

Grateful tears

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Sculpture by Werner Klenk

Dear brothers and sisters,

During this Lenten season, the Gospel readings have brought home to me with particular clarity Jesus' capacity to welcome everyone: the crowds, the disciples, the sick, sinners, friends and enemies, religious authorities and strangers. All people matter to him and he expresses this in a gentle consistency of gestures and words. In his relationships there is warmth, frankness, righteousness. He is what his gestures and words say. He is even able to overcome his cultural prejudices towards foreigners, those who are not of the house of Israel, and be moved by the great faith of the Syro-Phoenician woman and the Roman centurion. He is free to sit at table with sinners like Zacchaeus, the tax collector, and Simon, leader of the Pharisees. The cause that moves him to act in this way is not an idea or a project of the Kingdom of God, but the warm certainty that the secret of that Kingdom is that God is a merciful Father. That is why what matters most to him is his encounter with people and his relationship with them, because only in the depth of this relationship can everyone be open to the inexhaustible newness of a God who is always at work and who is first and foremost a Father. Everyone can

see that they have a place in him, that he excludes no one, unless one chooses to distance oneself from him.

Hospitality

Among so many passages, I have reread the account of Jesus' meeting with a sinful woman in the house of Simon, the Pharisee, (Lk 7:36-50). Jesus has accepted Simon's invitation to eat with him. Everything happens at home, in the course of a meal. No one invites others into their home if they do not feel at ease or comfortable with them. In the course of this meal, a woman barges in whose only characteristic is that of being "a public sinner". Simon knows this, but neither Jesus nor the reader does. Nor is it clear the kind of sin that this woman has committed that makes her a "public" sinner. In spite of this, she comes into Simon's house, overcoming her fear of rejection and the judgement she would be exposed to by those who know her, especially Simon. Something very powerful moves this woman to overcome the barriers that hold her back. Jesus is there and she wants to tell him something important, something essential. And she will do this not with words, but with the eloquence of her gestures and the language of her body. She stands at the feet of Jesus, upon which she sheds her tears, wipes them, kisses them and anoints them with perfume. Each one of us can remember what we felt when we washed feet or had our feet washed on Holy Thursday in front of the Christian community. Our feet contain the history of our steps. If someone kisses our feet, we feel unworthy and vulnerable. And Jesus allows himself to be touched by this woman, without stopping her or suspecting her. With empathy he unravels the significance of these gestures for this woman, for her host and for Jesus himself.

To this end Jesus uses a parable so that everyone can remain open, without reticence or suspicion, to the significance of what is happening. He integrates into the parable the woman's gestures, Simon's unspoken judgement of Jesus as a prophet and the woman who is a public sinner. The parable is about two debtors whose debts are forgiven by the creditor. The creditor acts not out of interest or calculation, but simply attends to the fact that neither of them are able to pay their debt. Their debts are "written-off". Jesus connects with his host and asks for his opinion, not about the creditor's motives, but about the feelings of the debtors who were forgiven by the creditor. "Which of them will love him the more?" Jesus asks. "The one whom he forgave the most" - Simon rightly answers. This dialogue serves as a basis for Jesus to bring to light what is happening. The woman, who was seen by the Pharisee only in her sinful condition, has shown in her gestures something deeper than her sin. First, she is the one who truly welcomes Jesus with the signs that the host should have offered him. It is true, Jesus accepts Simon's invitation, but it is the woman who has made him feel at home. The hospitality that Simon offers to Jesus has an ulterior motive. He wants to know who Jesus really is and whether he fits into his view of what a prophet should be. And he is disappointed, for a true prophet would not allow himself to be touched or approached by a sinful woman. Instead of being surprised by Jesus' gestures and thinking outside the box, Jesus actually confirms what Simon had suspected about him. Also, with regard to the woman, Simon already knows beforehand what kind of woman she is, with his judgement being confirmed by what is happening before his eyes, in his own house. He is someone who reasons well on the level of ideas, but who is disconnected from the reality of the facts. Jesus sees that the woman's

gestures are already her response to being forgiven for her sins. Jesus does not hide the sins, indeed he even quantifies them as "her many sins". But for him, much more important than her many sins is the woman in front of him, weeping and close to Jesus. In her gestures she shows that she is able to accept the forgiveness that God offers and because she has been forgiven so much, she shows that she is able to love even more. The Pharisee, on the other hand, with his preconceived ideas, is not ready to love more, because he considers that he has little that needs to be forgiven.

Jesus with the familiarity he has with his merciful Father, recognises the Father's discreet action in this woman. He sees that God, her Father, has already forgiven her. His words simply make explicit what is already there, which only the eyes of faith can see and recognise. A discreet and effective action that acts in the hearts of people and that can only be evoked through the theological passive. "Your sins are forgiven". Even so, having seen and heard, the diners still do not understand what is happening. They still believe that it is Jesus who forgives sins, when in fact it is God who has already forgiven them. Jesus is a witness familiar with God's action and can therefore recognise, welcome and celebrate it, with the help of this woman's faith: "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

"God loves every person and so does the Church".

This is what the response of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith states about the Church's power to impart the blessing to same-sex unions. In practice, however, this assertion is belied not only by the negative answer to the question of the possibility of imparting blessings to same-sex unions, but also by the way in which these relationships and the people involved with them are referred to in their accompaniment. However much it is insisted that the response is not intended to discriminate or exclude anyone, in fact, it has had this sad effect. We need only to look once again at the practice of Jesus, his welcome, his attention to each person and each situation, his empathy and sensitivity in recognising, in gestures and silences, the deep longings of people and the discreet and effective action of God. It is not that Jesus does not see the sin in people, but he chooses not to leave them locked in their condition, or in their sexual definition or religious or national belonging. Rather he invites them to look at the quality of relationships they create with others and at what God is doing in the relationships: purifying prejudices, widening the desire and capacity to love that exists in each one, welcoming the forgiveness that God offers, his unconditional love, his patience. In order to perceive and taste God's action, Jesus stimulates the capacity for discernment and decision-making in the people he meets. This is what he is doing with Simon during the meal in his house. Above all, Jesus invites them to understand that when Jesus appears forgiving, or blessing, in reality he is welcoming God who is already at work in the faith of each person. Such faith is confessed more in gestures and silences than in public declarations and professions, and is something which Jesus knows how to appreciate, to make explicit, to praise: "At that moment, Jesus was filled with joy in the Holy Spirit, and said: "I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to the little ones. Yes, Father, such has been your good pleasure" (Lk 10:21).

I believe that faced with the new sacramental demands posed by same-sex unions, it would help the Church to continue studying and implementing the guidelines of the exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* along the lines of a church of closeness, of open doors, of a field hospital that helps to repair so many broken lives, in families, in couples. It would also help us if the brothers and sisters who participate in or accompany the pastoral care of sexual diversity could assist us in understanding more the discernment of God's action in the relationships that are being built day by day between people, in evangelising the desire to love that exists in each one of them, in the mature experience of sexuality, in the generous dedication to others, in the care of children.

Just as there have been various reactions for and against the substance and tone of this statement, I wonder, if we, ministers of the Church, brothers and sisters of the Congregation, are able to recognise the sexual diversity that also exists among us. In so doing, we would grow in empathy and lucidity with regard to our ways of speaking about and accompanying each other as well as those in same-sex unions.

The grateful tears of the woman in Simon's house encourage us and the welcome of Jesus gives us confidence in the God who loves and forgives each and every one.

Fraternally,

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