

Healing sleep

Sleep heals and provides power. Religious people experience this as an encounter with God. Do I also enjoy inspiring sleep?

**His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better."
John 11,12**

Asklepios, the son of the God Apollo thanked his life a dramatic rescue. Apollo had conceived him with the virgin Koronis. She, however, married the King's son Ischys. In revenge Apollo killed both of them with his arrow. Koronis' corpse had already been laid out on the funeral pyre when Apollo took mercy on his unborn son and brought him into the world with a caesarean section. Asklepios would become the God of healing. Since Roman times countless asklepieia such as the famous Pergamon on the island of Kos have been founded in his holy grove in Epidauros, a city in the wooded hills of Peloponnes.

These holy sanctuaries were places of pilgrimage where thousands of pilgrims hoped for miraculous healing to be given to them in their sleep. Whoever had been given up by all of the worldly doctors put his or her hope into the nightly encounter with Asklepios. Pilgrims undertook weeks of difficult journey in order to gaze in wonder at the columned halls, temples, spas, the library and the stadium of the sanctuary. A temple servant explained the rules of abstinence which were to be observed in the days before the great night. After carefully preparation, one stepped forward in a white dress, barefoot and crowned with a laurel wreath to the cult washing at the spring, and then to the altar of Apollo. Asklepios received the prescribed sacrificial cake before one could finally enter the holy hall for sleeping. The temple servant gave final instructions for the night and the appearance of Asklepios, before he put out the lights and the ill person fell asleep full of expectation.

The Biblical tradition also sees sleep as a possible place for a life creating encounter with God. God lets Adam "man" fall into a deep sleep in order to create Eve "life". Abraham and Jacob experience the great story which awaits their family (Gen 15,28). The young Samuel feels so at home in the temple of Shilo, that he sleeps there near the ark of the covenant until he is called by the voice of God (1 Sam 3). The worshippers of the psalms find peaceful sleep in their relationship to God: "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety" (Ps 127). When Jesus is asleep in the boat on the stormy sea he reveals the power of composure with which he – hysterically awoken by the disciples – immediately calms the storm. In the story of Lazarus the disciples have learned to believe that sleep will heal Lazarus.

People need the healing effect of sleep every day, especially however in restless times like ours. Am I sleeping well now? Do I give myself the gift of the healing and inspiring joy of sleep? What makes it possible for me to lay down to rest with no worry?