



JAN FIRBAS, THE MAN WHO HAD A CALLING

*Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,
I press on toward the goal to win the prize
for which God has **called** me heavenward in Christ Jesus.
(Philippians 3:13–14)¹*

It was Friday morning, 5 May 2000. Spring was in the air. On my way to the faculty at Arne Nováka St., Brno, I crossed the yard with trees in blossom and followed the pathway to the dear shabby buff building which housed the Department of English and American studies back then. I habitually went upstairs to turn left onto the long corridor with its familiar, somewhat stuffy smell and a row of high, packed bookcases and several large wooden doors leading to teachers' offices; those who have ever been there will certainly recall the same sentiment. I was heading to see the secretary to pick up some handouts left there as usual for students at the old-time pigeonhole storage. I found the secretary standing motionless by her desk. Upon my arrival, she said bluntly: "Professor Firbas has died..." At that moment, the world stopped turning for me. Professor Firbas had been ill for some time, yet the sad news caught me off guard. I was overwhelmed by feelings of bewilderment, grief and, most of all, emptiness. So, being his last diploma student, I wouldn't be able to finish my master thesis under his supervision; it only needed a few finishing touches now. Never again would I hear his soothing voice. Nor would I see his smiling, kind face. An era had come to an end.

On 25 March 2021, Jan Firbas would have turned 100 years of age. It is incredible how time flies! To mark this anniversary, I should like to share several private flashbacks related to Jan Firbas. In my *Introduction to Linguistics* course, in which one session is devoted to the Prague School and its followers, I typically conclude my introductory account of the theory of functional sentence perspective by saying that Jan Firbas's personality embodied a unique combination: firstly, he was a distinguished scholar of well-deserved fame, secondly, he was a gifted and inspiring teacher, and, thirdly, he was a humble, good man of extraordinary integrity. Much has been said about Firbas — the scholar, and Firbas — the teacher; in my rather personal, somewhat narrative and non-academic reminiscences, I intend to look at Jan Firbas as a man of faith, for I am sure it is his Christian belief that lies at the root of his exquisite scholarly, pedagogical and human qualities. Moreover, on a personal note, faith is actually what constitutes an intimate link between Firbas's research and life, and myself; since from the moment I found out Jan Firbas was a believer, faith has been a logical and inevitable prism through which I must see both his personality and his work even from today's point of view.

For Jan Firbas, faith was by no means a theoretical or superficial issue; the contrary is the case: faith was an inherent leitmotif of all his life, both private and

¹ Biblical citations are taken from the *New International Version* (www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/).

professional, a practical guideline as well as a powerful shield. What often comes to my mind, for instance, is Professor Firbas mentioning the troubles he had to face at the faculty before 1989. The point is that Firbas's scholarly merit was harshly diminished and his academic career hindered due to the Communist oppression. Many a time he had a chance to testify — “with trembling knees”, as he would say — of his firm Christian beliefs when facing political threats and moral dilemmas at the faculty. The viewpoint of eternity provided him with wondrous courage and perseverance. With regards to his research, one should be aware of the fact that it was virtually practicable to publish texts on religious discourse only with the wind of change after 1989. Needless to say, although he had earned prestige and scholarly recognition at western universities, he was only granted full professorship at his alma mater in 1990.

I personally observed a connection between Jan Firbas and Christianity for the first time in my third year of studies in the course titled *Functional Sentence Perspective*. Many texts we discussed in the classes were extracted from the Bible. I will, for example, forever cherish in my heart the way he presented the Christmas story of the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem; apart from highlighting the initial placement of rhemes in the two opening sentences as well as the corresponding prosodic features, he always spoke so dearly of the biblical message itself: “And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them” (Luke 2: 8–9). This, so to speak, pastoral recollection has become an organic part of my Christmas ever since. The study materials, including Firbas's *opus magnum* published by Cambridge University Press in 1992, also offered numerous FSP analyses of New Testament passages, often in several translation versions. As a matter of fact, being a recent convert at that time, I was absolutely engaged in those discussions and wondered whether there was a reason for Jan Firbas incorporating biblical texts into his teaching. I was soon to find out.

Thanks to Professor Firbas's elucidating classes, his genuine kindness, and egalitarian professionalism, the theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP) soon became something more than mere study material to me; gradually it was transformed in my eyes into a dear adventure worth pursuing. In my fourth year, this passion led me to the decision to write my diploma thesis in the area of FSP. The text material that I chose as a research corpus was a set of selected English translations of biblical texts. I was truly afraid of suggesting such a topic to Professor Firbas and just the idea of asking him to supervise the thesis seemed rather daring to me. Nevertheless, in the end I endeavoured to take this step. The talk in Professor Firbas's office finally exceeded my expectations. He agreed to be my supervisor as well as accepting the topic I suggested. In the months to come, I found in him an outstanding mentor. Apart from that, during our talk I finally came to understand that Professor Firbas was a Christian. In the course of his lifelong ministry in the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren in Brno he served as a youth leader, a lay pastor, a Bible teacher, and an elder. From time to time, since that day, I would enjoy rare opportunities to discuss faith and other personal matters with Professor





Firbas, be it in his office or home over my novice excursions into the realm of FSP, or, occasionally, on our way to the university cafeteria when he would ask me to keep him company.

As hinted above, in the Spring Semester 2000, I was gradually completing my master thesis. Since he had been seriously ill for some time, Professor Firbas invited me to consult my thesis on a regular basis at his home. He was always seated in his upholstered wing-back chair, surrounded by books, papers, and radiating warmth and kindness. Besides my thesis and FSP, we would speak about different topics and I could not get rid of a penetrating feeling that I was bothering him and robbing him of his precious time. He repeatedly reassured me that I should not worry and that he enjoyed our meetings. To my astonishment, instead of seeking quiet and relaxation, he — a disease-stricken old man — paradoxically kept encouraging me in my work as well as my personal life. I will always be grateful for that. Incidentally, as I learned later on, aside from his family, I was probably the last one to speak face to face to Professor Firbas; my last consultation took place about five days before he passed away.

Professor Firbas's funeral was plain and modest, yet dignified and memorable. It was held in the neo-renaissance Bethlehem Church (run by the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, Jan Firbas's home church) and the service was led by the local minister Dr Jan Pokorný, who had known Jan Firbas for decades. The nave was filled with Jan Firbas's congregation, numerous colleagues, and beloved family. I couldn't but let myself become immersed in the solemn evangelical hymns, Dvořák's moving biblical song *God is My Shepherd*, Professor Hladký's warm-hearted eulogy, and the memorial sermon based on most pertinent verse from Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me", a quintessential definition of Jan Firbas's life. Rather than hopeless and helpless mourning, the gathering was a true celebration of a fulfilled life of a faithful servant, and a powerful reminder of God's grace and glory. What a testimony to all present! I knew Jan Firbas had passed peacefully from this life to his heavenly home.

Evidently, in his teaching, in his scholarly career, in his humanness, in his hardships and in his fame, in his illness and death, Jan Firbas shared a wonderful personal testimony, be it with his students, colleagues, family or congregation. In this respect, he could readily subscribe to what Apostle Paul says in Philippians 3:13-14, "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus". I am convinced that it is this perspective of heaven that represented a precious cornerstone of Jan Firbas's life as well as his ultimate motivation in all things.

To conclude, let me say the following. Some people believe one can have either a job (to earn money and enjoy benefits) or a career (while you do a job for others, career is what you do for yourself); I believe Jan Firbas had neither a job, nor a career — he had a calling. He was called to serve as a scholar, a teacher, a colleague, a husband, a father, and, last but not least, a humble servant of God. *Forbes* once published, "Those who experience their work as a calling are most likely to feel a deep

alignment between their vocation and who they are as a person. (...) They are enthusiastic, have a sense of purpose and are willing to work harder and longer to make a contribution.”² I will never forget Jan Firbas, the man who had a calling.



Martin Adam

Department of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno
Poříčí 9, 603 00 Brno
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-9130-9983
adam@ped.muni.cz

² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/melodywilding/2018/04/23/do-you-have-a-job-career-or-calling-the-difference-matters/?sh=3c7aca2e632a>