

Opening Worship Service on June 13th, 2013, Geneva
by Bishop Dr. Tamás Fabiny

Psalm 107:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

*1 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.
2 Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
3 and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.
4 Some wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to an inhabited town;
5 hungry and thirsty,
their soul fainted within them.
6 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress;
7 he led them by a straight way,
until they reached an inhabited town.
8 Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
9 For he satisfies the thirsty,
and the hungry he fills with good things.*

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Our Lord Jesus Christ!

It is also a characteristic of us, the members of the LWF Council, what the psalm writer says: God has “gathered us in from the lands, from the East and from the West, from the North and from the South”. We should experience this fact, that we are able to gather from all these directions, feeling together that we are all called by the Psalmist to “Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good; for God’s steadfast love endures forever.” We have reason to give thanks. When we live in the finitude of time – this is witnessed by our densely written calendars – at least now, during the worship service let us abandon ourselves to God, who is above time and whose love endures forever. When we take a look on our watches wondering how many time zones divide us from our families and colleagues, let us note that all of us can be held in the love of the Lord who is above time. I would like to ask you already now, before our negotiations, regardless how tight our schedule will be, how rushed the multitude of our program points, let us not forget the eternity of God’s love. As we raise our attention toward the east and west, the north and south during our negotiations and talks (trying to extend our attention equally to all directions), let us not forget the fact that the most important is to look upwards. Since we confess with James: “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, ...”

Psalm 107, this thanksgiving psalm, is not only the text of this opening worship but it will be the basis of the bible studies for the coming days. We are informed about four life situations: those who wander in the desert and are threatened with death from hunger and thirst, those who as prisoners are not free and are in deathly darkness, those who are mortally ill and in the grip of Sheol, and those who are abroad on the sea and are tossed about in the sea’s chaos. All of these instances described by the psalmist are summed up with the refrain

defying the anxieties, dangers and afflictions: “*Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and God delivered them from their distress.*”

My Dear Sisters and Brothers!

Today our attention is drawn to those who *wandered in desert wastes, finding no way*. This obviously refers to the wandering of the elected people in the desert. We know about the trials they had to face and how they failed their temptations. But we also know about their experiences of the miraculous care of God right under these difficult circumstances. It is true that they hungered and thirsted but then they received quails and manna. Moses could get water from the rock for them. Most of all, they received the Ten Commandments right there in the desert. In the midst of their stumbling, recognizing their sins *they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and God delivered them from their distress*. Therefore, the desert was not only the place of great need and privation but also of miracles. In the end of their roaming they got to their destination: they found “*an inhabited town*” they could enter the Promised Land.

Anyhow, the psalm refers not only to the desert wandering of the elect, but to that of all who roam. I used this metaphor frequently at the time of the political changes in 1989-90. In our post-communist situation we were emerging from our forty years of wandering in the desert. I could point to what this wandering meant and that we had to cross the Red (!) Sea. I could talk about several golden calf-stories and about other disobediences of the people. At that time I was young, so I was not afraid of emphasizing the Joshua-role of the new generation opposed to the elderly and decrepit Moseses. Well, since then we have traversed two decades and I must admit that we have not reached Canaan. So, also we must learn the lesson of what it means to cry out to the Lord in our misery.

These Bible verses can be the psalm of every people wandering/roaming/knocking about. It can be a psalm of those who wander in desert wastes today. There are so many of those. The fate of the drivers on the rally between Paris and Dakar in the endless sand desert is almost negligible compared to the experiences of some of our sisters and brothers. Loosing direction, impenetrable paths, dead-ends are characteristic of many of their lives. In recent days, two famous Hungarian mountain-climbers died after climbing to an 8400 m high peak (the Kangchenjunga, Mount Everest, in Nepal). One of them, Mr. Zsolt Eröss, who climbed with an artificial leg because of a previous accident, was a real national hero in our country. He tried to reach his destination, not through the desert, but through the almost perpendicular, endless walls of snow. But then he was not able to come down from the mountain. His partner learned from his last radio message that because of exhaustion and lack of water he became blind. His strength abandoned him entirely. Perhaps he cried out to the Lord with his last breaths. But God did not save him from his difficult situation. In a similar way his younger partner who tried to rescue him also died. We have to frankly admit that there are occasions when God does not pull someone out from his or her misery.

II.

My Dear Sisters and Brothers!

Attentive reading of Psalm 107 obliges us to take note of and help those who are roaming in their own deserts today, on impenetrable waste lands, and who cannot find “*an inhabited town*”. Today on the roads of Africa and Asia the flow of refugees rolls on. Masses of people wander from one country to another, and if they are lucky they can settle in refugee camps. They hunger and thirst. Their soul faints. We know, as well, about the people, who

want to get to the USA at any price from Mexico, from Guatemala and so on, or those trying to get from the North-African countries to Southern Europe. Many of these people drown in the sea, or die on the tiring journey. Also in Central Europe we often have to face situations in which people are smuggled in terrible conditions, squeezed into a van or a minibus by inhuman traffickers. Recently in a parking lot close to Budapest they discharged some half-starved Afghan refugees telling them that they were near Vienna.

We have to have a word for the miserable and to the miserable. We have to raise our voices in favor of them. We have to do so also on behalf of those young girls who – during their roaming in the desert – are taken to foreign countries and there, having been deprived from their freedom and official documents, are forced to become prostitutes.

Our service carried out on behalf of such roamers of the desert waste is the field of diaconia. The Greek word “konis” means “dust”, “desert” and “dia” means “through.” According to the folk etymology “diakonia” means through the dust, through the desert. We have to be there among the victims of catastrophes or at the times of floods, among those whose basic rights are trodden down, among refugees, among the cumulatively disabled people, accommodating the escaping young mothers with their children who flee from their brutal husbands, among Romas and homeless people. We have to be with all those wandering in the desert waste lands.

We have to recognize that in the secular societies of our present time how many people, roaming in the waste land, are surrounding us. Probably physical hunger and thirst do not torture them, but they are in great spiritual need. It comes to fulfillment with them what was prophesied by Amos: *“In that day the beautiful young women and the young men shall faint for thirst.”* (8:13) *„The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.”* (8:11) *„They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.”* (8:12)

At this point, we have to ask ourselves with the deepest sincerity: do we proclaim the word of God among them with enough power and authenticity? Because if it is true that they will hunger and thirst not for bread and water but for hearing the word of God (8,11) then it puts a huge responsibility on us. This responsibility is nothing else, but – especially to us as Lutherans, the church of the word of God – to testify to the word of God among them, and to testify to the life-creating, new life-creating power of it. To achieve this, we also have to live from this Word day by day. If it is necessary, instead of them, if it is possible, with them, we always have to cry out to the Lord with the strong belief that God is capable of rescuing human beings from their miserable situation. This means that beside the word of God, prayer is our other tool which we have to live with and use.

In Psalm 107 we can find that God hears their prayer, as we read: “God led them by a straight way.” After the turnings and twistings of wandering in the desert, after the detours of roaming, the human being finally finds the way out. This way out is a straight, a direct way that leads to a place where people can live, an inhabited town, a home to stay. We can also interpret this direct way that God leads them as a metaphor for how we should interact with one another. Being direct and honest in speech and in behavior must be characteristic to us. A Hungarian poet wittily phrases: *“The shortest way between two human is straight talk.”* Sincere and honest talk helps to understand one another. This way of “being sincere and honest” must mark our churches and our koinonia.

III.

The narrative unfolding in the psalm ends with the Lord’s listening to the prayer of those wandering in the desert wastes. God leads them to a straight way, in order to bring them to an

“*inhabited town*,” not to a depopulated land or to a ghost city but to an inhabited town, not to Pompeii after its destruction by the volcano or to the desolation of the Planet of the Apes, but to an inhabited town, not to Hiroshima devastated by an atomic bomb, or to Oklahoma City blasted by the tornado, but to an inhabited town. (Of course, it is a wonderful thing that these cities ruined in different ways can be rebuilt, too.)

Probably, it exhibits a professional obsession if, when I hear about the “*inhabited town*,” the oikumene, the inhabited world comes to my mind. It does not matter, I take responsibility for it. I would like to share with you my hope that although we have arrived via different ways from our own desert wastes, we can still meet each other in this oikumene, in the “*inhabited town*”. Here, all of us can find a home. We can pop over to our neighbors, regularly visiting each other. We are glad, since we are citizens of the same city, with the same rights. We all have full rights as members of this same community. And we want to stay together, not only here, in our earthly town. But this is the way we would like to go to heaven. Martin Luther delivered his famous Invocavit-sermons in a very critical period of the life of the Wittenberg community. In his absence, people interpreted the gospel and the law in different ways. They could not stay on the level of peaceful debates, but a serious feud broke out between them. Therefore, after leaving Wartburg Castle, Luther preached to them for eight days. Among others, he said the following: “*So we should also deal with our brother, have patience with him for a time, have patience with his weakness and help him bear it; (...) and thus we do not travel heavenward alone, but bring our brethren, who are not now our friends, with us.*” Do you understand it, dear LWF Council members? Along with Luther we cannot say less, than we have to go to heaven together! There can be, and of course, there must be debates between us, but we have to go to heaven together.

My Beloved Sisters and Brothers! Certainly, many times we cannot find the straight way, leading us to our destination. Perhaps we are still wandering in the desert wastes and our soul falls into despair. But we cry out to the Lord in our misery, who rescues us from our difficult situation.

Let us give thanks to the Lord for this, for God is good; for God’s steadfast love endures forever! Amen.

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