

## About rule and service

Dear sisters and brothers,

several years ago I have been working in the field of diakonia . Here I encountered many colleagues who were deacons by profession. When we had larger events – just as elsewhere - the seating arrangement was important. Up there is where the boss sits. It struck me that deacons were happy to avoid sitting near the boss. The answer I found: deacons seem to know the bible better than pastors. The lower path is always the best. It is better to be humble and serve rather than rule. A question of inner attitude and – maybe a question of strategy. Deacons are apparently even more sensitive to the issue of serving and ruling than pastors use to be. And maybe all Christians are.

Service and especially humble service does not seem to be especially rewarding! In any case not in our society. On my last trip through Ethiopia, one person from our travel group had observed that many Ethiopians treated me – an old age person - with reverence and took care of my wellbeing in an almost humble way. In my innate modesty I was of course embarrassed to hear that. Nobody should serve me. Rather than I should be the one who is serving others. But somehow I could also enjoy being treated so kindly and helpfully...

For example I also feel comfortable with my Turkish hairdresser. When I have my hair cut there - and I wouldn't go anywhere else to have my hair cut! - I feel like a guest of honor. Please take a seat here in the armchair. Would you like some tea or coffee? And since I regularly go in and out there, the question no longer arises whether I would like the haircut to be shorter or longer. They know. Anyhow, nobody would recognize. And above all: I am not involved in any conversations. It is a very special event that takes place in silence. Wonderful. And then in the end: Come again! And have a wonderful day! ! The hairdresser's name is Pasha. Someone in my family whom I meet often thinks that Pasha suits me well....

About rule and service. That's what an exciting biblical text is about.

*Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus. "Teacher", they said, "we want you to do us whatever we ask. - Not exactly an expression of modesty. "Please, can you do me a favor. Fulfill all my wishes and requests...!"* The gospel according to Matthew tells the story in a somewhat different way. The mother of the two comes in. She is the one who is asking the question. Naturally she wants the best for her two sons. Mothers want that. It reminds me of a joke I heard: Two mothers meet. One of them demonstrates how wonderful her son is: (Pointing at her muscles) My son is not only good here, (pointing at her head) but also here! The other: "(Pointing at the muscles of her right arm): My son is not only good here, (pointing at the muscles of her left arm) My son is also good here!" According to FREUD it is easier for fathers to love their daughters...

The biblical background of the text: Jesus is at the beginning of his ' path of suffering', which will end with torture and death. This situation is completely misunderstood, when a dispute suddenly arises in the immediate vicinity of Jesus about who may sit next to him. When the wonderful times of the Kingdom of God have begun, then who will benefit most from the power, influence and fame of the Lord?

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. This is expressed in a very modest way. Probably the two were lucky that Peter did not spontaneously draw his sword and cut off their right ears just like he did a little bit later with the soldier who wanted to arrest Jesus.

When Jesus heard the argument, he said: You have no idea ! Can you go through hell with me? Yes, of course, Master, Rabbi! Dear friends, too presumptuous! Don't take your mouth full! - That will be found out soon.

If it was a **novel**, the beginning might go like this:

A man who has come to success and wealth learns that he has only a very short time to live. He indicates this to his family and business partners. They don't understand what he's talking about. The only thing they think about are terms like 'market share', 'profit distribution', 'profit maximization', 'takeover negotiations', 'expansion'. When the man on whom all hopes are directed, has perished miserably, chaos breaks out among his friends and partners. An abyss opens up before them. Nobody knows how it will go on.

If it was **music**, you could think of the Verdi *Requiem* of the *dies irae* sequence. A masterpiece of his musical work. About overwhelming directness and insistence. *Dies irae* - day of anger. God's final judgment with this world. *Verdi* refers to a funeral mass, which probably originated around 1200 in the context of the *Franciscan Order*. In Verdi's work, death is as omnipresent as love. The deepest and the highest experience of humankind. Between 1838 and 1840, after only two years of marriage, the composers' son, daughter and wife died. Verdi was 27 years old at that moment.

In a letter Verdi wrote to his friend: *"I think life is something very stupid. What do you do? What we gonna do? To be honest, there is only one answer, and it is humiliating and sad: nothing at all!"* Verdi dares to look into the modern abyss of nothingness without religious safety rope. There are moments of unconditional existential fright and no salvation is in sight. It is all the more astonishing that Verdi nonetheless keeps devoting himself to the Christian Event of Salvation.

*"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory. "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."*

*Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mk 10, 35-45)*

What a story! One wants to be closer to Jesus than the other. Isn't that embarrassing? Jesus faces dying and death and his disciples fight for the highest offices and the best places. Couldn't that have been left out of the Bible? The biblical testimonies of faith apparently do not hesitate to look freely behind the scenes and get closer to the truth of our human aspirations and thoughts. The people who have lived with Jesus for so long seem to be rather narrow-minded. Tunnel view. Always towards the highest bliss. Always securing the best places – even in the Kingdom of God.

The story of Jesus is not focusing on suffering. The story of Jesus is not at all about *per aspera ad astra* – through hardship to paradise. It is not a story about how a period of suffering will be rewarded after a while. Jesus does not want to be a role model in suffering, but encourages passionate followers. Jesus advocates a passionate and loving relationship with one another. What a world would it be: if we would recognize in every fellow human being a creature of God! Because all of us are created by God. We are God's creation - not less, but also not more. We are created as equals. Our brother and sister, the stranger, and also the person who awakens disgust or fear in us! All of us created by God.

Many people long for an ideal parent figure, a loving and powerful rescuer in need who can solve our problems, who can reconcile our contradictory feelings and actions and will create harmony and peace within us. Could be that the disciples were inspired by the dream that one day all our longings, all our wishes and all our requests would be fulfilled. However, Jesus is realistic. He disillusiones those who think they know him best, but only project their own wishes onto him. Jesus is concerned with a realistic perception of life as it is: "Those who are considered rulers hold

down their peoples and their authorities do violence to them." Because this describes the the real living conditions Jesus emphasizes serving as the basic human attitude. Not ruling.

Ruling was already the motto at the time of the Roman Empire with its occupation and oppression policies, which they called "peace policies". Times have been changing since then, but the basic question remains: Ruling or serving? Or to be more specific: How can I practice leadership with the attitude that I am serving even when I happen to be in a leading position? How can I keep an eye on my neighbours welfare and the common good? Maybe like it is handed down from the Prussian king *Frederick the Great* who proclaimed: *I am the first servant of my country*. However, maybe it is just a transfigured story about an absolut ruler in the times of Enlightenment, when the enlightened rationality and your own ideals were always further than you are yourself.

What it is about: It is about decency and lies. About truthfulness and blackening. About exposing and making false claims and the humble way. And how can I find and go my own way?

Jesus is not primarily looking for a change in the political balance of power under which he lived. Rather, he seeks to change the minds and the way we perceive reality. It is true that, when it comes to politics, we need regulated participation in the exercise of law and rules. We need appropriately acting authorities. Because more or less all of us tend to abuse our power. Why is that? Because of our fear to go under. And the fear that I have nothing more to say. Nothing more that I can do. And that I don't have time for a second chance.

I remember a story about a ruler who had conquered many countries. On the deathbed he asked his marshal: Tell me, what again are the names of the countries I conquered? In the end, our conquests become recurrent. Maybe we can't even experience that it was worth fighting for something. But it is always the right time and it is always worth it to stop injustice and abuse of power. To fight against the gap between rich and poor. To fight against prejudices and arrogance. To fight against misunderstanding and stupidity. The fight goes on and on.

Isn't it astonishing that in this context Jesus says to his disciples: "It is not like that among you." In grammatical terms it is an indicative sentence. It is not a 'Should be' or a 'Will be'. But wait, is this really true? In our families? In our church? So, why does Jesus speak as if it were already reality and not our wishful thinking?

In my view, Jesus anticipates what is not here and now yet, but can already be experienced. Jesus speaks of the "Kingdom of God", which is still outstanding, but can already be anticipated and felt. Isn't that true: Sometimes people are sharing with us what they have experienced: healing and liberation, reconciliation and hope and joy. Some share with us that they have been living in a world of peace and love – at least for a while. That they had found a place where they could live without fear. A place where we can relax. Maybe it is not even a specific place. And maybe it is not even a place at all - rather than a feeling. And maybe it is not even a feeling rather than a longing - for that final, harmonious state of wellbeing. A state of peace that reconciles all contradictions. A state of healing and health and salvation that soothes all wounds and removes everything that is torn in us and between us.

The Bible says: This is the place and this is the time of the Kingdom of God! Our life in God's kingdom. Surprisingly enough we can feel and touch and see it even here and now. In moments. Unfortunately only in moments – some would say "spiritual moments". Unfortunately not permanently. But as a promise: "I am with you every day of your life and forever." Amen

*And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

