

24.5.2014

Sermon by Bishop Irja Askola in the Worship Service in the European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups in Alppila church, Helsinki

Matthew 6: 5-13

Prayer – between privacy and community

Dears friends, sisters and brothers

It is a real joy for me to welcome you in our Diocese and in this church. This church and this parish used to be my home parish for many years.

So, for me it is always happy to return to this setting, where different people have always met and where they have found space to grow, to keep silent or to speak loudly, to cry or to laugh. To act or just to be, keep wondering. To me this kind of possibilities means “to be a church”. So, for me personally, to meet you and welcome you in this church, is a beautiful task.

I wish you feel welcome, very welcome, in our whole Church and in this Diocese. You carry with you something, which we need in our Church. The wisdom to be sensitive to all those, who have struggled to be accepted. To hear the voices, which have been ignored or recognize the beauty, which has been forbidden to be appreciated. Your story is a story of many, who are different in different ways compared with the normative majority.

My wish and hope is, that your stories and your journey will help our churches to be more a just and inclusive Church, where God’s creation and every human being can celebrate the life and its gifts. This attitude and this approach I have learned from the Gospel.

In my theology God’s most beautiful word is WELCOME.

Welcome with all, what you are, with all, what you have experienced, with all your wounds and disappointments as well with all your strength, joy and happiness.

God s´ most beautiful word is welcome!

The Gospel text, what we just heard, has one interesting tension. A prayer is a very intimate, secret action and yet, it is very public and communal.

Jesus indicates, that when you pray, go into a private space, even into a secret place, and let your God hear, what concerns or bothers you. Let God hear all, what you have in your mind, in your heart, in your neighborhood.

To me this means God’s empowerment and a deep understanding of the democratic, non-hierarchical Church. God does neither need a permission from the Church synod, nor any Bishops letter, to let human beings approach God and let them tell their concerns, happiness or pain. God’s most beautiful word is welcome – all of your own vocabulary, all of your silent feelings and all those words, which were never understood, can now be expressed to God, secretly, if you so wish. God has an intuition, that human beings need the promise, namely this: God has no gate keepers, the desk is open all day around. I sense and suppose, that today this church is full of those prayers, even silent whispers, which have followed this promise: you can - you have the permission -, to pray secretly; God, who created you as you are, has all reasons to hear you, to understand you, to comfort and to empower you – God does not need a permission of the Church law to welcome you.

I suppose, that this permission to pray secretly - being an advice by Jesus - is experienced in this church today. Many of you remember, how does it feel, when you or your love is not found in the prayer book of your Church or when you cannot find your identity in the vocabulary of the Church.

But, however, the advice of Jesus makes the prayer a communal issue, too. When you pray, address your God as Our Father – your private and secret prayers are still there, always welcome, but prayer connects you into the global network, too - there are so many, who whisper secretly in privacy the same prayer in the same words, which you do. May these prayers meet and connect us. May they strengthen us to build up a global network of solidarity and justice. May these prayers, even expressed in prisons or in total rejection, be heard by us and by politicians, not only by God. May these prayers open our doors, attitudes and financial resources to care for one another. God's most beautiful word is WELCOME.

God asks us to pray for our daily bread. The bread, which we need to grow, to survive in our daily struggle, to keep alive our calling, is the bread of God's promise. The promise, which calls us to share our stories, to share our resources, to carry mutually each other's wounds and dreams, to meet one another as a part of God's beautiful Creation.

I have been asked several times by media, why did I accept your invitation to preach in this worship today. Well, what could be more natural for a Bishop, than to preach in one of her home church, when a European Christians meets in Helsinki. So, business as usual. So that should be. However, being with you today, is my message for the human rights. Our Church needs to hear from you and add into her agenda your stories, experiences and expectations, too. Our daily bread, which we ask in the most universal prayer of the global Christianity, means all that, which gives us strength and leads us into relations and into a community. The daily bread, which we pray for, leads us into the joy of hospitality and makes us to share. When we move from hostility into hospitality, everybody wins and God will laugh with and among us.

Prayers in us and for others, are food, given for us.

That food gives us strength to struggle for human rights for everyone. It gives us inspiration to ask openly and transparently full human rights for those, who have been violated or rejected. It gives us wisdom to see the beauty of the love among sexual minorities.

God's most beautiful word is welcome. God's welcome makes us to move, to dear and to care.