



SIEBENQUELL

Which Stories will we tell?



SOURCE: ERIK RIECHERS KLOSTER GRAFSCHAFT 2015

While I was in Egypt this summer, I was told many Coptic legends about the flight of the Holy Family. I was astonished by the number of places in Egypt that have a story about a visit of the Holy Family during their two year exile in the land of the Nile. Until this day, a vibrant culture of pilgrimage exists in these places, unfortunately limited today by the threat of ISIS and the unstable political conditions in the country.

What I noticed over and over in these legends was the fact, that they all were stories about the blessings which flowed into this land as the people here welcomed a refugee family. I am aware that nowadays legends are quickly dismissed and ridiculed. However, legends should be taken seriously, for they mirror a primal experience of their first tellers. The question of the Coptic legends is not whether everything in them happened exactly in the fashion described, but rather what kind of experiences the Egyptians had with this family of refugees that made them hold them fast in their legends. I will take only two of their stories as examples.

In one legend it is recounted how Mary, exhausted and dusty from the day's journey, washed the clothes of her tiny family in the river and then wanted to hang them out to dry. The bush which offered its services bore after this day blue berries which mirrored perfectly the colour of Mary's cloak. This is a warm and wonderful story, because it recounts the experience of the faithful. When we are willing to let strangers to get close to us and to carry apart of their burden, it will rub off on us. We will be changed, transformed and beautified by it.

In another legend it is told how the child took the staff of Joseph and broke it into tiny pieces. He then stuck the pieces into the dirt and out of them grew balsam trees. In this legend a primal experience is recounted, namely, when we took in refugees, they brought new life to blossom and to flower and they left behind a new fruitfulness in our midst.

These are but two of several dozen legends which speak of springs bubbling out of deserts, wells that never run dry and bowls that never are empty after an encounter with the refugee family from Nazareth. What all these legends have in common is the deep conviction that the acceptance of and assistance for refugees brought blessing with it and that the refugees left the land and its people richer than before their arrival.

In the last months I have heard many stories about refugees of a much other kind. In front of thousands of our fellow citizens a speaker regretted that concentration camps were no longer operative in order to get rid of the refugees by this means. Hate speech has become a daily occurrence. Freely fabricated stories are circulated about rapes, the danger for German women, and even of refugees who supposedly slaughtered and ate three goats from a petting zoo. Not one of them was true.

There are also true stories about refugees that are hardly edifying. Repeatedly people want to tell me their negative experiences with refugees. They tell of shop lifting, ingratitude and arrogant attitudes. I do not doubt, even for a second, that these stories are true. Yet these stories take place every day and long before the refugee wave reached our borders. Germans shop lift. Our citizens are often aggressive and ungrateful, and some of them are arrogant in their behaviour. Some even behave in a very threatening manner, as I was able to experience as I sat in a train filled with rowdy and violent soccer fans. However, it would never occur to me to recount such episodes as my experience of »the Germans«. I would rather tell the stories of my experiences of hospitality, helpfulness and the incredible enrichment I have known through the German language and culture. It is a question as to which stories I am willing to tell. Unfortunately, we often want to tell the stories which confirm our fears and approbate our bias.

In Egypt I found it to be extraordinarily refreshing to meet people who tell ancient stories about a refugee family which tell us that they brought blessing, fruitfulness, healing, enrichment and experiences of God with them.

Let us imagine that in one hundred years time, school children open their books and the stories we left behind about refugees. Which stories will we tell?

Erik Riechers SAC

October 27, 2015, Vallendar