

**Sermon by Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary, World Council of Churches
30 August 2015**

(13th Sunday after Trinitatis) – Catedral Pentecostal, Curico, Chile (Iglesia Pentecostal de Chile)

Gospel: Luke 10:25-37 - The Good Samaritan

Epistle: Romans 15: 7- 13 Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you

“Abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13)

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

I greet you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. To worship with you – or one of the other 345 member churches in our fellowship of the World Council of Churches – is the most meaningful and inspiring thing I do as General Secretary. We pray together so that we “may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” We need hope, every human being needs hope, the world desperately needs hope. We need to be able to look forward with expectation for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren. Those who have hope have power to live and to participate in transformation of life, so that others may live with hope. Your church, Iglesia Pentecostal de Chile, is a remarkable example of this truth, in the past decades under dictatorship as well as today.

Our hope is given to us by Jesus Christ, through his death and resurrection. Our hope is based in Christ’s welcome for us, just as we are. We are not excluded from the life of God, from the future of God. The disciples who denied Christ were welcomed on the shore after the resurrection: “Come and eat!” Paul, who persecuted the followers of Christ, was welcomed as one “untimely born” (1 Cor 15:8). Therefore, we are called to welcome one another, to give one another life in abundance, to abound in hope.

You have welcomed us today, as a sign of this fellowship in hope. For that we are deeply grateful.

Stories of Hope

“So that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”: This is the purpose of Paul in writing to the church of gentiles and Jews in Rome. These formulations in his concluding remarks give us many keys to his message, to what Christian faith and life is. He tries in different ways to answer the question why and how people who are so different belong together in the one Church and the body of Christ. These are people who did not belong to one another from a perspective of having the same ethnicity, history, religion, power, material goods, social status, gender, whatever – they still belonged to one fellowship. Why should the Church not be a fellowship of only those who are together because they agree with one another or already are bound together for some reason? Why should the Church be the fellowship where nobody is excluded due to who we are?

Because it is a fellowship in the triune God, and there is no partiality in God: Therefore, we can be so different - as we are – and belong to the same fellowship. Therefore, we can abound in hope.

The source of joy and peace is the hope that comes with believing, with our faith in the God of life, the God who created us, who overcame our sin and redeemed us in Jesus Christ, and who sustains us together with all life in the power of the Holy Spirit. Hope is to see this world with the eyes of faith! It is to see what God is bringing about in the Holy Spirit. Joy and peace are gifts of the Holy Spirit who

comforts us, gives us the right words to pray and the hope that God will not abandon us and this world.

The day to day messages of the media and sometimes also our own experience, however, are very different. There are many reasons to worry. The TV and the internet present us with news every minute from wars in the Middle East, from refugees fleeing their homes, from floods, from hunger, from terror, from injustices and natural catastrophes. Your own city was devastated by an earthquake in 1928 and again badly shaken on February 27, 2010, when another strong earthquake hit the region, destroying houses, roads and bridges, wounding and killing hundreds of people.

Jessica Phelps, a young US photographer, reported from Curico ten days after the earthquake:

“I found the people beginning to organize their lives. Listening to their stories was heart breaking: The family whose home had been destroyed and were now sleeping in a bus at night too afraid to sleep in the remains of their house; the parents who had lost their infant child.

But impressive was the amount of donations collected by this town and being sorted by its residents to be passed out to those left with nothing. Everyone in this town was helping to clear away rubble and start the process of rebuilding. They were told that temporary houses would be built outside the centre of town by the government while they awaited their new homes, but many there ...are more comfortable relying on neighbours.

I left Curico with mixed feelings. Heartbroken at the amount of devastation, but also inspired to see this town pulling together, neighbours helping neighbours.”

The region of Curico is surely known for its wine, and driving here today I understand why. But what is even more worth sharing with the world is Jessica’s story of such wonderful people who in the middle of the disaster stay together, putting love for the neighbour into practice. Unfortunately, these are not the stories that make it into the television evening news. Nevertheless, this is what gives hope, to one another and to the world.

I have initiated the practice that every WCC meeting I convene starts with sharing “signs of hope”. We need to come together to share hope. There are so many other stories and issues that can remove our hope. To some extent, we are working together in the WCC because we are committed to address exactly the contexts where hope is threatened, where there seems to be no hope. And we work together for unity, because we are not identical nor are we coming from the same church background. We could, therefore, focus on what is dividing us. We come together to focus on what is uniting us. We share expressions of true neighbourly love rooted in faith; they are encouraging stories that can re-ignite hope in the middle of despair. They help us to look at this world with the eyes of faith, discerning the presence of God in such acts of care and love for each other.

Love that crosses boundaries and reconciles

I tend to believe that Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan that we heard as the Gospel for today in part to re-ignite hope and care for the other among his followers. It is not only a critique of self-righteous people, who think they can limit their responsibility for the neighbour to what they define themselves. The Bible combines the message of care and hope with a clear reminder of the universal horizon of God’s love. God’s love is intended to reach everyone in need and not just this or that community. Remember: the Samaritans were not considered anybody at the times of Jesus, so far as

his own community was concerned. Priests on both Jewish and Samaritan sides declared that it was absolutely unacceptable to have relationships with the other group or - even worse - to enter their territory. And it was practically unthinkable, for both sides, to speak with one another.

These boundaries are left behind and overcome when the Samaritan takes care of the victim without asking any question as to who this might be, and when he enters the inn and begins to instruct the inn-keeper. Such boundaries are left behind and overcome when Paul calls upon the Roman Christians and Jews to welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed them, strengthening the point he makes with quotations from the Hebrew Bible which they shared that God's love is reaching out even to the gentiles.

The man who fell into the hands of robbers certainly would feel hope as some human beings passed by. Even more so as they were from religious communities, having been entrusted with tasks of leadership. He had reason to lose hope as they moved on without helping him. He had reason to lose hope both in his own future, in human beings, even in God. The parable of Jesus is a sharp reminder to all who find their identity in religious communities or in certain positions of these fellowships. We can, with our concern for ourselves and our communities, make people lose their hope.

There are many human beings, a lot of children, women, men, there are even many communities - we can even say nations - that fall into the hands of robbers - or dictators or warlords or cynical capitalists who care primarily for the profit of the rich. They do not all care for human rights and the needs of everybody, but sometimes even rob them of their belongings and their dignity - and their hope. The enormous challenge to us - today - is to counteract those effects of injustice or violence. The challenge to us as an ecumenical fellowship to care and to give hope is not to be ignored.

Indeed the place of the story of the Good Samaritan in the gospel of Luke is at the beginning of Jesus' pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Right after the return of the 72 disciples, Luke points to the great transformation of love that the death and resurrection of Christ will bring about for all people. If this message is about reconciliation between different ethnic, cultural and religious communities, it applies even more to the relationships between different churches and Christian communities.

The two readings of today underline this: the way towards this goal of being one includes the crossing of dividing boundaries and the reconciliation of different communities with each other and with God. We are to take part in the movement of God's love for this world following Christ, sustained by the Holy Spirit.

Our journey - a pilgrimage of justice and peace

The World Council of Churches, this worldwide fellowship of more than 340 churches of Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant and also Pentecostal traditions, brings you an invitation. It is from the tenth assembly of the WCC 2013 in Busan: to participate in God's movement of love and transformation, and to join what they called "a pilgrimage of justice and peace". By this we mean a joint journey of faith in hope. Our relationship is based on an open approach, and Pope Francis affirmed that our theme corresponds to his understanding of the mission of the Church. We are called to move together, with an open mind, to what Christ is calling us to do together. Those who suffer cannot wait for the time when the structures or all the doctrines are fully the same in the churches.

Humanity is under threat, in many ways because it is divided by lack of justice and peace. This affects the churches, too. Life is being threatened as a consequence of profound injustice and inequality, of

violence and war, and the destruction of the very basis of life on our planet. The future of humanity and creation requires and deserves that we leave our divisions and tensions behind. Only together we become credible witnesses for the good news of the gospel and overcome the boundaries that separate us. There is only one common future for humanity, not many and not just mine. Real hope is only the hope we share.

We need to go into the future, open to new challenges and open to new partnerships, and continue to overcome prejudice and enmity, embracing God-given diversity. We know that the way into the future needs to be a way of justice and peace as values of God's reign. This cannot be a way of selfishness, pride and privilege; it needs to be a way of neighbourly love and advocacy for the plight of the poor, the marginalized and those suffering of violence and war. We speak, therefore, not of a new project or programme of and by the churches, but of their common journey into the future. They are to follow in the footsteps of Christ, looking for God's reign to come, praying every day together: Thy kingdom come!

The parable of Jesus reminds us today that we can learn to follow Christ from those we regarded as marginalized or even excluded from our fellowship. We are reminded that Christian life and identity are part of something greater than ourselves, something which binds us together in solidarity with each other as an expression of God's grace and love.

The network of trust, healing and care

The Good Samaritan on his way to Jerusalem shows us the direction to go. Paul reminds us with the letter to the Romans of values and practices we need to uphold. We know that the plight of the wounded person requires an immediate reaction. Jesus always feels deeply the needs of the suffering and responds through the outpouring of his love and healing actions. Contrary to the priest and the Levite, the Samaritan too feels the pain of the victim deeply. And so "he shows mercy." He stops and offers the wounded the first aid that is urgently required at this moment.

But he then goes some steps further. He puts him on his own donkey, brings him to an inn and negotiates with the inn-keeper who he will take care of him, offering to pay for everything that is needed. The Samaritan begins a common journey with them both and builds a small network of trust, healing and care. A small network of trust, because the inn-keeper has to accept the Samaritan and the victim contrary to everything that tells him never to trust Samaritans, never speak to them and, definitely, do not cooperate with them. And the other way around, the Samaritan must trust the inn-keeper that he will not misuse the money and he will really care for the wounded victim until he is healed.

Beginning a common journey as a pilgrimage of justice and peace following Jesus, we need to move forward and build our networks of trust, healing and care. Called to be one in the body of Christ, the churches need to be allies, neighbours, sisters and brothers to those in needs at local and international levels together. Actually much of the work of the WCC can be described as mutual support, like the story from the earthquake in your city. This was true of our work with refugees from Chile who were struggling to escape persecution and oppression during the Pinochet dictatorship – and from very similar situations in Argentina or Brazil or the war in Colombia. And we can describe in this way also the work together with the churches in Colombia for peace today or the work for climate justice in many places of this world and internationally.

See and walk together

The first step is always to see the realities in a given place and the world today. We see and experience how you live out your witness to Christ, as Christians and churches. We see some of the challenges you are facing, and also the contributions you are making to your communities and societies. We see how you welcome one another, and how you welcome the other, as Christ welcomed you by grace alone.

Let us continue to do so.

“May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Amen