

Homily for the Advent Meditation
Tallinn Cathedral
1.XII.2016
Urmas Viilma, Archbishop

Your Honourable Eminences and Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Sisters and Brothers!

Introduction

I greet you with the words of the Psalm of the Day appointed by our church calendar, which bring to us the message of the Season of Advent – the message of the expectation of the birth of the Christmas Child – with a rather surprising tone. In the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, Jesus Christ reveals Himself and says: *“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”* (Rev. 22:12-13)

If someone should determine our salary for the past year and pay us according to what we have done, then what would the payment be for each individual? Or for our nation or people as well as our leaders? Or for our church with its members and shepherds? I am afraid, that between ourselves we would not be able to reach a decision; which means that we need to place ourselves before the realm of God’s righteous judgement and grace. Still, we ourselves can reflect upon that which has taken place and what has been done as well as analyse the successes and failures.

Meetings with those governing

The past year has been a year of many meetings. At the beginning of the year I began familiarising myself with all the different political groups in Parliament in order to meet those who make the most important decisions for our nation and from my part, to introduce the Lutheran Church and share my thoughts about important questions for our society. The major questions which needed discussing were tied to the European migration crisis and the arrival of refugees in Estonia; also important was the legislation on co-habitation and the need to take time off for calming down; actual was also the subject of supporting the work done in private schools and the distinct place for Christian schools in the context of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union; intriguing was the discussion on principles regarding the distribution of political pork barrel funds and the problems created thereby. Depending on the political group, arose of course, many important questions. Among important meetings, I could add the many consecutive meetings with the Prime Minister, many government ministers, the Chancellor of Justice, the Speaker of the Parliament and naturally the President of the Republic of Estonia. Though be it that all parties have held these regular meetings to be mutually important, one journalist however, found this kind of behaviour by the archbishop could be likened to *“appear to be like the 1990’s style of providing an overhead.”*

I am convinced that as the leader of Estonia’s non-governmental organization with the largest membership, I not only have the right for such meetings but a duty to hold such meetings. The Lutheran Church still has to carry the responsibility of being a folk church that was bestowed upon it nearly one hundred years ago. This is equal to the responsibility all the above-mentioned persons and institutions have to the Estonian people and state. That responsibility was confirmed by a symbolic meeting here before this altar in the middle of August: the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, the Prime Minister of Estonia, Taavi Rõivas, and myself as a representative of the church bowed to inspect the original letters that Martin Luther sent nearly a half-century ago to the Tallinn City Council. Here in front of this altar we were equals, bowing in humility, before a couple of a thousand years of European Christian heritage, eight centuries of Christian heritage in the Land of Mary and 500 years of Protestant-Lutheran heritage.

Meeting the 500 years of Reformation heritage

The jubilee year of 500 years since the Reformation has given the opportunity for many incredible meetings and wonderful co-operation. In the Estonian context we cannot forget the little talked about fact that for the Reformation Jubilee Year the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe has named Tallinn and Tartu amongst others as European Reformation cities. The festive opening of the jubilee year in Tallinn brought together in St. Olaf's Church the leaders of the member churches of the Estonian Council of Churches as well as representatives of Tallinn and the state, including almost 500 worshippers along with those watching the Tallinn Television live broadcast. Noteworthy at this ecumenical service were the words of the Minister of Justice, Urmas Reinsalu: *"Christian heritage and values make us Estonians a people. If we turn our back to these, then as a people we lose our soul."* A similar thought was also shared by the Acting-mayor of Tallinn, Deputy Mayor Taavi Aas: *"We are born into the cultural world supported by Lutheran values and our assessment of values has been shaped by a grounding in Lutheran teaching."* The civic government of Tallinn has valued its title as a Reformation City with a concrete step, founding together with the Lutheran Church a foundation whose task it will be to build for the residents of the Mustamäe City District a church. The Mustamäe church building, its construction beginning already in the beginning of the New Year, will truly be a community centre with all the necessary facilities that will further work with children, youth, people with special needs, senior citizens and all other various groups residing there. The Reformation City Tartu is helping to prepare for next May the church congress that is to take place in Tartu St. Paul's Church marking the anniversary, 100 years of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church as a free folk church. Each one of us can do our part in the Reformation year by planting an apple tree, following Luther's saying: *"Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant an apple tree today."*

Meetings with the Spirit

For the world and for Estonia the most important ecumenical meeting this past year took place on the 499th anniversary of the Reformation on October 31st in Sweden, at Lund Cathedral. Meeting were global Catholics and Lutherans, who were represented by Pope Francis and the Lutheran World Federation President Bishop Munib Younan and General Secretary Reverend Martin Junge. Estonian Catholics were represented in Lund – where in the 12th Century Fulco, the first bishop for Estonia was consecrated – by Bishop Philippe Jourdan and Lutherans by the speaker now before you. The joint commemoration of the Reformation by Catholics and Lutherans shows that true reconciliation is possible everywhere where reigns Christian love and the will to co-operate. As a sign confirming this reconciliation, last week, I signed together with Bishop Philippe a letter of invitation on behalf of our churches officially inviting Pope Francis to visit us in the year 2018 when the Republic of Estonia will celebrate the 100th anniversary of its birth.

Likewise, in unity and in the same spirit of consensus, almost after a thousand years of recess, this past June, on the island of Crete took place the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, a gathering of the Orthodox Patriarchs and leaders of independent national churches, amongst them Metropolitan Stefanus of the Orthodox Church of Estonia. Returning from the synod the metropolitan rejoiced because the Orthodox world was open to ecumenical endeavours more than ever before. Love always directs from conflict to communion. Christian churches have a responsibility to prove this in the name of Christ.

Meetings have also characterized the internal life of our church. I have tried alongside with international contacts and visits to find time to hold myself in touch with life in as many as possible places in Estonia. So I have been a "shadow" to many parish clergy in Estonia. These have been heart-warming visits with faithful and unassuming clergy and their families in Suure-Jaani, Keila, Sangaste, Märjamaa, Järva-Jaani, Valjala and Maarja-Magdaleena. In addition, numerous visits to congregations include festive occasions and official visits to all Estonian counties. These meetings have brought my

attention to the same question that the new governing coalition has named as one of its major themes: the critical demographic situation in Estonia. Likewise actual is the problem with alcohol, which cannot be solved by raising the excise tax; yet which needs to be addressed through example, education and the propagation of temperance. Temperance needs a moral measure and not a material one.

Inheritors of the inheritance

The problem of emptying churches is also a problem of emptying kindergartens, schools, community halls and village streets. It is a problem for us all. True, with the exception that empty churches remain as protected heritage sites to beautify the local landscape and to inspire tourists and pilgrims. Unfortunately, the maintaining of this beauty and heritage falls on the shoulders of ever shrinking congregations. The state program “Maintaining and Developing Sacred Buildings” has funding only for small jobs amongst many churches, yet we are most thankful for this. Yet, the sum of money for funding this program for a year is less than one million euros to be divided among 400 sacred buildings under protection and one cannot but ask the spiteful question: Really, does the Estonian National Museum (ERM) or the Tallinn City Hall outweigh the rest of the national and historical heritage? Raising the funding to a couple of million for the program for sacred buildings just like the solving of the question of the ownership of St. Nicholas’ Church requires nothing more than political courage to decide. Courage is not needed in order to make the right decision, but in order to make a decision that is just and takes the voice of one’s conscience into consideration.

The conscience of the state

Does the state have a conscience? I have to admit that hopeful signs about its presence have always been there. The saving of the Narva Alexander’s Church from creditors by the state and church in co-operation is one sign of the conscience of the state. At that time the firm conscience was represented by the Reform Party Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas and Minister of the Interior Hanno Pevkur, to whom today on behalf of the Lutheran Church I want to say words of thanks. What shape the conscience of the state will take under the present coalition, the near future will show. Words of thanks for saving the Narva Alexander’s Church belong to all those who made personal or anonymous donations, be it individuals as well as companies, without whose help the Lutheran Church would not have been able to make the necessary financial contribution. Thanks to a joint effort this miracle became reality. The City of Narva has after this decision got a new Lutheran congregation who just a few weeks ago, after the interim closing of the church, has held its first worship service. Despite the state, whose property the church is, still having no vision for the future of the building, this church is again a sacred place for Lutherans in Narva, be it the Estonian-, Finnish- or Russian-speaking congregations. At New-Year’s the bell of the Narva Alexander Church that has been silent, will ring again, marking the presence of the Lutheran Church in Narva.

Meeting the people

The church needs to be naturally there where the people are because the mission of the church is to share the Gospel and serve the neighbour. So is it with the Lutheran Church with its congregations and agencies accompanying and supporting the people throughout their lifespan. This is how we fulfil Christ’s command *to serve each other* and to care for the neighbour and their needs. This occurs for example at Risti congregation, where recently some of the first refugees were welcomed, a Moslem family; at Bethel Congregation, where street children are cared for; at the diaconal hospital, where a person’s life – free from pain and trouble – is valued until their last breath; at the family centre, where the hurt souls of the victims of family violence and of divorced couples are cared for; at congregations’ soup-kitchens and centres for the distribution of clothing; at nursing homes and hospitals; at Christian day-care centres and kindergartens as well as schools. Likewise, at the EELC Theological Institute, the oldest private school of higher learning in Estonia, the centre for church related education and schooling, which celebrated recently its 70th anniversary. Chaplains serve faithfully in the Estonian Defence Forces, the Estonian Defence League, the Police and Border Guard

Board as well as in prisons. Church as the representative of Christ needs to be present there, where there are people.

Tomorrow's meetings

If we wish to remain as a state and people in a multi-cultured and multi-religious world, which with its diversity is also represented in Estonia, we should not focus on identifying the strangers and guests who come here or with whom we meet, but on identifying ourselves. For this we need to abandon the understanding that faith is a private matter. If it were a private matter, then it would be compared with a lamp that was placed under a basket. Jesus, however, says that a lamp is not to be placed under a basket but put on a lampstand. He says to his disciples: *"Let your light shine among people, so that they seeing your good works, may glorify your Father, who is in heaven."* (Mt 5:16)

How can people around us, be they our own or strangers, who do not know that we are Christians, because we cannot be differentiated by veils or scarves, know who we are? The Christian faith of our people and from this arising Christian way of life needs to be heard and seen. Also our joy today, our advent hope, our desire to celebrate the Christian Christmas, our desire to come to church on Christmas Eve and on other occasions, our desire to live in a Christian land and to be counted among the Christian peoples. I wish, that this new church year that has just begun will be a mark for Estonia and the Estonian people of a spiritual awakening and a rising against an attitude that forces believers and the church into the private sphere, back in between the walls of the church buildings and out of the public sight. Following Christ's call, we have to act contrariwise – we have to be visible and recognizable among people.

I thank all of those who have accepted my invitation and are present here at this Advent meditation and reception. I wish you a beautiful Advent Season just begun, peace in your hearts and soul as well as plenteous God's blessings!