

My faith is

upside
down

Sometimes Jesus makes me angry



Matze Dichristin

Matthias Dichristin

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www.dichristin.de

www.meinlaufzwischenwelten.blogspot.com

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Matze Dichristin lives and works together with his wife Esther in South Africa. They have two kids and their vision is to create safe places for people living with HIV and AIDS.



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INTRODUCTION

On a Sunday some months ago I was sitting as usual in a worship service. I have to admit that I really like my church. The preaching is very challenging and this is something that matters to me.

This time the pastor encouraged us to read more in the Bible. This is something which is never wrong.

But still my thoughts were drifting away and I was remembering that we just received a new book with the heretical title “Misquoting Jesus”.

I haven't read the book yet but still I am asking myself if I should feel bad just because of the fact that we own it.

In the middle of the sermon I started to meditate about my faith, my life and all these questions that are running around in my head. And instead of feeling bad there is again this thought that I should write a book.

A book I was never planning nor thinking of in this way.

A book about some things I don't usually even dare to think of.

A book about the fact that Jesus' way of life is more than challenging to me. Many things he said were more than uncomfortable. They make me angry and leave a load of questions behind.

A book revealing that I am struggling with my faith.

A book describing my feeling that we have turned the example of Jesus upside down. We are not at all living the way he showed us to live.

A book telling the story that we as Christians do not resemble Christ with the way we are living.

A book telling the story about all the things that are turning around in my life. On the first view Jesus has left a big mess.

It is book about me. It is a book about Jesus.

I also believe that this book is going to bring a lot of comfort:

Comfort because it enables me to write things down I didn't want to say thus far.

Comfort because it speaks about thoughts and concepts that are defining anew inside me.

Comfort because it describes how close Jesus is in the middle of my questions. Even in the middle of my doubts.

This book is hopefully comforting us because it is not mincing the matters. May be there are even a few other people who feel that some of these words are right from their heart. Some people who kept the matters of their heart as secrets so far.

Some time ago I had unbelievable experiences with my personal resolution not to keep quiet about the matters of my heart. So I spoke out although I broke some taboos in the foreign culture:

I have been promoting condoms to fight HIV and AIDS in the middle of evangelical churches. And I was asking people to do the same in their congregations. Because I believe that condoms are saving lives.

I have been demanding that women must finally be treated equally to men so that the abuse of women can be stopped.

And I have been demanding that we finally need to accept the fact that we are all sinners. We are all the same – being HIV positive or not. As the Body of Christ we are all HIV positive regardless of our personal status.

And just because I think that these statements are not very provocative I'd like to state some things that are turned upside down in my own small Christian environment.

I want to speak out because people are discriminated against even in churches, people are discouraged and stigmatized and sometimes this is happening with the Bible in the hand. I want to speak out because Scriptures are often abused.

I'd like to write some uncomfortable things because I am missing some grace in our relationships. I don't want to keep it to myself any longer if I think that things are heading in the wrong direction. I don't want to be silent anymore about some things where we are not daring to take Jesus seriously.

Therefore I also believe that this book is telling stories about repentance. Repentance because we all fail the demands Jesus set.

They are high. Far above our abilities. Far above all our possibilities.

And in this failure we are together. As many other people I am also in danger of thinking better of myself than of others.

I am longing for a successful and easy life.

I like my personal wealth and most of the time I am not spending too many thoughts about the welfare of other people. Yeah, you can even be a missionary and a bad person at the very same time. WAH!

I am clinging to my personal well being. And probably this is seriously affecting the impact I am having to change this world. The task to bring the Kingdom of God down to earth.

This book contains seven chapters about things Jesus is teaching. Things we are losing, we are drifting apart from. No matter whether we call ourselves Christians or not.

We are stumbling with these teachings because Jesus is turning things upside down and this makes us feel angry, uncomfortable and insecure. And finally I need to let it out.

I am writing that I want to turn back because Jesus even mentioned that we should not be angry with him or about the things that he is saying.

With these chapters I am trying to re-discover Jesus because I feel so abandoned in this world and because this world is so lost without him.

And one chapter even says that Jesus himself felt abandoned.

He knew how it feels to be betrayed by everybody and even abandoned by God himself.

With my life and hopefully a bit with this book I want to bring God's Kingdom to this world so that the world is a little bit more filled with God.

I want to write about how challenging it is to keep my wealth small because I feel the danger of losing myself in the middle of materialism. And perhaps I will even find the strength to get rid of it one day.

I want to serve other people because that's the major example Jesus was giving to us as you will read on these pages. And you will also read that this is absolutely not in line with my ego.

But still: I want to love others and fight for their rights.

And I want to have the courage to give my life for others if needed because Jesus gave us exactly this example.

BREAK!

Now I need to stop for a moment and take a deep breathe.

I will need some comfort because this seems to become a tough book. Perhaps you should also take a deep breath and think for a moment if you want to read this book.

Breathe.

Everything needs to change.

And because I believe that everything needs to change these chapters might show some things and tell some stories of changes in me. Often it's only attitudes, a way of thinking that has changed. Still this is changing the way I act. You, as a reader are going to be part of these changes and I want to give you some space and opportunities to change, to be changed by God. And as soon as you have some friends who seem to despair in this world then share your questions with them. Every chapter will raise some questions that are going to take you out of your comfort zone. They should encourage you to think a little bit further.

I believe that we need to feel insecure as the Church.

Yesterday I received a nice e-mail from a friend.

He wishes me that my life continues to be in-between the chairs. It's not nice to sit in-between the chairs, so why is he writing that?

I agree with him that we are not having a choice if we want to take Jesus seriously. His whole life speaks about this experience and it challenges the existing systems and values in this world. As people we are shaken around because we can feel that we need to make a difference.

But this is so difficult. It seems almost impossible. It nearly breaks your personality. You can hardly stand it.

He writes:

You will feel like you are being ground between two millstones. But perhaps through this process you will become the bread for someone else.

I somehow like this picture because it describes my hope. It describes the hope that is the foundation of this book. I hope that it shakes me around or even grinds me because this is what I am experiencing and what I want to share.

And hopefully it will bear fruit, nutrition for others because we are all changing dramatically.

One last thing before it really starts:

This book is a result of a paradigm shift we are experiencing in the Church and in the society. It flows with the spirit of this age which is also my intention:

It is more important to me to be relevant for this time than being theologically correct.

The person Jesus is important to me. He fascinates and inspires me. Maybe I can even say that I love him.

At least Jesus is showing himself to me in a way that is getting really close and that is relevant to me and as far as I believe for this times we are all living in. May be he is more relevant than he was ever before.

I am more convinced than I used to be that people need Jesus.

We are the light and the salt in this world, his hand and feet. If we are not changing the World no one is doing it for us.

**Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.
(Matthew 11: 6)**

For the people who lived 2000 years ago, the life of Jesus must have been like someone hitting you right in your face. The examples in the Bible are endless and I am not willing and able to mention all of them here.

Just some that could cause us stumble even today.

His life was different. No mainstream.

Different from what we would call a safe and sound life.

He was a son of poor, unmarried people.

He became a refugee immediately after he was born.

He became a carpenter as it was common in his family.

His closest friends he chose to spend his early 30's with were bloody young and had no good reputation in the society: Fishermen and tax collector. People you usually don't want to hang around with.

Jesus was preaching that his Kingdom comes and some people treated him like a king. Like a king that enters Jerusalem on a donkey instead of a nice horse, being celebrated by the crowds.

Just a few days later he would be executed because the establishment did not like what he was preaching. No one wanted to listen longer to what he had to say.

He said that we should love our enemies and that people are more important than laws. He challenged us to share without condition, to serve others and to think higher of others than of ourselves.

Jesus respected the people no one wanted to respect.

Women and Children. The poor and the sick.

Criminals, prostitutes and adulterers.

He was able to respect them in a way that enabled them to change. They were healed in his presence and experienced their value as humans.

Jesus was called the friend of sinners.

We have lost this kind of value and respect in our so called post-modern society. We have lost it within the church and the society at large. No one wants to connect with the so called sinners.

But Christ knew that we are all on the same level.

We are all sinners.

Christians should therefore know better!

We are not good. We are not better than those. We will never be.

And here I am talking out of experience: I am a missionary. I work sometimes with the people at the edge of society. Many of them are suffering from AIDS. I left something behind to work in God's Kingdom and I believe that my work is meaningful. Altogether I would say that I am doing the right things right now.

I am a good guy!

Am I?

Just take a look in your daily life if you think (like I do sometimes) that you are doing the right things. You can see the failure everywhere:

I become angry easily if things are not going my way. Although my anger is silent most of the time, I am definitely not slow to anger.

I tend to be lazy.

I am impatient with my family. I am impatient with my children with those, who are closest to me.

I like others to spoil and serve me. Especially I like my wife to serve me.

I am too lazy or too good to serve. Whenever I do it, it is a burden to me.

This list is endless.

I like to spoil myself with small things and it is so difficult to share my money.

I cruise with my car polluting the environment.

Altogether the goods that I am consuming are neither fair traded, nor produced under good and safe conditions and I keep on telling myself that I can't change that as an individual.

But the answer seems so easy – so clear.

Give things up!

However cool and good a guy you might be: We are all victims of our ego, our pride and our greed. And we keep on telling ourselves that we are enjoying in a moderate way. We are hypocrites.

And Jesus causes us all to stumble because he lays his fingers in these wounds. His teaching and his life is shouting out against self centred individuals who don't care about people starving in this world.

He talks about giving instead of receiving.

He calls us to share – materialistic, spiritualistic and emotional. Jesus kept nothing for himself, although everything was in his hands.

We turned it around.

Instead of acknowledging that all belongs to God, we believe that we deserve what we have, earned with our own hands. We even think that others get what they deserve.

We believe that we have worked hard for what we have and who we are.

Big lies.

Therefore we believe that the value of people is different. There are first and second class people out there. As it used to be in India. As it used to be in South Africa's apartheid era.

We have classes in all our society – open and outspoken or behind the scenes.

Although we might agree that we all make mistakes, that we are all sinners, still there are the good and the bad ones, the hopeless and the better ones the more or less and the real bad people.

We put people in orders.

Just take a quick look at someone, think of some gossip you have heard, some talking behind people's backs. Think of all the judgments and opinions you have taken over from your family and your friends. It is difficult to overcome these attitudes. Belonging is everything.

Conformism.

Examples?

Here we go:

Outsiders are those who are not that smart or maybe even without a proper job.

Those are useless who are not strong enough to work or just to survive on their own.

We get rid of the people who say uncomfortable things; who are difficult to handle; who answer back instead of swallowing our visions. We don't appreciate criticism and different opinions. We prefer that everything runs smoothly.

So we surround ourselves with people who think in the same way we do. Thinking or even acting different has no place.

I know: We all can't agree to what I was just writing, but listening to my silent inner voice how people who think differently can exhaust me, how much I am troubled by their problems and how much they are taking of my power and my time, then I discover me fighting against my wish to have not too much contact with outsiders. These relationships are exhausting.

And again I know what I am talking about:

If a strange person enters the room I can take every bet that she or he is choosing the chair right next to me. And then she or he is starting to talk without a break or a finish line. And I can hear me sighing silently.

And what about the people who in a serious way are challenging us as Christians?

People who are divorced. Couples living together without being married.

Women who have an abortion for whatever reason.

Gays and Lesbians.

Drinking soccer fans, protesters or students who seem never to start a serious life.

Oh my gosh: None of these examples describe anything illegal. All these people are a normal part of our societies. But in the church, the Christians who claim to follow Jesus and to love him, they don't want to be seen with those people. That's so poor.

We emphasize how wrong sex before marriage is instead of talking open and honestly how much we all struggle to live a healthy, honest, faithful and fulfilled sexuality. So far there is no couple in my experience not struggling with this issue. Before or after marriage becomes less important!

We condemn divorce and are at the very same time not able to help people who have problems in their relationships. And as Christians we also struggle to work within our marriages to get counselling and to speak about our failures. Everything needs to be alright.

No room for mistakes. No room for struggle.

We would rather point the finger at others!

But Jesus teaches so differently:

The one who looks lustfully at another lady has committed adultery!

We all have done this!

We blame women who decided to have an abortion and as a whole society we neglect our responsibility for children. Children are a common responsibility and not only the result of two people having sex with each other.

Why do we have abortions?

Because in general and also as the Body of Christ we are not creating rooms for every child born, we are not giving support to every family that is struggling; we are not embracing the women who don't know how to raise the growing life in their wombs.

We point our fingers at pregnant women and we forget the responsibility of fathers and of congregations at large.

We are not giving support! We judge!

We are so sure that homosexuality is wrong and therefore we even are afraid of an open dialogue. That keeps us from getting a deeper understanding of the identity of men and women who feel differently.

We remain in the dark on this issue because we are afraid that we might break down our safe attitudes and that we might develop new values that are not according to the Bible on the first view. But can values really be according to the Bible or will they always be based on how we have learned to read the Bible within our church and family contexts.

We are afraid to embrace people who are homosexual because relationships and even inclusion in the church might change attitudes.

Things will change. This issue will change in the very same way it happened with slavery, as it starts to happen with divorce and thanks to God, it continuously happens with the equality between women and men.

Although I am aware of the fact that human trafficking and bad labour conditions (e.g. in the Far East) are the modern form of slavery and maybe will make things even worse in the 21st century.

But back to the actual verse:

Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.

Maybe Jesus does not cause us to stumble because we are simply not doing what he did. We just do not have real dialogues with the people who are outside of our peer group. We are not aware of others, not being integrated, living on the edges. We rather keep our easy going relationships. We avoid any stumbling because we are not leaving our safe terrain.

Where the importance of unity and even harmony is held high there is no room for any stumbling.

But people who don't stumble will lose their significance for the society. The Kingdom of God is struggling because we altogether lose our significance for the society. We became puppets who are playing together with the things en vogue.

We are not stumbling causing no one to stumble who has his things sorted.

That's the kind of game Jesus never played. He always challenged the establishment. He even judged the establishment to take the side of the weak and discriminated. He gave up his own privileges as God or risked his reputation as rabbi. He had nothing; he did not care about his reputation. He served the people.

My lessons learned in the past years cling to the fact that I dare to stumble with the things Jesus taught. Reading the Bible and exploring the life of Jesus sometimes challenges me so much that I get angry. It's like hitting me with a hammer on my head because I am just not doing what he did and I am busy getting the right excuses for my wrong behaviour.

And because I am doing so little of what Jesus did, people don't take my faith seriously. And because many Christians are together with me in this, because as a church we are not doing what Jesus did, society is not taking our religion seriously any more. We stand for old fashioned values, rules that are not relevant for this world, fast judgements and conservative ideas. And we just reap what we have sown over the years. We are

traditionalists, boring, full of frustration, condemn joy and we are just not from this world.

While Jesus became part of this world, he broke with traditions, had a fresh thinking and broke with religious laws and traditions.

As he was, we could also be so much more. Hopefully I will describe this in the next chapters:

We could be comforters for the lonely and the lost in this world.

Change agents who make this world better, bit by bit, step by step.

Sharers who know that all things belong to God.

Servants who are unconditionally there for others.

Lovers who give their lives for others.

Fighters who are willing to give sacrifices.

I invite us all to turn around and to become comforters, change agents, sharers, servants, lovers and fighters.

It is about me. About us. About our neighbours. About God's Kingdom.

Are you a part of this?

Are you a part of this?

Why do we struggle so much being there for others?

What makes it difficult to comfort others?

Why is it so exhausting to change things?

Why is it so difficult to share?

Why is it so difficult to serve others?

What does it mean to love and surrender?

Which sacrifices must I bring in my life?

My God, my God why have you forsaken me? (Mark 15: 34)

What a cry from Jesus, the son of God! As man he is hanging on a cross giving his life for the world, for us, for me. He feels totally abandoned. Jesus experiences how it feels to be godforsaken facing his own death. His friends have left him and even his father in heaven, seemed to have taken away his eyes.

In the midst of this forsakenness breaks his last cry:

It is finished.

Many might agree with me that this moment, the dying of God at this cross of Calvary is the central point in the Christian faith. At least it is the centre of my belief and my relationship with Jesus. Everything needs to stand the test at the cross. Everything needs to stand the test with what I experience at the cross of Christ.

And once again I am at a point where I could get angry with Jesus:

1. Why is such an awful death the centre of my faith?
2. What made this sacrifice necessary?
3. Why does God even allow the feeling of being forsaken?
4. And maybe the most difficult one: What does this all mean for my life?

1. In the centre of God's story with this world is the cross

It opposes the laws of this world: Mankind writes history with violence, war and suppression. We are used to the stories of life that are written on the backs of others. We allow what brings personal advantage. We allow what brings you further. We allow is what no one sees. And at least we are allowed to fight back when our rights are violated.

God gives up his rights, he refuses to use his power to destruct or violate.

Instead he gives the freedom to decide and offers humility and devotion. He gives the power into the hands of mankind.

His attitude peaks in the dying of Jesus at the cross. There you can find the secret of God, the climax of his story with the world:

Life matters when you are willing to lay it down.

Forgiveness works when you are not fighting to become right in the end.

Mercy reigns there where someone is fighting for someone else, where you are taking the punishment on behalf of others, where you are willing to let go and to sacrifice.

We can feel it in our hearts and the big people of these days make it obvious: Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King or Mother Theresa. You change this world when you stop fighting (violently) for your rights. People change this world by humbling themselves, being willing to suffer instead of fighting back and using their power.

Surely this must be the Son of God was the statement of one of the executioner watching the dead Jesus on the cross. What power was in this dead and destructed body? Which message lies behind this suffering, within this loneliness and this dying? A powerful message screams out of this powerless situation.

2. What makes this sacrifice necessary?

Unfortunately in this world and in the church also it is the easy way to use power. The one who wants to convince others has the good arguments. And I guess the word comes from argue. And if our arguments are not working then we use emotional or even physical power, we build alliances to be on the strong side.

Let us be honest:

We all know these moments when words no longer help and we just have to keep silent.

How often has it changed our life when someone just held us in their arms instead of criticising us?

How encouraging can a simple smile be and how destructive some well meant words?

How much power lies behind reconciliation and forgiveness compared to simple justice?

And I am writing all of this without neglecting that we all need constructive criticism and justice in our societies.

But can you feel it?

Can you feel how much more the cross implies than simply grace and forgiveness?

It implies to take the side of the powerless and the ones who have lost their rights. This is what God offers the world. Can you imagine to step into situations where you don't have any power anymore?

Helpless? Weak? A victim?

I believe that in this 21st century this side of the cross needs to be discovered afresh. This will bring a lot more of Jesus into this world. Consequently, people like you and me need to start to take God's yoke upon themselves. Because this yoke is easy and light.

Leaders need to discover their brokenness because it makes their hearts soft and husbands need to love their wives as Jesus loves the church and this world. They need to be willing to give their lives. Or in other words: To submit everything!

We all need to be broken and discover our weaknesses instead of pretending that everything is alright and life's just running smoothly. Women must live out their responsibilities in this world because we need more emotions, more devotion, more beauty and more decisions from the

heart. A lot is broken, because women were not allowed to be strong, although they are usual not as antisocial as men are.

The cross offers all of that: weakness, devotion, love, compassion and pain. It offers so much that it hurts.

Why do we always choose exactly the opposite and make Jesus and our faith seem ridiculous to this world? We speak about strong leadership instead of living in loving relationships. We are looking for heroes instead of supporting and suffering for each other. We even bring the economical strategies into our churches. How ridiculous is that?

We clap on the shoulders of people who have everything in order. We show how blessed we are and don't realize anymore that we refuse to bless others because we mostly think about ourselves.

3. In the centre of devotion you feel forsaken

The selfishness of people is weighing on the shoulders of Jesus on the cross. When your life is losing track then you really feel alone. It wasn't God who has left Jesus alone on the cross – how can the trinity be broken in this world changing moment? I believe it can't.

Jesus felt forsaken because this is the normal feeling when you sacrifice yourself to this ultimate extent. And you are forsaken because no one goes the road along with you.

Forsaken by everyone.

People who are willing to sacrifice will be forsaken in this world. And they might even feel forsaken by God.

Some think that Jesus felt alone in this moment because he carried all the bad things in this world, all the sin of mankind. God, the father can't therefore be present in this moment.

I don't believe that.

I believe in this moment lies a big comfort for all people. A treasure for those in trouble, those suffering and sacrificing. This is the ultimate identification of God with this world and the human race. The identification with suffering, pain and devotion. The cross is the symbol for all loneliness, for all moments when we feel forsaken in this world. The symbol, that God is in the centre of this. A paradox we are unable to sort out.

A paradox that can comfort us:

How can Jesus be forsaken, when God is changing history in this moment forever?

How can God turn away and at the same time the earth is shaking, the curtain in the temple is torn in two parts, the graves are opening and the sun is darkening?

He can't!

Jesus was wrong. God is right there. His emotions have betrayed Jesus.

4. What does this mean for my life

I need to take my cross upon my shoulders. Right into situations where I feel forsaken. Right into insecurity.

Out of the comfort zone of my church, my family, my safe environment.

Jump!

And every jump brings the danger that we might be wrong. The same way Jesus was wrong feeling forsaken by God while his presence was so strong that the earth was shaking.

Jump as high and as far as you can so that you are not sure anymore that you believe the right things. Jump until you are not sure anymore that Jesus really meant it in such a radical way.

Jump. Jump until the earth is shaking.

What do we think how these silent heroes have felt while they were dying?

Jesus. 11 of the disciples. Paul.

All of them were killed.

Mandela, Biko, Bonhoeffer or Stauffenberg.

Millions of disciples suffering in German concentration camps.

What do we think the people feel who are persecuted all around the globe? In Africa, the Middle East or in Asia. Nearly everywhere but not in our safe westernized countries. We think it is more important to hold up the right dogma.

Jump. Feeling forsaken, insecure and in danger are the emotions at the edge to eternity.

The resurrection is later. Today, right here and right now the centre is the cross.

Does this make you angry? Jump and find out what carries you.

What do you need to sacrifice?

What do you need to let go?

Who needs you to be there for him?

Where do you need to tell the truth?

Where do you need to apologize?

Where do you need to give up your rights?

Jump!

Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. (Luke 18: 25)

The Singer Todd Agnew wears on the cover of a promotional CD a long sleeve with the following message:

If it is that difficult to enter heaven when you are rich, why do we try so hard to become rich?

Reading this phrase which is paraphrasing in a nice way what Jesus is saying in this verse in the Bible the words stuck in my mouth.

Why is it so important to become rich?

Why?

Why are materialistic things so important to us? Why do we love to treat ourselves with small presents or shopping tours? Why do we hang around in malls and artificial entertainment centers? Why do we buy ourselves small treats? Why do we travel further and further in our holidays?

Why are we not satisfied until we have a new fancy cell phone? Why should the car be a little bit bigger, faster or with the highest quality interior?

Why?

Why are we never satisfied?

Are we not keen on going to heaven?

And don't get me wrong:

I don't have a problem with people who enjoy their life or people who spoil themselves from time to time. Neither do I condemn the use of communication media! I also enjoy going to restaurants or having a nice holiday from time to time.

That's not the point!

First of all I am asking myself why I suffer chronically from dissatisfaction. Why is it so easy to convince me that I need a little bit more?

Do you need something else?

Where does this evil longing for more come from? What nurtures this longing in me and what makes me find loads of arguments to justify it?

You have worked a lot in the past.

If you have this or that appliance, work is going to be more effective and convenient.

Others even have much more.

When you finally get this then you will be happy.

Now it is the time to spoil yourself.

That's how the capitalistic society works. You can't change that.

STOP! SHUT UP!

We are betraying ourselves with that. All of us know it deep in their hearts!
What makes us believe that anything can satisfy us?

Anything?

What a big lie that something could still our longing after we finally possess it.

Lie.

The contrary is the truth: it becomes worse with each thing you possess. The circle of materialism can't be stopped easily. You need more. The dissatisfaction will grow.

A new kick. We have never enough.

It is so obvious that the richest people often have the biggest debts. It is just never enough. Money is never enough. Sometimes our longing even turns into hate after we finally got something.

It is not the right thing. Not big enough, not nice enough. Not enough.

I should have spent some more money. Saved some money in the wrong moment. I should have done it properly.

More.

And if we need that much, heaven could be the wrong place for us. Maybe we are going to be disappointed with what is expected of us in eternity if we are not changing right here and right now. Maybe the wedding meal is not the luxury as we like to imagine. Maybe our imagination of heaven is a little bit wrong.

Our imagination of...

Meal.

Together.

You prepare the table.

In front of my enemies.

I have no idea how it is going to be, but I read that it might not be so luxurious, because it is difficult for rich people to be part of that. People who cling to their possessions who consider it as important to be rich do not fit together with the Kingdom of God.

And the Kingdom of God starts today.

So my advice to all of us is to start selling everything before it might be too late. As Jesus is saying: sell everything and give it to the poor.

Because this is how his Kingdom works.

All people are equal.

Money and prestige are not relevant.

We cry with those who stick to things and we laugh with those who share them. If you want to know how God's Kingdom works then you should share as much as you can and observe how you feel when you share. And if you want to know how hell is, collect as many possessions as you can and socialize with people who want more and more. People who count on their money and their prestige.

And this leads us to the story that Jesus summarizes with this phrase:

A rich young man had everything, a good reputation, status, he thinks he made everything right in his life. His life was sorted out.

Everything in order.

And Jesus unveils his attitudes. Sell everything you have if you want to be part of my Kingdom.

Everything because you and all your possessions belong to God. Your value defines in your relationship to me. Never in the things you've got.

It is not about what you can do. It is about what you are willing to leave behind.

Let go!

Don't cling to the values in this world. It does not count in my Kingdom. The one who wants to follow me needs to let go.

Why do we try so hard to become rich?

And we are not only trying in materialistic ways: It is not only about sharing what we have!

Science becomes more and more important. We learn more and more and we are keen on having certificates. Children must do their A-levels and go to university. They should be good in sports and music.

All these things are good things, but...

But?

We have lost the appreciation for the small things in life. A sense for the most important things.

The smartest child does not have a good life without having friends. A healthy life is worthless if you are dying lonely in the end. Success in the job is useless if you don't have any time left for your family and your friends.

What is it for?

Success.

Health.

Beauty.

Smartness.

Well dressed.

Alone.

Everything is in vain if there is no one to share it!

The offer in God's Kingdom is different. When Jesus invites this man to sell everything he asks him where his heart belongs.

It is an invitation to not being alone any more. Together through the storms of life.

And it is also the challenge to his church. It is about community.

Unfortunately we have messed it up. We prefer doing it like the establishment in the capitalistic systems: We build nice churches and we love well planned and styled programmes. We want to listen to perfect sermons and we forget about the stories life is telling.

We show around what we are and what we have. We give responsibility to those who have achieved a lot and at the same time we are corrupt inside: Because we have chased God out as he makes us angry with his radical statements. We keep quiet instead of confessing that we are all failing. We look in the mirror Jesus is putting in front of our faces with his challenges and we pretend to look normal.

In reality the picture is totally screwed up. In reality we are hypocrites and the world outside has seen it long time ago. We are also failing. We can't do it!

We can't sell everything. We are not sharing what we have.

We are unable to love our friends and we are far away from loving our enemies.

We worry about ourselves instead of not being worried.

We don't care about social justice.

We have all failed. And it is more than necessary to finally admit it and regain some relevance and credibility.

If we start to admit that we have failed we might start to build the Kingdom of God.

Admit it! Can you do that? It doesn't matter if you can do it or not:

Start to admit!

What are you not able to do of the things Jesus asks us to do?

What makes you sick about church?

What makes you sick about yourself?

When are you thinking of yourself in the first place?

Why are you thinking of yourself in the first place?

Why do you fail again and again in being a good person?

And don't forget: We fail all.

We are all not good. We are never good enough.

It is time to admit it.

The Kingdom of God is like yeast... (Matthew 13, 33)

SMASH!

Right into the Kingdom of God.

Yeast that works through the whole dough.

It is easy to imagine. Thrown inside, worked through with some grinding noise and then everything starts to rise.

It blows up.

Until it explodes.

This would happen if Christians and other people would stand up and stop being something they simply not are. It would explode.

If people would start to admit that they are simply not as good as they pretend to be the bomb would explode. God's Kingdom would really spread explosively in this world.

Moments where people are able to show their real identity, where they are able to admit failure. These are moments that change everything.

Moments that work through the whole dough. Moments where everyone becomes silent and there is tension in the air. Moments where the

atmosphere is turning from a masquerade into holy reality. Moments where hypocrisy leaves the room and reality can come in.

We all know these moments. We have all experienced them. It is just too seldom.

I had the privilege these days to become part of such a holy moment, where the Kingdom of God entered powerfully into this world:

I am leading a workshop on HIV and AIDS awareness. We speak about faithfulness and condoms. About the fact that both is necessary in church settings. We speak about voluntary counseling and testing and the empowerment of women because both helps to prevent the spread of this pandemic. But most of the time we speak about accepting one another instead of stigmatizing and discriminating people.

How sick this all became!

Church has become a place where we need to promote acceptance and fight discrimination. We are just not living our calling.

Well, we talk how we can be inclusive for people living with HIV and AIDS.

Us and them.

Separation.

Suddenly a pastor stands up and asks the attendees: "Have you ever seen a HIV-positive person?"

Silence.

“I am HIV-positive.”

One sentence telling such a long story:

I know how it feels to be discriminated. I know your silent questions; your eyes are checking me out, your talking and your gestures behind my back.

I know the feeling of being excluded, not being worthy or good enough because I might have done an irreversible mistake. I know how it feels to be a second class human being: still human but a little bit below all others.

Failed.

Burned.

One sentence unveiling so many lies of the mass.

As listener or now as reader you might be a really good person: We all were caught. We are caught. Caught because the truth is so bitter:

We live according to a lie. We behave as if...

We are the good ones and there are the evil ones. We want to be on the side of the good ones although we are all evil.

Us and them.

We discriminate those being apparently less perfect than we are. And as a church we have become professionals in this game of discrimination.

As the pastor continues telling his story it was like yeast in the dough. God's Kingdom was spreading in the room. No one could stop it.

More and more tears came into the eyes of the listeners, because discrimination was replaced by understanding. Condemnation had to leave and mercy entered the room. Suddenly there was only US in the room.

The story of one man led others to tell their story. Stories of suffering and mourning. Stories of insecurity, fear and the loss of hope. Stories of sick and healthy people. It did not matter any more.

We were together. Together in this. Suffering together.

That was a holy moment.

And I promised to myself that I want as many of these moments as possible in my life.

Start. Admit.

Tell your story as honestly as possible. Share your failing and don't forget to tell when you fail Jesus. God's Kingdom is going to spread until it explodes.

I fear that we have hindered the spread of God's Kingdom as a church:

Why?

Because we love to separate the world: There is right and wrong. Good and bad. Black and white. Heaven and hell. Inside or outside.

We draw clear lines.

Grey is not allowed. Questions and doubts are excluded. No room for mistakes.

Failure is therefore excluded in the church. We know what is right. We are the good ones.

God's gospel for the lost has been perverted by those who think they have understood God.

US and THEM.

And the worst is that we even abuse the words of Jesus to justify our behavior and this separation.

He once said that we are not from this world.

What he meant and lived instead of creating a separation is this:

Because you can admit failure, because you can share instead of getting more, because you can serve instead of rule, because you love your

enemies, because you are not fighting violently for your rights, because you behave different to the rules of the world, because you give your life for your friends, because of that you are not from this world.

Instead of fighting the theory of evolution fight the rule of the survival of the fittest. That would be innovative.

For sure he did not encourage us to separate from others, to judge or condemn. We are not even supposed to fight for our Christian values to show others how evil they are. By the way: What are our Christian values?

We are meant to be examples, to live instead of preaching. We should be women and men of action instead of words. Driven by mercy and not by judgment.

And this is only possible wherever we dive completely into this world. Into the dough and then work through it.

If we live like that nothing will stay the same. Everything is blowing up. It is going to be dangerous because everything might burst. And then it will spread into every corner. It will spread into the smallest hidden places of this world.

It won't be controlled anymore it will just spread.

Maybe sometimes the exploded dough is not going to show a nice picture because it will mix with the dirt, maybe it might even look like dirt. But it will spread.

Maybe sometimes the dough is not suitable for eating anymore but it will be shared. It will be a sign of community; it will get in contact with others. It will be for those who never had any contact at all. It will spread.

Unfortunately the church is scared of that.

Therefore only individuals, real followers of Jesus and his example can make a difference. Just by diving right into this world and seeking relationships with others. Seeking relationships as lost people with failure, with people full of questions, doubts and problems.

Seekers. Because we all seek God.

Open and honest. Relevant.

I am dreaming of missionaries (and I'd love to become more and more such a person) who are not scared of admitting their weaknesses so that others can feel safe and welcomed.

I am dreaming of churches where we celebrate our mistakes because we are living in an atmosphere full of grace.

I am dreaming of holy communities where sinners meet and are friends. I am so sure that the dough would grow and finally explode and spread into the darkest corners.

Could we stand that?

It starts simply with your story:

Invite people to explore your life.

Show them things that are not going smoothly in your life.

Seek friendships where nothing needs to be hidden.

And don't look for them inside your church!

I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you (John 13: 15)

Jesus showed us how to do it.

He was telling the story of God with his life. He was not telling it, he was living it. He has shown us how God is.

The one, who knows me, knows God. Seeing Jesus means seeing God.

Seeing this man, means seeing God.

Looking at the life of Jesus shows you the story God is writing with mankind.

And we need to follow his example.

To follow Jesus.

This means to follow God's example he has given to us. It means continuing the story that he writes in this world. We continue this story in doing what Jesus did.

You should see their faith in their deeds. Acting is more important than talking.

Sometimes we should better shut up!

Unfortunately this verse which is calling us to do what Jesus did is placed within a very uncomfortable story:

Jesus is busy washing the feet of his disciples. Yeah, you read it right: God is washing the feet of men. God comes to serve.

Embarrassing. Provoking. Tough.

Jesus makes us angry once more but after so many pages we are used to it, aren't we?

I don't know if you have ever washed someone's feet? I have done that with several youth groups and in some training sessions.

And it is true:

It is uncomfortable. I don't like other people to touch my feet (nor is it nice to wash the feet of other people). Feet stink. They are full of sweat and dirt. Maybe there are even rashes or blisters.

Washing right in between the toes where the dirt and the smell is, is especially intense.

And what happens next?

The person washing your feet is kneeling down before you.

Humiliating.

It feels like humiliating someone to wash your dirtiest and smelliest body parts. Although we always did this exercise voluntarily this strange feeling inside remains:

You don't have to do that for me.

I can clean my feet on my own.

And this is the point in this story: Jesus humbles himself to get right into the dirt of our personalities. God makes himself small, becoming one of us to get right into this dirty and humiliating world. God the father makes himself small in the human Jesus Christ kneeling down before us to wipe away all the dirt in our lives.

That's unbelievable. An unbelievable example and role model.

And because it is so unbelievable and it makes us incapable of being like Jesus the church has watered down the message. The church is only telling one side of the story:

If you want to follow Jesus, admit your failure and Jesus will wipe away all your sin.

This is true.

It makes you change sides. From evil to good.

This is wrong!

WRONG!

It is definitely wrong because we will never be good.

It is not about changing sides. It is about following an example. Do as I have done for you.

To follow Jesus means to step down. Kneeling down, humbling yourself. Washing other's feet. Clean the dirt in between the toes.

Go to the dark corners. To places no one wants to go.

Touch what no one wants to touch. Wash what no one wants to clean.

Right in the dirt. Into the smell.

Not once but over and over again.

In the Middle East, when Jesus lived the people walked bare feet.

Washing someone's feet was a daily routine:

Hosts would wash the feet of their guests. It was part of saying hello to each other after walking the dusty streets of Israel.

Our life is similar to these streets. The dust is everywhere. You can't get rid of it.

We are not the good ones. We will never be.

We talk bad about each other or we make stories nicer, more interesting by adding slightly to the truth. We overemphasize a small detail. We create scandals. Rumours.

We paint a nicer picture of ourselves by telling small little lies. We create stories.

Our tongue is the most dangerous weapon that exists. It hurts. It might even kill.

All these small details, wrong decisions that we make is like dust in the secret corners. Like the dust between our toes.

It gets there. Everyday.

We need to stop pretending that it might be different in our life. Or different in the church.

We are not the good ones.

God, who claims to be completely good showed it:

Kneel down in front of each other and serve. Humble yourself to overcome your pride. Don't try to show others how good you are because it is a lie. Serving others is the only way to break the cycle of pretending.

And it breaks the pride. The pride of two persons. The pride of the servant and the served person. A small miracle.

Maybe a big one.

Peter, one of Jesus closest friends suddenly asks Jesus to wash his whole body. Feet and head because he understood: It is about doing good things, about allowing Jesus to serve you about admitting that you depend on him.

The principle of this world is broken:

Not what you deserve....

Not the poor serving the rich...

Not the powerful suppressing the weak...

Serve each other. Do as I have done.

Peter learns to let Jesus come close. Very close.

An intimate experience.

Dirt and smell comes to the light. Where we do good things to others we open the door for honesty. Where we respect and value others higher than ourselves we offer an opportunity to admit mistakes.

We enable each other to admit weakness because someone humbles himself before us. We can admit weakness because God became weak.

A serving attitude changes relationships. People we have served will treat us differently. People you have served will show you respect.

A serving attitude changes even small situations:

Opening the door for someone.

Offering a helping hand.

Share your time. Not being busy.

Offer your seat in a bus.

Not jumping the queue. Let others go first.

Let others finish what they want to say. Keep your criticism for yourself.
Shut up.

You know what I mean. You know what is difficult for you.

Why can't we just start?

Think of someone you could serve. Ask yourself how you could serve this person. And finally: just do it.
Just do it.

And because it is so difficult, think of some friends serving together. It will be even more difficult because someone might ask you: Have you done it?

Whoever acknowledges me before men... (Matthew 10: 32)

What a pressure this small verse can cause if it is quoted outside the context:

You need to testify your faith as we keep saying in our small Christian environment. Be a witness!

Talk to as many people as possible about Jesus. No matter if they are interested or not. It's all about sharing your faith.

How often have I heard the following advice: "Pray that Jesus gives you opportunities to share what you believe"!

And how much I have hated this advice. I was (maybe I am) just a coward. Or maybe God never gave the right opportunities.

Probably the truth is in between.

But it is more likely that I am just a coward.

However: I am sure that fear and pressure never leads to relaxed relationships nor does it make bold believers.

And exactly that makes me angry: We are fearful cowards instead of relaxed bold Jesus followers.

We are professionals in creating pressure and fear.

And most of the time there is no sense in doing so. Pressure to tell half true stories about your faith. To share your faith with people who have no connection to the church so far. People who might not even want to be connected to church.

Do you realize?

Is it about God, about us or about the church? Unfortunately too often it is only about us or even worse – only about the church.

But it is all about God, isn't it?

However, let me also create some pressure:

I believe this verse goes together with the challenge to do as Jesus has done! We must follow his example. Follow his example means acknowledging him!

And by the way: This verse is in the middle of the gospel of Matthew where Jesus warns us that we are not going to have many friends, that we might make people angry and that he did not come into this world to bring peace but a sword.

Ouch.

Is Jesus not the peaceful guy I was thinking of?

Might acknowledging him mean far more than sharing what you believe?
More than telling people that they need forgiveness of their sins?

I believe it means much more. Much more!

And this opinion was underlined by a scene in the movie “Kite Runner” that I have seen some time ago. My idea was underlined by the role of a Muslim from Afghanistan, who is running away from his country with his son from the Russian invasion. In a truck they want to cross the border with many other people.

A soldier at a check point wants half an hour with a young lady who is trying to calm her crying baby.

It is disgusting. It makes you hold your vomit. The evil things in this world are obvious in this small scene. Power, abuse, forced sex and violence. This bitterness is the reality sometimes.

After an eternity of silence that in reality lasted only for seconds the Muslim stands up and jumps in front of the gun of this soldier.

“What happened to your dignity?”

What a question!

“There is no dignity in war times!”

What an answer!

“There is always dignity! Let us go! Leave the women alone!”

In movies there is a happy end most of the times. Another soldier comes before he can use his gun. The refugees move on and cross the border to Pakistan without any harm.

The scene is repeating many times in front of my inner eye. I have to remember this verse in the Bible and it is suddenly so clear.

Suddenly. Like someone slapping you in your face.

Acknowledging Jesus means to fight for the rights of others. Fighting for the dignity of minorities. Fighting for the rights of abused.

Someone who acknowledges Jesus gets hurt if others are violated. He can't turn a blind eye, nor a deaf ear to injustice done to others. He will stand beside the colleague who is mobbed, next to the classmate who gets beaten up and right in front of the women who gets beaten up by her husband.

Someone who acknowledges Jesus listens to the lonely and silent people in this world, shares with the poor, opens the door (and the borders of the country) to refugees because the injustice in this world breaks his heart.

Enough pressure?

I am sorry. Jesus brings the sword, not the peace.

Maybe one day you have to stand in front of a gun to prevent injustice. Maybe you need to hide persecuted minorities in your house one day. Maybe you need to quit your job one day because your company does wrong business. Maybe you just need to tell more bedtime stories to your children so that they might have a better relationship with their father.

Acknowledging Jesus is not about powerful sermons or big revivals. It starts with the things you do.

It is not as easy as we have so far pretended. Acknowledging Jesus is not about words.

Maybe I should have never written this book! It is only full of words!

It's not about possibilities where you can share your faith. It is about dangerous situations where you have to take the side of the oppressed. And I keep on praying that there might be not too many occasions in my life where I have to do that. And I pray that God will give me the strength to do the right things whenever it might happen, even if it could cost me everything.

And the Bible is full of occasions where Jesus took sides:

He saved a women caught in adultery from being stoned (which was the law in these days) by standing next to her. I believe the atmosphere was heated up. A spectacle many wanted to observe. The rights were about to be executed.

I am quite sure that easily Jesus could have been ended up stoned to death in this situation. It was dangerous!

Jesus had lunch with a tax collector, a person no one wanted to be seen with.

He was talking to a women of a foreign culture in spite of being forbidden to talk to women neither to someone from this tribe.

Jesus chased the business out of the church and preached sermons about social justice that resulted in many opposing him. People wanted to kill him.

He challenged the hypocrisy of the religious leaders because they made the life of the people with many rules so difficult. It was impossible to get close to God as an ordinary man.

They wanted to condemn Jesus because he cared for the sick or provided food on a Sabbath. According to the ancient laws all kind of work was prohibited.

Jesus did not care about these laws. Law is made for the people. Not people for the law.

Acknowledging Jesus can cost you everything. It could end in illegal but non-violent actions, could kill your status, the principles of your family.

Everything.

Maybe it might cost our lives.

That happened exactly to Jesus.

And once again this makes us angry, it causes our faith to stumble. It is impossible to acknowledge Jesus, to follow his example. It needs so much integrity, sense of justice and self denial. It is so damned difficult.

But please, for God's sake let us all try. Let us try to make this world better. Let's fight against injustice and fight for the lost in this world. Let's do everything to improve the life on this planet even if it might cost us everything.

Churches could become so full if they were full of people living in the way Jesus lived. Even if it is impossible, we could at least try.

How could you get more courageous?

Who needs you to stand next to him?

Which opinions have made you angry for a long time and you need to talk about them?

What persons do you need to fight for because they can't fight for themselves?

Who do you need to protect because he can't protect himself?

Where there is arguing and fighting you need to mediate?

Small things can make a big difference.

... whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10: 39)

It's over.

This is the last chapter.

And it is about life and death. It is about losing and finding. About gain and lost.

In other words: It's about everything. The core of faith.

Or once more in other words:

It's about the ultimate thing that makes you really angry. The challenge that is the cherry on top. So it is the ideal thought to close this book.

Our Christian faith is not as easy as we used to think. And I have to admit that it challenges me more and more. It is not easy to swallow.

It raises many questions. It's not healing every wound, sometimes it even creates new wounds.

I don't want to lose my life. I cling to the things that seemingly describe my life. I fight against the thought that my life lies not in my own hands. I hate it to be dependent. I don't like the thought that I am only partly able to make my life meaningful and important.

I want to keep what is precious to me.

For many things I have worked hard. I have earned many things. I have made many small or even big sacrifices.

I don't want to lose any of what I have accomplished. Nothing!

Once again I have to admit that I am not made for a life with this Jesus:

It is too radical. At least at this point it is too much, isn't it? That's too much!

Thanks. I am leaving!

The feelings and the deep knowledge inside me supporting the truth of this verse are very silent. But there is a glimpse of what could lie behind this secret:

True freedom is only available where you are not clinging to anything. We scratched this issue in the chapter about our possessions.

But now it is even more. It is about everything. It is about your life.

And real life is only available if you are willing to give your life. It is only worth living, where you are willing to risk it if needed.

Are you willing to risk your life?

If you want to take Jesus seriously then here is the task for your whole life:

Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

If you want to find life in the way Jesus meant, you need to give up your own life!

Let go!

A difficult thing as we know since some chapters!

As Christians, as the church, we have ruined it.

We have spoiled the message of Jesus by making it soft and we picked out a small piece.

We pretend that Jesus takes all our mistakes (our sin), wherever we are not sufficient and suddenly the new eternal life with God starts.

And although I think it is important to admit our shortcomings, it becomes a minor thing in my daily trial and error process of becoming a disciple.

My willingness to bring sacrifices is much more central.

Salvation because of deeds? (This thought is close to hell, ha ha ha!)

Perhaps.

At least I am living in this tension.

In the tension that Jesus overcomes my shortcomings, forgives my sins, that he gave his life to show grace to me and the challenge to give my own life. Give everything to follow his example.

And not out of fear that I am not good enough, but because I am learning that I am good enough to risk everything.

Not because I am afraid of eternal condemnation because I am not sufficient for Jesus but because he invited me by setting the example.

Jump. Let go. You can also do it. I did it before. I do it with you.

Do you feel the difference?

You can smell it:

Some people smell because they are afraid. Especially if they need to let something go. Sharing is impossible. And there are always perfect reasons to keep what you have.

And probably it will make you hold tight in the important moments:

We are not the last person leaving the sinking ship – far too exhausting!

We are not cleaning up after the party – too tired.

We are avoiding arguments – too challenging.

We are not giving our lives for others – too dangerous.

And you can smell the other persons:

People with high ideals who love to think about others.

Inspiring people whose companion is so nice because they would give their last shirt.

The ones you can call after a breakdown at 3 am.

The ones you can call when you desperately need money.

The ones who are not shocked that you broke up your relationship.

The ones doing the dishes while others have nice conversations.

The ones who would stand in front of you while someone attacks you.

The ones who have found their life because they can give.

I have been on both sides. Maybe life is about being on both sides. We are not the good ones. We will never be.

This is my personal truth I want to speak about and live according to. I believe Jesus invites us to bring sacrifices because he entrusts us to change everything.

I believe that I am not always willing to follow that example.

But I am willing to talk about it. To admit this shortcoming.

Hopefully I take the right decision that brings life in the meaningful situations.

Even if I might be dead afterwards.

The end: Are you willing to give everything?

You have read what I think of this Jesus. I believe in this book you get a picture of how I see Jesus and why he is important to me.

I don't think that life is always about risking everything, selling everything and being in dangerous situations.

I also have a family that is most important to me and I can't really do anything that could be dangerous to them or lead into suffering. Not even on a materialistic point of view.

But it is about my attitudes. The willingness to bring sacrifices.

And I want to increase this willingness. I believe this is a process Jesus expects from us. Although it is tough.

Are you ready for that?

Can you imagine that there is life in abundance after a learning process of sacrifices?

Can you imagine things being better if you own nothing? We will go naked to heaven!

Can you imagine being satisfied after you have given everything, after someone took everything from you? When it is all about you?

Can you imagine being everything and nothing?

Can you imagine being dead?

If you are able to imagine this (at least partly) then share it with God and someone else. You can also mention all the things you are not willing to sacrifice.

God knows it anyway. We are all failing. He knows.

And I can't promise that you might not have to let go one day. I can't even promise that it is not going to be painful.

I can't promise anything. But I hope and pray that Jesus never let's us all alone. That's what he promised.

I wanted to finish this book with a prayer. But I am not the kind of person to do that.

Instead I just invite you to pray. Talk to God. Think about him. Meditate. Try it.

Maybe something will change. Everything needs to change.