



SIEBENQUELL

On the way to the House of the Father I:

Moving into the undiscovered land of the resurrection



»Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.

In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going.«

Thomas said to him, »Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?«

Jesus said to him, »I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also From now on you do know him and have seen him.«

Jn 14, 1-7

Whenever I read or hear this story of faith, I admire the fine and polished way Jesus plays with two beloved images of the spiritual life: the house of the Father and the way of life. Until this day these images are extraordinarily cherished. The image of the house gives us hope, because we know that God has prepared rooms for us because he wants us close to him. We are gladly seen children, who have a place with the Father who is waiting for us. When we arrive, then not as surprise guests but as feverishly anticipated children of our Father's yearning. And the image of the way grants us comfort, because we are not alone on the path. This way is not a dead end, but leads to life. And Jesus, our companion, knows the way, its twists and turns, and can help us to master the tricky stretches of life.

What perhaps recedes a little in the story, is that fact that this play of the metaphors is at the same time the rhythm of the resurrection. The resurrection plays out in our life in an exchange between the here and now (the way of life) and the future fullness of life in God (the house of the Father). Like so many tensions of the faith, this one also threatens to fall apart.

For, as with all the stories of God, there is the tendency to pick and choose and to only concentrate on or open ourselves to that which speaks to us, suits us or pleases us. After all this talk about the house of the Father, of a place in which we can live and the rooms that have been prepared for us, it is easy to overlook the actual intention of Jesus. »Let not your hearts be troubled«.

In order to avoid the troubled heart, Jesus starts by speaking about the house of the Father, Ironically, this house of many rooms often becomes the occasion for a troubled heart. For although Jesus speaks about the house, he does so in order to keep our sight free for the way.

After all, John works with two great images: The house is the metaphor for our future, for the goal of our life. And the way is the metaphor for our life. Jesus actually wants to speak about our life, because he fears that an overemphasis on the image of the house of the Father (future and goal) can lead to the fact that we are distracted from daily life. That in turn leads to a troubled heart.

When Jesus employs these two metaphors in his storytelling, he has a twofold liberation in mind. On the one hand, he wants to liberate us from the fixation on the future and the goal. This fixation on the house of the Father also comes with two side effects: Either it awakens in us a deep fear of the unknown future or it leads to a paralysing fascination with the future scenarios, which we cannot form or fashion here and now. On the other hand, Jesus wishes to liberate us from the concentration for the path (for life). That means, to be free for the tasks of daily living as well as for the joy of living.

The Fear of the Undiscovered Country of the Future

Jesus realises the danger of being fixated on the goal (the house). It is like undertaking a journey. We set out with a destination in mind, but have not prepared a reservation for an overnight stay. Because we are uncertain what will happen when we arrive, we are distracted from the journey and the way. The entire time we are consumed with worries about our arrival and about the house. We constantly, agitatedly wonder: What happens when we arrive? Will we have to stay outdoors? Will we be left out in the cold? Will we be left in the dark? Will we be left without care, subjected to the elements or even homeless?

The message of Jesus is simple. When it comes to the future, stop worrying your heads about it. You will be cared for, taken in. There is room and space for you in the house of God. »In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?« This message should liberate us from an exaggerated concern about our future for a good reason. This exaggerated concern about the future distracts us from the way, from the life that we must live here and now. The future is cared for. Now we can turn to the present.

The task of the way (of life) is not to project these questions into the future, but to pose them here and now and answer them. What happens on the way when people arrive at our doorsteps? Who has to remain outside? How many will be left out in the cold? How many will be left out in the dark? How many have to live without care and homeless?

That is why Jesus says about the house: »And you know the way to where I am going«. Concentrate on the task of living (on the way), because it leads to the house of the Father.

At the same time, we must careful never to forget that the house of the Father is the meaning and purpose of the way. Everything which the way of Jesus demands is oriented toward the house of the Father. He is the way, accompanies it, goes it before us, and shows us not only how to walk it, but why we should take it. The way of Jesus is a partnership with God for the life of the world. We humans will not redeem or transform the world alone. The salvation of the world is not a purely human-political project, but a cooperative undertaking between God and human beings, even when we occasionally forget our partner. Almost every day we bemoan the problems we have to solve. There is a lack of will, vision, strength and perseverance, and a sense of the common good. At the same time, inspiration, courage and determination are daily awoken in the most varied of people, and it is the Spirit of God who does so.

As already stated, John plays with two great images, the house and the way. »What God has joined, humans must not divide« is an essential statement: It applies to more than marriages.

A fixation on the image of the house leads to fear of the undiscovered country of the future. But it can also lead to a paralyzing fascination with the worlds that we are not yet able to form and fashion. More to this in the next column.

Erik Riechers SAC

Reinbek, April 12th, 2018