

## Following Jesus – Luke 9:57-62

“The cost of discipleship” or “the cost of following Jesus”, are the headlines given to today’s gospel text.

The cost of following Jesus…

This has always been a passage I found really hard to come to terms with. Even though I also always seemed to like it… It touched my heart, it rang a bell – maybe more in my soul than in my brain.

The tension in and the seriousness of the passage have always fascinated and attracted me.

…as if my whole being sensed that however uncomfortable this text sounds when you first hear it, there was and is an enormous truth in it that goes beyond your skin. It makes you shiver, stirs you up, but you cannot let it go again…

Maybe because it holds in store pain and comfort, challenge and promise, risk and trust…

But let’s approach it from the beginning or better from before our passage begins.

We discover here that Jesus is not on an easy journey. He faces rejection, and he faces suffering and death.

We meet Jesus and his disciples on the road, journeying towards Jerusalem. And it is made quite clear that this journey is more than a fun trip to the capital, more than a short visit…

Jesus’ going up to Jerusalem is already part of his death, his resurrection and his ascension. We are told that Jesus would soon be taken up to heaven. And it becomes quite clear that the author of the Gospel and probably also the close friends around Jesus knew that his life journey would come to an earlier end than one would wish. …that the way Jesus had lived and loved so resolutely and provocatively has consequences…

The direct way from Galilee to Jerusalem led through Samaria. But most Jews avoided it. Jesus had sent messengers on ahead to a Samaritan village to get everything ready for him as he journeyed through… Did he want to

stop there for a meal? Or stay the night? We don't know. What we know is that the Samaritan village community did not want to be hospitable towards Jesus.

There was a centuries' old quarrel between the Jews and the Samaritans about where to truly worship God. But Jesus had deliberately chosen to take this direct route, as if he wanted to extend a hand of friendship to a people who were enemies.

In the story, however, not only hospitality is refused but the extended hand of reconciliation and friendship was rejected.

James and John, Jesus' first disciples and probably very close friends reacted as perhaps many of us would have: they were furious. And in their anger they suggested to call fire from heaven and destroy the village...

But Jesus "rebuked" them, says the New Testament Bible, he held them back from causing harm and made them follow him to another place, where we hope, they were made to feel more welcome.

So, having just been refused hospitality and welcome by a foreign little community, Jesus was walking along the road. His friends and followers with him... and surely also a handful of all sorts of curious people.

This is, when a man – a friend? or a stranger? – approaches him. What he says sounds almost like an attempt to comfort after the rejection...

"I will follow you wherever you go." As if to say, leave these hostile villagers behind, and turn your eyes to those who are not only willing to take you in but would also walk with you the other mile.

And here happens, what makes the story a difficult one: Jesus does not simply welcome this man and his offer. Instead he warns the man of the consequences of following him:

Jesus is homeless, and to follow Jesus wherever he goes means sharing in the homelessness of "the son of man". "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head."

One needs to ponder the consequences of discipleship when making a commitment!

The same principle applies to the next two incidents.

Following Jesus is not a task that can simply be added to a list of other tasks, like “first let me go and bury my father” or saying farewell to those at home.

The father whom the person wants to bury was not necessarily dear or even ill. What the man is saying is that he still has family obligations which he needs to complete first.

Jesus’ reply to him amounts to the fact that nothing (and not even the most important religious duty – which burying the dead in fact was in those days) should be given higher priority than following him.

Discipleship, as we discover it in these 6 verses from Luke calls for an absolute detachment from property and family. It calls for absolute and genuine devotion, then and now.

The whole text is like a warning not to follow Jesus because of the consequences this would have. Jesus has no house and asks us to be houseless, too. Jesus has no family bonds, no needs to bury the dead or say goodbye to friends and relatives, and asks us to do so, too.

“My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word…” he says some chapters earlier in the Gospel of Luke, when his family comes to see him and makes an attempt to approach and understand him.

No extra bonds for family, Jesus seems to say. “All who hear my word and do it, are my family…”

There is a harsh freedom and a disturbing restlessness coming into our lives when Jesus enters it. He brings along a clear and straight forward alternative to the safe places, the homes and nests we all so long for.

Jesus wants us to be alert, on the move, mobile, flexible, and free. But at what cost?!

When I talked to one of our church members the other day she shared with me, how much she suffered from the greed and the expectations of her family of origin back home on another continent. The very family she had run away from to save her life, health and dignity, was now expecting her to share the little support she gets here in Germany with them.

Here Jesus' words about the dead burying their own dead, and the hands at the plough would probably be helpful and allow some liberating distance and healing freedom from a tradition and a culture that can literally hold us in its claws.

When we are desperately looking for a safe place and creating a home for our children, and still have to move from one place to another as many of the asylum seekers in this church do, these words about Jesus' homelessness may be of some comfort. But still... How long can a man or a woman of God restlessly journey through this world? ...without a place to peacefully and safely lay down his or her head?

We cannot be totally unbound and unsheltered. We need at least a minimum of what we call home, don't we? And if it's only a temporary space that we can share with a beloved person...

...or a handful of friends who I know will always be there for me – no matter what...

...or a community which welcomes and supports without asking anything in return...

I often think, my home has never been and will never be a particular house with white walls and a tiled roof, a garden and a bank account. My home is where Reiner is.

So far so good.

This may be enough for two people who travel on the same spiritual road, have a similar calling, and the same goals in life.

But what if you have children? Responsibility for lives entrusted to you by God?

Have they not deserved a stable home, love, care and safety?

And I share a secret with you: my older son Jacob would probably say Yes to love, care and safety which shaped his personality tremendously, but he couldn't be bothered with houses or bank accounts. He once – when I was very much in doubts about whether we had neglected our kids being both pastors... - said to me: You have given us all and that is enough.

Can you imagine how relieved I was?

But back to the Bible:

have God's people not always been on the move?

Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, later his brothers, the Israelites on their way to the promised land, and later, much later in exile when they were longing to be able to go back home...

And don't we have both elements in all these stories: the desire to be at home somewhere and stay, and the restless longing to move on to a better place?

...better because of the food there, the jobs, the health care and the schools.

...better because of the democracy there, the economical situation, and the social welfare system.

...better because of religious freedom, political tolerance, and a better status for women.

...better because... - and you may add to this list as much as you like...

There are so many reasons that can call us out to move on and seek a land where we can do the work of God. But there is also always this deep human desire to find a home and be safe. We all seem to have two sides: one is adventurous and seeks the new, and the other would like to settle and rest where milk and honey flow...

And maybe none of our lives is forever taking place on one of the two sides. Nobody can forever be on the move. And nobody can always remain in one single spot. Nobody can forever be homeless and alone, and nobody can always be surrounded by family and friends. Nobody can always hold fast. And nobody can always let go.

Our lives are both: rest and risk, safety and adventure, stillness and movement.

Maybe there is an option to learn from the OT poet that there is a time for everything... a season to settle and a season to travel...

And if we take a closer look at Jesus' life, we can find both: the places where he rests and stays, and the roads on which he travels and is on the move. Following him, living according to his call, and working for the kingdom of God in this world, is probably a lifetime of deciding when to do what: stay or leave, rest or travel, risk or ensure...

Our text talks much about homelessness, freedom, and motion... but it also offers an image of stability. We find it there twice: the kingdom of God. We shall proclaim it and make sure that we are fit for it.

Nowhere to lay your head, but fit for the kingdom of God... It is like an even bigger house... a space to live, a place to stay... not earthly though but spiritually, not for good but for ever...

Whether we are foxes in holes or birds with nests, or whether we are out there on the road, the space in which it all takes place is the kingdom of God. And whether we live in houses or travel the world, there is always a space for us in the great big house of God's kingdom:

The more people live in it, the more people help building it, and the more it will grow.

And making it grow is definitely our mission as those who try to follow Jesus with hands put to the plough and not looking back.

The passage that comes after today's sermon text reports how Jesus sends out his disciples two by two, and how he tells them to bless the houses of those who they stayed with and at which they had been welcomed.

So the blessing lies not only on those who leave, but also on those who stay and open their homes to the people of God.

God bless you.

Amen.