

Through Lent with Jesus

Sisters and brothers,
through Lent with Jesus – and what can this be like? That was my initial thought when I started reflecting on Lent on Ash Wednesday.
Who is this man born in a stable, persecuted already as a baby, loved and adored, hated and rejected? Who is he, who loved so much, cared so much, gave so much, gave all, gave himself? Who is he, praying in the garden, betrayed by a disappointed friend, left alone by those who'd promised to stay at his side?
Who is he?

And one of the things I had focussed on in these weeks of Lent, was living with Jesus, getting my life closer in line with him, and doing what I did for him. To enhance this I read a chapter or two from a book about Jesus every morning and every evening.

And what I am preaching today, is a part of what came out of my intensive reading. I did not only discover the nice and loving side of Jesus, which already asked too much of some people, but I also found out about a Jesus who disturbed and provoked people with his clarity and his criticism.

I would like to take you back to the liturgical must at the beginning of Lent: back to the story of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness.

The temptation in the wilderness seems nothing – or not much – compared to what Jesus had to suffer through in the last few days of his life.

But – looking back on this story on this 5th Sunday in Lent, just these days in the desert with their tests and trials seem to be what he needed as a preparation for all that was to follow.

Jesus' way was at no point an easy one. Right from the beginning of his active time as the "beloved son of God" there were some people in absolute favour of him, but also voices who would not speak one good word about him, thinking he was a mere nuisance and on top of this a tremendous threat to the status quo, with which they somehow had arranged themselves.

And in between those two extremes – if you like – were all those who couldn't quite understand him, who were too surprised by his words and actions as to immediately appreciate them. There were many who shook their heads in disbelief of how he lived, and wondered whether he was actually insane or out of his mind.

At the very beginning of his gospel the evangelist Mark takes time to share some thought about Jesus' family. Just shortly after Jesus must have returned from the 40 days in the desert, "Jesus went into a house and once more such a crowd collected that he and his disciples could not even have a meal (here we are again – remember this meal issue from my "come away" sermon?). When his relations heard of this, they set out to bring him back by force, for they said, he is out of his mind." (Mark 3:20).

Jesus' family was quite troubled with the path he'd decided to walk from then on. They thought, he was crazy. They may have had the impression that he was only bringing damage to his family and to himself, and perhaps they wanted to protect him.

His family may have been well-established among friends and neighbours, at good terms with the Jewish authorities, and if they kept quiet enough untroubled by the Roman occupying army.

But Jesus had decided to take John the Baptist's side. He followed a different theological tendency. One very much formed by John. Jesus travelled round the country as a preacher and miracle worker. Those he was on the journey with, had become his new family, and that did lead to conflict with his original family.

A few verses later on in Mark chapter 3 we find Jesus' relatives coming to visit yet again, this time not to bring him home, but to speak with him. "His mother and brothers arrived and standing outside, sent in a message asking for him." (Mark 3:31).

But Jesus wouldn't listen. He looked around and said, who is my mother and who are my brothers? (Mark 3:33)...

...and expresses an inner distance from his family.

More than almost anyone else, Jesus detached people from their close family ties. Two Sundays ago we had this breathtaking reading from Luke where Jesus tells a man who wanted to follow him as soon as he had buried his father, "let the dead bury their dead; you go and proclaim the kingdom of God..."

And he means well by that.

Jesus wants to give people the courage to go their own way, even if their family do not understand it, even if the best friends don't think that it is a good way.

That can cause loneliness in a life following Jesus.

And he encourages us to risk this!?

He wants to let us know that it is worth it: because his path makes us more open to the mystery of God and God's kingdom; because his path brings us closer to God; because it allows God rule in our lives more than any other way of life.

Jesus wants us to be really free to go our own way, the way he calls us to choose.

And this way is surely more important than anybody else's approval.

Following Jesus we cannot be "everybody's darling". We are called to make our own personal way in this world... go our own path and do what God tells us in our hearts; and by doing so being really true to ourselves and at the same time to God.

Jesus was (more than anywhere else in the gospel of Luke!) the divine wanderer who has come to this earth to live among us and remind us of the divine that is / or can be at work within us.

And on his way he keeps dropping in on men and women to eat and drink with them, and to celebrate with them the joy that comes about, when people accept one another and love one another because they know how absolutely unconditionally they are loved by God.

Wandering through the country Jesus looked at people in a different way. He wanted to open their eyes to the nearness of God. He enjoyed the beauty of nature and discovered God at work there, too.

"Do not worry about your life and what you have to eat..." (Matthew 6:25), he said at one point, and pointed out the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Jesus wasn't bothered about the future. He didn't carefully organise his career and make arrangements for old age...

Did he know that he wouldn't need to?

Would he have known that his way of living and loving would eventually cause so much trouble that his life would end sooner than you usually expect your life to end?

Did he know that as "a son of God", you didn't get far in life – in terms of the world's standards for success?

And could he already expect or foresee at this point that his very early death followed by the mystery and fascination of resurrection would once and for all change the world?

We don't know.

And we never will.

The only thing we can do to understand this Jesus more – especially in this time of Lent, walking towards Holy Week – is to observe him carefully, listen to his words, reconstruct his path, and read in his behaviour.

Then we find the Jesus who refuses power, who objects to competition, and who breaks the spiral of hierarchy and achievement.

Do you remember the parable of the workers in the vineyard? (Matthew 20:1-16). It upset and infuriated people at all times. Not all of them, but many... And it surely didn't make Jesus very popular among those, who had the say... nor would it let anybody today win elections with ...

Of course we all need to work and earn our living.

But nothing more and nothing less.

This is the lesson Jesus is teaching us. Jesus shows us, how simple life can be. And asks us to reflect honestly, by what standards do we live? What do we live for? How do we define ourselves?

What is the real motivation behind our work, our dedication to others, in our job, in church?

Faith as Jesus lives it, frees us from the pressure to please, to achieve, to become ever more successful, mighty and rich. It wants to enable us to let life flow, let creativity blossom and accomplish greater things – far beyond worldly things. In such freedom Jesus can befriend the unpopular of his time: the poor, the sick, the lame, the outcasts and homeless. He becomes a friend of women, allows them to come close, touches and teaches them and shows the world of his day the equality of men and women that he can see when he looks through the eyes of love and justice.

Friendship is important to Jesus. Nobody reports that more clearly than Luke. Again we find a Jesus who opposes competition and rivalry. And he emphasised such thinking with his own life and actions.

Anyone who wants to be a leader, who wants to be at the head, he says, is to serve.

"I am among you as one who serves," Jesus tells his disciples (Luke 22:27), and shows them the role that he chooses for himself among his friends. And the basis of all friendships with Jesus was their common ground with him as friends in God, in the father of them all. (John 15:15). The evangelist John expresses Jesus' great love for his friends when Jesus said: "No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13).

And this is exactly what he does – not only in the end, but all along his way through Galilee: He gives – and gives – and gives himself...

Not out of a romantic feeling. No.

But because he is so sure and confident about his call. And this call at times also includes confrontation and criticism... the urge to clarify and get things straight. Possibly again at a price that doesn't necessarily make him very popular or well-liked by many others.

One Jesus' story which clearly tells this, is the story of the cleansing of the temple.

Jesus causes upset and anger, and makes himself enemies. Shortly after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem Jesus can't hold back, but needs to handle things in the name of God, who he knows as his father. This lets him finally sink in the popularity among the religious and political leaders and finalizes his destiny. Those who had the say, only had one wish left, and that was to wipe Jesus out. Get rid of him. Once and for all. Make sure he disappears and never gets talked about again.

They managed to do the first, they managed to crucify him, to end his life on earth.

But they could not hinder people from holding onto Jesus' way of life and love and friendship and so helping resurrection come true.

However, since the resurrection story is still 2 Sundays away, let us have a closer look at the crisis in the temple.

Jesus had given offence. Hadn't told people what they wanted to hear, but rather said what God had shown him to be right.

Some saw their religious and economic interests threatened, when Jesus had had the courage to overthrow the tables of the money changers and the stands of those who sold doves in the temple, and to drive out the merchants and tradesmen (Mark 11:15-19). When the high priests and the scribes heard of this, "they sought an opportunity to put him to death" (Mark 11:18).

The resolution for his murder was then made. And it was pretty clear that once the mighty and powerful had drawn their conclusion, nothing would ever stop them from playing their cruel game. Jesus knew this well.

But instead of panicking and hiding, running away from this threat of death, he calmly carries on spending time with his friends. There is the woman who anoints him in the house of Simon in Bethany, a village close to Jerusalem. There is the last supper they celebrate together, and there is the tender Jesus who washes his disciples' feet.

Before it comes to the "worst", Jesus once more shows those who love and adore him, how to serve. Just before his capture, Jesus washes his disciples' feet.

At a Jewish party it was usual for a slave to wash the feet of the guests. Since at that time people went around barefoot or in thin leather sandals, their feet were almost always dirty. It was sensible if not really necessary to wash them upon entering a house. The washing refreshed not only the feet but the whole person. Since very few people wore sandals at that time, the feet were

often injured. The slave who washed feet, took them in his hands carefully and inspected them for wounds. Then he anointed the wounds with oil – a favourite remedy in those times.

And Jesus performs exactly this service of a slave to his disciples.

He looks after his disciples' feet.

By doing this, Jesus gives us a moral lesson. "I give you an example, so that you may do to others as I have done to you." (John 13:15).

Jesus is the model for a new kind of behaviour!

If we want to be his disciple – and why else should we be here? – we are to wash not heads and hands, but people's feet.

Because Jesus has touched us first, we are invited to bow down low, to touch the injured places and heal one another, to respect and accept that as long as we are in this world, we do get our feet dirty over and over again, and we learn that we must help each other to wash them.

If we act for each other as Jesus did just short before his death, we show that we are truly filled by his spirit and that we can refresh and renew life on earth by serving each other.

The world is
always waiting
for our touch
and our tenderness...

Please remember this in the coming weeks, as we travel on our journey through Jesus' suffering and death towards the light of his resurrection.
Amen.

Prayer

Yes, Jesus – here we are...
ready to follow your path
walk the unpopular way
here we are
ready to touch the injured places
and heal one another
here we are
to live in line with God
no matter how people react
here we are
ready to understand and forgive
jeer we are
ready to love and serve.
Amen.