

The crackpot in the desert

Sisters and brothers, last Sunday Caro talked about the “last bit” of the Christmas story: the magi, the star and the newborn king. And she introduced Caspar to you – one of the three wise men.

Caspar spots this extraordinary star and shares his observation with two of his friends and colleagues. And what Caro then said was: “I love the idea that they don’t call him crazy, but support his challenge...”

This is exactly the sentence that I would like to use to introduce yet another interesting person who meets Jesus: John the Baptist.

And Caro’s sentence would then sound like this: I love the idea that Jesus did not call John crazy (which many others surely did), but supported his challenge..., followed him for a bit, had himself baptised by John, and by doing so showed the people of his day that there was a closeness, a relationship between the two, that they had something in common – however different from one another they were in the end.

But let us see where it all begins... with John.

There is of course the gospel of Luke with its romantic image of Elizabeth and Mary, two mothers expecting two unusual babies under unusual conditions... so far so good.

What may these mothers, who rejoiced and danced when they were both pregnant, who dreamed and sang of a new heaven and a new earth when they met with their babies in their wombs, what may these mothers have thought a good 30 years later, when one of the by then grown men was living out in the desert and the other one followed him out there?

Could the two, Elizabeth and Mary, see that their sons followed their God-sent call? Or may they have feared that both of their sons had actually got it all wrong, and missing the whole point of who they were meant to be, were now simply spoiling it all?

I mean, - that is just not what you expect your sons to do – live in the desert and wander aimlessly through the country. John came from a family of priests, and Jesus was surely expected to take over his father’s business...

The evangelist Mark, who has no Xmas story or nativity at all, plunges us into Jesus’ grown-up life and ministry without so much as a star, a manger, angels or kings. Mark offers us an about 30 year-old Jesus who follows the crackpot John into the desert.

John wore camel’s hair and ate insects.

John talked of a saviour to come who would make all things new. John called people to confess, repent and change their lives.

And when Jesus came out there to meet up with this weird guy, he was submerged in the water, baptised by John; he comes up re-born, not as the baby in the manger, but as a fully-grown man at the very beginning of a significant life journey.

Cynthia Skripak wrote in her piece for the Peace Church Advent Readings, when she reflected for us on the first chapter of the gospel of Mark: “As much as I love the Xmas season, and the story of Jesus’ birth (which Mark has not got), Mark’s

gospel is refreshing like a clear, cold winter night. His direct, uncluttered version of the beginning of Jesus' ministry strips away all the niceties – and sometimes the clutter of Xmas – and lays bare the central message. I am here, Mark's Jesus says, because God sent me to save you. Are you coming with me or not?" And the next thing Jesus did, was gathering his first disciples...

...who followed him. Surprising in a way, because the one who asks "are you coming with me?" is a friend and follower of this crackpot in the desert. They all know John. And they may well wonder what Jesus holds in store for them. Jesus does not call John crazy, but supports his challenge and carries on with **his** mission from **where John** is standing and living out his call.

Just as the wise men understood that they would not find the newborn king in the palaces of the rich and powerful, but far from the beautiful cities out there in a stable, Jesus had understood that the beginning of his mission was not to be made among the leaders and kings, but out there in the wilderness among the crackpots and outcasts.

And seeing where the real power in life lies – the power of love – will forever change the way you look at other people, and the way you look at the world. Last Sunday Caro pointed out that we don't know how Caspar's story continued after he'd started looking at the world with changed eyes. But we do know what consequences it had for Jesus to have met the crackpot in the desert!

Jesus went to where John was – not in order to stay there and live the life that John lived. No. They were different.

John was a loner, an unconventional thinker, a radical believer and a dropout. John spent a great deal of his time fasting; he wore clothes not made by human hands, but just as nature provided them. John drank no wine, celebrated no parties and called people to change their lives and let go of all that was not according to God's will. He warned people because he thought God might take revenge...

Jesus however, loved to be among people. His time alone in the wilderness was so exceptional that the Bible speaks of it as unusual for him. Like John, Jesus was an unconventional thinker and a radical believer, yes... but he was not a dropout in terms of withdrawal from civilisation.

Some religious people of his day accused Jesus of being a glutton and a drunkard, because he enjoyed the food and wine prepared by others... He even spoke of bread made by human hands as being the bread of life.

Jesus did not only enjoy and drink wine, he even transformed water into wine when a party was in danger of ending. Jesus then, represented a new world – a world transformed. And his message was one of transformation: the son of God is in your midst, so celebrate. And the celebration he seemed to recommend at every turn was not one of an unending worship service, but one in which people lived their whole lives as one big and unending celebration... in which people loved each other and looked at each other with the eyes of a loving God.

Unlike John's, Jesus' message told people that, yes, the world is harsh and bleak, but there is reason to celebrate, because God is coming among his people as a

God of love. Love, simple love – nothing more and nothing less. No revenge, but love.

And once you've met the God of love, you simply cannot stay the same. You want to change, confess, repent, make new beginnings and work to improve the world...

And here, can you see that? – here Jesus' ideas meet with John's ideas.

Change, they both seem to say to people, change – because only through change can the world be saved!

The only difference is that when Jesus says this, he is not warning because he fears God's revenge, but because he has experienced and understood God's great love for his world.

...which doesn't necessarily and automatically make the world a better place. Oh, no. Jesus can see that clearly. And this is why he goes out into the desert to meet John. This is why he lines up with all the others and has himself baptised – washed, renewed, made clean.

Jesus stands there with all the others, including Pharisees and all the people from the Judean countryside and the city of Jerusalem.

...just everybody, if you like.

With this step Jesus puts himself next to all those who sin. He shows his solidarity with them. He does not exclude himself from what it means to be truly human. He does not distance himself. He does not think that he'd probably be so much better than all those. No.

Jesus has obviously understood that the place God is calling him to, is right in the middle of human life with its vast distance from God.

Obedying his father and following the godly call, Jesus understands where he is meant to be: the beloved son of God among the very ordinary and simple people. The son of God at the side of those who so often don't get it right. The son of God out in the middle of nowhere, where people desperately try to get things right and find a purpose in their lives. The son of God in the midst of the hopeless and homeless. The son of God to share and experience all facets of what it means to be human... to be poor, sick, outcast and desperate; to be powerless, penniless and alone...

Our text tells us the story of Jesus from Galilee, who comes to meet John, the Baptist to be baptised himself. John refuses at first – he realizes that his visitor is so much greater than he himself could ever be (...I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals...).

But Jesus insists on his baptism. That is his understanding of justice and equality, of heaven meeting earth: the son of God obeying his father in heaven and becoming a friend of ordinary men and women.

Martin Luther, the great reformer of the church, called this moment the moment when heaven was forever opened to the whole world.

And 21st century theologians with this passage love to point out Jesus' preference for the poor and ordinary. All these including the ill and restrained, the blind and oppressed were (and are) the recipients of Jesus' good news of liberation.

By walking out into the desert with all sorts of sinful people and meeting John the Baptist, Jesus expresses where he wants to belong. He has a clear preference for ordinary people on the harsh and dark side of life!

Throughout his ministry Jesus uses images in his parables in which he welcomes beggars, heals the diseased, and ate with the sort of people that earned him the reputation of being “a friend of tax collectors and sinners”.

On his (life) journey to Jerusalem the main characters of Jesus’ teaching, the objects of his miracles were the socially underprivileged and the economically deprived: Samaritans, beggars, women, widows, children, strangers and outcasts. Jesus became an outspoken advocate of these people against their oppressors. In fact, he fought two ideological battles: first, he argued that poverty was not the result of sin but of injustice. Second, Jesus deeply disagreed with the assumption that poverty is inevitable.

This was as true then as it is now. There is enough for everybody. There would be enough for every single one to live a life in fullness, if the world only learned to share equally and justly... if we only dared to share equally and justly!

In order to do so, we all need a big portion of Jesus’ spirit, and probably a bit of the craziness of that crackpot in the desert wearing only makeshift clothes and eating insects...

I am not saying that we shouldn’t dress properly and not eat good food, don’t misunderstand me. I am only suggesting that sometimes living with LESS can mean MORE...

And here we are right in the middle of the challenge Mark’s gospel wants to be to us: Jesus’ story had to start in the desert, in the wilderness, with this strange cousin preparing the way for him. Jesus story had to start with few clothes and little food, with lots of sinners and no real place to go, in order to show the world that all, really all that matters is the love of God, and a voice from heaven showing us where we belong and which path we are expected to go.

This is the background with which - in the gospel of Mark - Jesus starts calling his first disciples. And he is calling us, too: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to work for mutual understanding, to bring freedom & justice, and to stand up for the dignity for every human being... no matter how hard this is at times, and how often we think, all we do is in vain...

Sometimes, I tell myself, sometimes one needs to be a bit of a crackpot to continuously do all that – day after day, year in year out...simply believing that: the poor are blessed, and those who mourn, the meek shall inherit the earth, and those who hunger for righteousness will experience it. ...mercy will be given, and God can be seen, when his children are following their call and become peacemakers...

After the wise men had met the baby in the manger and won clarity about who Herod really was, they departed to their country by another way...

This is surely not only a description of how and on which road to travel. This sentence opens a door to imagine all sorts of roads that they may from then on have taken - a different way... God’s way, I presume.

Meeting others changes people.
Meeting God in a manger –
or his messenger in the desert –
or his son among the poor and needy...
changes people, and it changes us...

We cannot stay the same because God is with us,
and we are his sons and daughters,
who he loves.
It is **us** who God wants to be well pleased with.
Amen.

Affirmation of Faith

Christ has come to turn the world upside down,
to overthrow the present order
with a revolution of love.
Therefore we believe...
...that God hopes and works for a world
where all shall be included in the feast of life,
and that in Christ we see how costly it is
to bring that world about.
We believe that God's strategy for a new world
is to put the poorest first,
and that nothing is more important for God's people
than to bring the poor good news.
We believe that rich and poor alike
can be generous, wise and creative
because all are made in God's image,
and that all are made poorer when they are left out.
We believe that loving our neighbours
means working for justice,
so that all have a say in what happens to them.
We believe that God made the good earth
to sustain and delight us,
and that we are called to take care of it and enjoy it.
We believe that the God of all creation
is at work beyond all boundaries we set,
making common cause with all who wish to belong.

We long for a time
when the meek shall inherit the earth
and all who hunger and thirst after justice
shall be satisfied,
and we believe that, despite the persistence of evil,
now is always the time
when more good can be done
and we can make a difference.
Amen.