

Why read »The Plague«?

Text by Svantje Guinebert

Translation by Meike Bogmaier

<https://blogs.uni-bremen.de/camus4solidarity/>

In his novel *The Plague*, Camus asks what solidarity, friendship and philanthropy can mean in a time when people have to deal with a great evil. How can we succeed in seeing realistically and clearly, for example in the face of injustice and the creeping deterioration of social or climatic conditions – and at the same time be hopeful, energetic and in solidarity? What are the possibilities and ways to remain human in the face of evil and to resist both the disaster itself and the brutalization that often accompanies it? What are the disasters or evils of our time that we might be tempted to call "plague"?

Albert Camus describes in this novel published in 1947, which immediately made him famous and is still considered a classic of world literature, how a small, ordinary town is struck by the plague. Different protagonists live and reflect solidarity, friendship and revolution against evil. Thus, possibilities of charity and civil courage against physical and moral destruction are set, literarily illustrated and reflected.

In 1957 Albert Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The Nobel Prize Committee justified its award by pointing out that Camus illuminated human problems of conscience of his time with sharp-sighted seriousness. He reflected on the possible consequences of a nihilistic attitude and opposed amorality and flight into ideologies with personal commitment against contempt for humanity and resignation. At no point do we encounter a raised forefinger, but rather an invitation to look respectfully, realistically and concretely for ways and means of human dealing with evil. The novel *The Plague* was completed in the immediate post-war period. In it, Camus deals with events of the Second World War, fascism and totalitarianism, personal experiences of the siege; but the plague can stand for many things. The novel can be placed in the context of different times, it can provide explanations for the past, offer courses of action for the present or guide us for the future in dealing with each other in difficult times. In view of the political and social problems of the present day, Camus' work has gained new topicality and significance. Against the background of today's debates and events, types of confrontation and challenges of social, climatic and global challenges, *The Plague* of Albert Camus can serve as a touching and stirring instrument to rethink together whether, under what conditions, and in what ways solidarity can be researched, taught and learned today.

Camus' work has the potential to both challenge and encourage:

« What a style! What precision and elegance, economy and visionary plasticity! The fact that it is still possible in our century to unite truth and beauty, measure and vision, elegance and incorruptibility, gives us confidence in the past, comforts us in the darkness of the day and gives us hope for tomorrow.» (Walter Jens, our translation)