



SIEBENQUELL

Those who do not hide in the Crowd



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The encounter of Jesus with the disciples in Mark 8, 27-35 mirrors more of our type of encounter with God than we would prefer to see. This is a story about questions. The biblical stories warn us, however, that a question is only a question, when we are interested in the answer.

The story begins with a first question. »Who do the people say that I am?« Here it is important to note to whom the question is addressed, namely, to all the disciples, to everyone in the group. And when the answer comes, everyone takes part. Just as we would expect, because it is only appropriate. »John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.«

The members of the groups happily give answer, and they do so at length when the topic is what »the people« say about him. When the crowds chatter, everyone takes part. That is not that hard. »People« talk about what »people« are saying about things. It requires no personal position, no profession and no clear cut personal stance.

The story does not end here, but is continued with a second question. »But who do you say that I am?« Now the question has become personal. This is no longer a matter about what »people« are saying, but of my personal opinion, where I stand, what I believe and what my personal conviction is. Lo and behold! The enthusiastic participation of the crowd is gone and everyone cloaks himself or herself in silence. All except for one, Peter. »Peter answered him, You are the Messiah.«

After this, everything that happens to Peter is a direct consequence of this answer. That is how it was and that is how it is. Those who show their true colours have to reckon with this. And Peter has shown his true colours.

This answer is followed by fright over his own courage where he takes Jesus aside and remonstrates with him. Then there is the attempt to direct matters so that he can take a step back from that which he has already recognised and professed to be true. That leads to a confrontation that asks him what he wants to change his position when the going gets rough. Then there is a clarification of the situation and the consequences in which Peter has to rediscover his original stance. »Get behind me!« And there is a new insight. Peter stepped out of the crowd to take a position in order not to hide in the crowd. But he ended up back at the place where the talk is about what »the people« want, not what God wants.

Peter could have spared himself all of it. He only had to keep silent and stay hidden in the crowd. There I can run with the crowd, chatter with the best and the worst of them and never take a stance. In the crowd I always have plausible deniability. Since I never have to take a stance in the crowd, I can always deny everything. A crowd has neither a name, nor a face, carries no personal identification and leaves no finger prints. No one can hold me responsible, because I remain in the crowd.

When we hear the shocking words, ideas, concepts that are being trumpeted loudly and everywhere these days, then it is tempting to ask »Where did all this suddenly come from?« Let us strike the word »suddenly«. It was always there, hidden, unspoken, wrapped in silence, but always there, always present. When the mobs started chanting on the streets, it offered many a chance, in and through the crowd, to speak these things aloud. The crowd gave them cover.

Crowds never play a positive role in biblical stories, and they play no positive role in ours either. They are the image of anonymity and invisibility. As all great stories teach us, invisibility is an eternal dream of human beings, but it is never a life-giving dream. Let us be honest. If we had the power of invisibility, what would we do with it? What advantages would it give us? And then let us ask ourselves, why we would not want anyone to see what we just dreamed up.

There are lots of new clichés to describe the crowd, such as »the people of our country«, or »everyone knows and wants«, and the infamous »silent majority«. In biblical stories, life and redemption never take place in the crowd. Bartimaeus sits in the crowd and cries out for mercy. The crowd tells him to keep quiet. When he cries out all the louder, Jesus calls him to come to him and thereby calls him out of the crowd. The woman with the hemorrhages finds healing and slips back into the crowd, but Jesus immediately draws her back out, so that she does not skulk through life in search of redemption. The sinful woman, known to the whole city, has the advantage that the big city offers her cover and anonymity. But she leaves this protection and enters a room to wash Jesus feet, in which everyone knows her and sees her. She shows her true colours and states, that nothing less than her tears and her hair are enough to honour him. The Samaritan who walked with the crowd of ten lepers, leaves them behind to thank Jesus, because he does not wish to hide behind communal ingratitude and indifference.

In this story, Jesus does not call us to take a stance. He asks a question, of us all: »But who do you say that I am?« Each of us must decide how to deal with this question. For my part, I will follow Peter and step out of the crowd. I consider Jesus to be the Son of Man, and I would love to live like a son of humanity as well.

Peter left the cover of the crowd behind. When I think of the raw and vulgar language of our public discourse, the bigotry and prejudice that have become acceptable in the public square and the homicidal hatred that is openly and unabashedly stated, proclaimed and defended, then I pray that many Peters, many rocks, will step out of the crowd. To live faith and to be Church without a clear personal testimony and without a clear stance on the most important and burning questions of our time is possible, but it will bring two consequences with it. First of all, it will save us a lot of trouble. And it will convince the people around us that we are not rocks on which they can build. We will be a people on whom God cannot build a Church.

It cannot hurt to remember the biblical wisdom I stated at the start. A question is only a question, if we are interested in the answer.

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