pointless – St. Stephen's Cathedral alone is worth the trip."

Of course, I could have corrected her and explained that I had by no means come to the cathedral out of touristic interest. On the other hand, my embarrassing appearance there had only made me realise how powerless I was. And what good would it have done my mother if I had shared this experience with her?

"How are you doing?" I asked instead. "Have you finally slept better?"

I stepped out of the dark shelter of the church into the open air. Roaring, the wave of everyday life crashed over me.

My mother sighed. "Yes, I did ... with a few interruptions, but it was all right."



"Are you taking your medication regularly?" I admonished her as the curtain of rain enclosed me ever more tightly.

"Well, actually I don't feel much pain ..." The answer ended in the unspoken question of whether I had forgotten about her situation.

"Listen," I said quickly, "it's raining pretty hard here. I'll call you back from the hotel later, okay?"

"All right, my boy," she crooned, "and dress warmly."

To think she still had such a child's voice at 75! That had always been a contradiction with my mother: her words promised protection and motherly care, while at the same time her voice radiated a childlike helplessness.

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