

The joy of celebration

During a celebration the community comes together again. Where do we celebrate? Is everyone invited? Are the important themes discussed?

**Then came the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem.
John 10,22**

Ramadan in Jerusalem. Thousands press through the narrow streets of the Muslim quarter. Many people from the surrounding areas have come into the holy city - called Al-Quds in Arabic, "the sanctuary" - for the main prayers of the holidays. Sacks full of herbs spread an oriental scent through the air. Repeatedly people meet others they know. Friendly nodding, handshakes and the kiss of brothers. For some days the people experience their togetherness through close contact. Joyful excitement hangs in the air. In the evening one sits in the circle of family and friends with good food and talks about relationships, religion, business, politics. The old people tell stories, the children romp.

Two and a half thousand years ago the atmosphere must have been similar at the largest pilgrimage festival of ancient Israel. Three times a year from all parts of the country people came to the Temple, to the mysterious place which God had chosen "in order that his name may live there" (Deuteronomy 12,5). At these three festivals - Passover, The Feast of Weeks, and the Festival of Booths - the people remembered the history of their liberation out of Egypt, they celebrated the harvest, brought offerings, and received blessings. How many couples met during the pilgrimage? How many deals were made, how many arguments were fought out?

Rapture over these festive activities is attested to by the prayer of Psalm 42: "These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng." The celebrations served not only religious faith, they fulfilled a well reflected social function: "And rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your son and daughter and your slave, the Levite and the foreigner and the orphan and widow" (Deuteronomy 16). In the shared joy of celebration all of the social groups banded together to form a community of siblings. The idea of an egalitarian society was born in the faith in a single God for all people.

Based on such festival experiences, the temple at Jerusalem symbolised Israel's religious and social identity. Its destruction by the Babylonians in 587 BC was the greatest catastrophe in the history of the people; its new construction under the Persians a celebrated triumph. The follower of Charlemagne forced the Jews to adopt the conventions of the Greek culture and hampered the practise of their religion. In contrast, the Maccabees resisted with violence and in 164 BC they achieved the new dedication of the temple. The temple dedication feast, which today is celebrated as Chanukka, recalls this triumph.

Like all Jews, Jesus loved the pilgrimage and the temple. In the public space of this religious and societal center he discussed the burning questions of the time. Do we still have places today where corporate bosses and unemployed people, professors and homeless people, diplomats and children come together, experience the joy of belonging together and talk about the questions of life?