

The day is snuffed out

A terminal illness changes ones whole life. It gives each moment absolute importance and causes one to ask what remains.

**Now a man named Lazarus was sick.
John 11,1**

His hand had already become cool. I had come too late. The silence of the darkness protected the room as I spoke to him as though he were still alive. This face, which had shown so many moods, was now motionless. How many places had served as a backdrop for conversations, walks, eating together, making music? This then was the final place for me to bid farewell to the body which was still too young to die; the body that wanted to die as little as his spirit. He had fought for fifteen months since his diagnosis. The strength in his fingers had left him so he could no longer play the organ, then the power in his arms to dress himself independently. At Easter we had walked three hundred meters to the opera; it took an hour and left him exhausted. In July took his power of speech. In September the illness stole his breath. Now all of the places we met have taken on another importance in my memory, a new colouring. They have become absolute, no longer subject to formation by new shared experiences. Now they have become objects of memory to be protected. And I try to understand what the message in all of this could be.

"Now a man was sick." With these words John the evangelist introduces one of the most important men in the life of his main character, Jesus. Without his illness we may never have heard of Lazarus, the person that Jesus apparently loved in a special way, him and both of his sisters. The illness of Lazarus and his death make this friendship important not only for Jesus, but for everyone who hears the gospel. Illness and death direct attention to this otherwise inconspicuous family for a great chapter. How Jesus deals with it reveals essential features of his personality and his power.

Terminal illness is often overwhelming, and it is understandable that it is often repressed. Patients, family and friends slide into isolation. Great texts of the Bible address this and place the illness and the painful processes associated with them at the centre of attention. The Book of Job spends more than forty chapters on this, it does not back away from expressing horrible depression in words: "May the day of my birth perish, and the night it was said, 'A boy is born!' ...Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul, to those who long for death that does not come, who search for it more than for hidden treasure, who are filled with gladness and rejoice when they reach the grave?"

Perhaps these texts help me to understand a little bit more about the life of my friend Volkmar. Perhaps advent also helps me create more calm space for it. Jews have taught me, to understand advent as a time of community with the dead. Jewish graves can not be moved. Because the dead wait for reunion like we wait for the arrival of the messiah.