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The "scandalous" Jesus

Life without prejudices

To face the question of whether practiced homosexuality is in any case contrary to the will of God requires an attitude of a certain intellectual and spiritual openness. But already this may be considered unworthy of discussion by many Christians. Hence, it seems reasonable to me, to reach back a little in order to illuminate generally how Jesus dealt with "disreputable" people and situations.

Like all people, Christians have the need to draw an image of the world in which the roles of good and evil, right and wrong are clearly defined. Any deviations from their order they perceive as a threat. This is justified, because God's word itself draws up appropriate guidelines. But in individual life issues this attitude consciously or unconsciously can lead to a complete exclusion of differentiated view. People who once received a specific label become subject to a fixed assessment, without any investigation of their actual life and behavior at all. This process meets the classical criteria of prejudice.

For many Christians homosexuality is a sign of increased godlessness. If then someone declares homosexuals as promiscuous and incapable of relationships, as self-centered or mentally disturbed, such statements are believed without doubt or question. In the way a lot of Christians behave or talk you can recognize how naturally they assume that homosexuals do not exist within their Christian communities. Whenever they pronounce the word "gay" they do it in a way which already expresses revulsion and disgust, and they usually regard that justified or even required by the Bible. To mention homosexuality and being a Christian in the same breath seems to be unthinkable to them.

It is not clear if the New Testament tells us of Jesus' encountering a gay living person.

However, there is the interpretation that the Captain of Capernaum may have had a homosexual relationship to his servant, for whose cure he asks, because it is particularly emphasized, how dear he was to him (Luke 7:2), and the Greek word *pais* ("boy") in the text (Matthew 8:6) means not only "servant", but also the "protégé" in the classical pederastic-homosexual relationship. In fact, his actions reveal an extraordinary personal interest in his "boy" when he, as a member of the Roman occupying power asks a Jewish itinerant preacher for help.

On the other hand, the captain, who sought to maintain good relations with the Jews, probably would have wanted to hide such a relationship because of the rather negative attitude of Judaism towards homosexuality, and would not have used such a revealing term.

Eventually it remains speculative how Jesus would have behaved towards a homosexual, even under the assumption that He would have understood the biblical verses related to homosexuality to be generally binding. Therefore we only can orient ourselves by his typical way of dealing with outsiders and current moral issues of his time. At this point, the issue of whether homosexuality is a sin will be put aside for a moment for the benefit of viewing the behavior of Jesus towards people with moral problems in general.

Christianity tended and tends to draw a picture of Jesus, which takes the word

"separate from sinners" (Hebrews 7:26) too literally, and doesn't correspond to His actual way of life handed down to us and to the always amazing affinity God shows for outcasts of human society.

Many of today's evangelical churches tend to equate Christian life with the lifestyle of a conservative bourgeois middle class. They shy away from caring for social and moral outcasts. On the other hand, these churches are not attractive for such people either. This should actually be a matter of concern. Do we still follow the great Master, who so often had been among sinners, that he was called a glutton and a drunkard, and was decried as a friend of publicans and sinners and to whom those people flocked in crowds (Luke 7:34; 15:1)? Of course, Jesus came as a "doctor" to "call sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31 f), not to join their sins and to legitimate them. But His behavior demonstrates a remarkable openness to the life of such people, in which He as well participated very closely.

How do we e.g. imagine Jesus at the feast that the tax collector Matthew Levi gave for him, where besides Him many publicans and sinners were present (to the disapproval of the Pharisees). That is, people who devout Jews considered the epitome of depravity? It would be naive to assume that at such a festivity there wouldn't have been a very free party spirit "living life to the fullest". Now, did Jesus sit sour-faced on the edge, wrinkling demonstratively His nose about customs, topics of conversation and jokes? If that were the case it is inconceivable Matthew would have arranged such a festivity to honor Jesus (Luke 5: 29). Just these people, who had already been prejudged by the pious leaders of Israel, were met by Jesus in a truly unprejudiced way, namely with openness and a willingness to take them very seriously as the people they really were, and as people before God.

Jesus was much less concerned with whether his actions could provoke moral impetus, as today's Christians have become used to be, often in a very restrictive way.

Do we entirely realize, what the transformation of six large jars full of water into wine at the wedding at Cana (John 2) actually meant? Jewish wedding celebrations lasted seven days. But at the time of the narrated episode the festival probably was near to its end. Regarding the former notions of hospitality, it is hardly likely that the host of a wedding would have budgeted the wine so meagerly that it would have run out at the beginning of the celebrations. Even assuming a number of several hundred wedding guests, which is rather high for the population of this time, the equivalent of over six hundred liters of wine (in addition to the wine already consumed) is a tremendous amount. As it is written in John 2.6, each pitcher contains two to three *metretes*, and a *Metrete* corresponds to about 40 liters.

Incidentally, the transformation into wine is a cultic impurity of the water jugs, which were used for the cleansing rituals, what certainly by some people was perceived as pious frivolity. But what would happen nowadays, if a Christian at a party where all alcohol supplies were already finished would donate another 850 bottles of wine? Would he not be accused to risk recklessly and irresponsibly tempting others to an unrestrained drinking binge?

Already in Psalms 104:15 wine is described as a gift of God that "pleased the heart of man". The divine affirmation of zest for life as is expressed in the wine miracle of Jesus is free of concern and leaves anxious-moralizing ifs and buts aside. We tend to forget what a tremendous scandal many of the actions and statements of Jesus were in those times, while today they appear totally normal to us and we take them for

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granted. If today we e.g. hear the term "Samaritan", we first think of the Good Samaritan in whose honour Jesus by means of his parable erected an imperishable monument. His contemporaries combined with this term however a profoundly despised population - and with the parable a provocation beyond compare! For the Jews the Samaritans, who emerged after the Assyrian captivity as a mixed population of Jews and various other by force displaced people of the Assyrian sphere of influence, represent the incarnation of impurity, even if they worshiped Yahweh as their Lord, too. The Old Testament sharply comments on Israelites mingling with other peoples (see Deut 7.2; Neh 13:23 f.). This went so far that it allegorically even prohibited the mixing of seeds, tissues or animal breeds (Lev 19:19). The "mixed multitude" that tempted Israel to sin has always had a negative connotation in the Scripture (Num 11:4). Therefore the Jews had refused the Samaritans' participation in rebuilding Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity (Ezra 4,2f). The wording of John, the Jews "have no dealings with the Samaritans" (John 4:9) is rather an extremely cautious description of the adversarial, competing attitude between the two nations (Lk 9,52f.):

Religious Jewish feast pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem usually traveled quickly through Samaritan territory without staying overnight. Some even accepted a long detour to avoid having to pass through the "unclean" land. Jesus himself attests theological shortcomings in the faith of the Samaritans: "You worship what you do not know" (John 4:22). That is, why the above parable is so shocking, where the most pious of Jews, the priest and the Levite fail miserably, while the despised Samaritan practices real faith in love and mercy (Luke 10).

The provocation is still increased, as the action of the Samaritan is used to illustrate the highest Jewish commandment, the love to God and to others – and it even becomes a metaphor of God's mercy itself. Listeners to this parable, who were educated in scripture, would immediately have understood the parallel to Ez 16:5-9 evoking a picture of God seeing Israel lying near the road in its blood, and having mercy on it, caring for it and clothing it.

The parable of the "Good Samaritan" was at that time certainly no less offensive, as if today Jesus would tell the "parable of the Good Gay" in a theological conversation with the most pious of the pious. In this case admonishing statements that Christian doctrine has been presented in a dangerous, blurred indistinct way, showing a lack of awareness of necessary clear boundaries would be almost inevitable. But would they be justified? Because - put yourself in the context of the time of Jesus - God's son did not have these reservations at all!

When Jesus was involving the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well - a woman of dubious lifestyle - into a private conversation he was breaking with all conventions of his time. And even more, he did not fear the risk of an in these times highly compromising situation, which could provoke malicious gossip. And just this woman got a unique theological gift from Jesus. While he usually strictly prohibited his proclamation as Messiah (Mt 16,20, Mk 1,24f), he revealed himself to her as the Christ even without being explicitly asked: "It is I, who speak to you" (Jn 4:26).

Jesus' lifestyle was a far call from fulfilling the expectations commonly related to the Messiah. One of the so "disappointed" was even his God-sent precursor John the Baptist.

On the question of how a godly life should look like, John affirmed the exhortations to his listeners by saying that the soon coming Messiah already had the "winnowing fork in his hand" to separate "wheat and chaff", bad and good, among the people (Matthew 3:12).

He voiced dire social conditions and stigmatized publically e.g. the marriage scandal

of Herod the tetrarch, which finally sent him to jail. Significantly, we hardly read about similar public moral convictions made by Jesus. Instead, he sat with disreputable company at table! In fact, in the eyes of John there was such a lack of "winnowing" in Jesus' behaviour that he began to doubt whether he could be the Messiah at all. So John finally sent messengers with a relating request to Jesus. Jesus publically always confirmed the divine mission of John completely. Therefore his mild but unmistakable rebuke in response to the Baptist is astonishing: "Blessed is he, who takes no offense at me" (Luke 7:23). Instead Jesus refers explicitly to his doing good to those who are suffering as a true mark of his being the Messiah.

The Greek word used here for "taking offense" is derived from "*skandalizo*", which is the origin of our term "scandal". Perhaps the "mild" attitude Jesus showed towards moral outcasts was "scandalous" in the eyes of John?

A serious charge that Jesus raised against the pious of his time is: "You shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to" (Matt. 23:13).

They despised the people who did not correspond to their idea of piety (Luke 18.9) and generally denied them the possibility to be accepted by God. In his famous parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector Jesus sharply opposes this wrong opinion. If there were people who were refused by Jesus, then it were rather those narrow-minded pious, but we never read in the Gospel about the fact that he backed off from people due to moral concerns. Obviously, Jesus' main interest was not to call sin by its name, but to call sinners by their name. He lived in a perfect way the divine tension between the highest ethical standards (Beatitudes!) and loving generosity towards individuals.

By the way, Paul also did not even hesitate to be friendly with people, whose duty included a task he could never have condoned. Acts 19 mentions the so-called Asiarchs (v. 31) to be "befriended" with Paul: officials who were responsible for the supervision of the imperial cult, the divine worship of the Roman Emperor, what in the Christian view was blasphemy.

With exquisite polite deference, even almost cordial openness Paul directed his words to the court before King Agrippa II. Luke describes Agrippa as a person quite fond of worldly pomp and pageantry (Acts 25:23). Among the Jews, the unmarried Agrippa was regarded highly controversial. Due to his very close and intimate living with his sister Berenice it was rumored everywhere of an incestuous relationship between the siblings. Nevertheless, there is not a trace of moral judgement in the speech of Paul against Agrippa, but a very intense eulogy of his faith. Since Paul in another court hearing did not hesitate to speak about abstinence and the Last Judgment (Acts 24,25), he surely cannot be accused of merely wanting to flattered Agrippa, in order to achieve a more favorable verdict for himself.

Without having touched the issue of biblical evaluation of homosexuality, the New Testaments' accounts of Jesus' life (as well as Paul's) indicate that his approach to homosexuals certainly might have been much freer and more easygoing as we are used to in today's evangelical church life.