

Sermon at the Opening Service of the LWF European Pre-Assembly

Höors kyrka

31 January 2017

John 20:19-31

Recognized by his wounds

We just heard it: Jesus is entering to the disciples through a closed door and identifying himself by showing the disciples his wounded hands and his wounded side. *He is recognized by his wounds, not by his glory.* Now, what does that mean?

Jesus says: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” I wonder how the disciples felt about that? They knew the *via dolorosa*. They did not need to see a movie about the Passion of the Christ in order to know. They had been right in it. Or more correctly: they had barely saved their skin out of it. They knew all too well where the mission of the Father had led Jesus: the pain and suffering, the cross, the grave, the wounded hands, the pierced side. They had every reason in the world to keep their doors carefully locked. They had every reason in the world to rethink their involvement with Jesus. Did they still want to be part of the mission of Jesus? They must have understood that it is the mission of a wounded God rather than the mission of a God of glory; the mission of a disabled God rather than an almighty God. Or, is the glory in the wounds? Is the power in the disability rather than in divine omnipotence?

This is not an easy one. Especially not for people who want to do great all the time. Someone wants to make his country great again; someone wants to make their football team great again. We can smile or be scared by the consequences. And doesn't the LWF want to be a great communion of churches, in order to carry out the mission of Christ effectively? Think of our vision statement "Liberated by God's grace, a communion in Christ living and working together for a just, peaceful, and reconciled world" – that is wanting to do great indeed! Or think of the fifth commitment in *From Conflict to Communion*, signed by our president Bishop Younan and Pope Francis exactly three months ago and less than 40 kilometers from here: "Catholics and Lutherans should witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world." Yes, we want to do great, for the sake of the reign of God!

Yet, we all know that that is not the whole truth. There is more to being sent than being excellent and doing great. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," means that there are going to be wounds. We are always going to be hurt and wounded, and we will make others feel wounded. Maybe in the time ahead more than before, since four dangerous p:s are effecting our countries these days, and hence also our churches: *polarization, populism, protectionism* and, with the word of the year 2016 (according to Oxford Dictionaries), *post-truth*. We will have to resist, and thus we will feel the pain of our own wounds as well as the pain of others' wounds.

Do we still want to go? "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." I do want the peace, yes, but looking at the wounds – do I really want that kind of sending? Do I want the mission of the wounded, disabled God? It is good to know that no one less than the apostle Paul had

trouble with this, too. He knew about the attraction that goes with glory, and he knew about the pain of weakness. Three times he appealed to God before he realized: “The Lord said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’” (2 Cor 12.9) For him as for the disciples, the Holy Spirit must have made a huge difference for their willingness to respond to the sending. The power comes with the Holy Spirit. Yet, it is a somewhat strange power Jesus gives to the disciples – the power to forgive and retain sins. Take a sample of people including Lutherans from all over the communion as well as Christians from other denominations and ask them what kind of power they would like to have most of all. It is my hunch that the power to forgive sins does not quite top the list. A wounded God who breathes on people and gives them, with the Holy Spirit, power to forgive sins – this is indeed a remarkable project.

Because it is so remarkable, I am glad for Thomas, called the Twin, even more often called doubting Thomas. It is probably the doubt that makes him a twin – our twin – to the extent that we take our own doubts as seriously as they deserve, and to the extent that we realize that doubt is the twin of faith. Faith *without* doubt is scary. Faith *with* doubt is not comfortable but authentic. Stories of doubt and disbelief of the believer run like a red thread through the Bible. All ‘heroes’ and ‘heroines’ of faith struggle with it. Abraham and Sara, Jacob, Joseph, Job. And all those nameless psalmists, how often don’t they struggle with God? Even John the Baptist, that courageous and controversial man had his doubts. “Are you the one who is going to save us?” he asked while imprisoned, “or should we rather wait for another person to come?” Thomas has got many twins, and there is nothing wrong in joining that crowd.

Thomas had missed the first opportunity to meet the risen Christ on the evening of the first day. He got the report, but did not go along with it. You cannot build your own faith on the experiences of others only. You have to have your own in order to be authentic. In that sense Thomas is dead right: Unless I see, I won't believe. And he has got it all figured out; he knows exactly what he needs to see and to do in order to become convinced: unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe. Empirical proof is what he is after.

In the end, it looks like he does not need that sort of empirical proof after all. Jesus offers him to put his finger in the mark of the nails and his hand in his side, but all of a sudden that does not seem necessary any more. Hearing and seeing is enough of a touch. Thomas has recognized the wounded God as his God: "My Lord and my God!" The confession is followed by a mild rebuke from Jesus "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." What Jesus seems to say is: 'Listen, Thomas, I saw your doubt and your need to find out for yourself, and I came. That's ok. But your doubt was not as deep as you believed it was, because you did not actually have to touch me. Have trust, have faith.'

What is good about Thomas and his twins is that they are so honest both about belief and disbelief, about faith and doubt. And it seems to me that God has a special love for those who struggle with God. Thomas got rebuked, but he also got what he needed. Jacob and Job were both marked by their struggle with God, but they got the blessing. God loves those who in the midst of their struggle urge God – like Jacob at the river Jabbok "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Gen 32.26), or like Thomas behind closed doors "I will not believe unless I see."

Thomas saw the wounded body of Christ and he believed. As we look around, we also see a wounded body of Christ: salvation is offered for sale, human beings are persecuted, sold and trafficked, creation is mistreated and sold. The image of God in creation is still being distorted by violence and abuse, by extremist ideology, also in the name of religion, by the loss of dignity, the loss of biodiversity, by slow action in response to climate issues, by increasing gaps between people in terms of wealth, education and power and by the systematic promulgation of lies. Again, the four dangerous p:s of polarization, populism, protectionism and post-truth! Yes, we see that the marks of the nails are deep on the body of Christ.

Thomas saw the wounded body and believed. The question is, what can *we* believe about the wounded body we see? Today's gospel allows us to believe that it needs the recognition of a wounded God to overcome violence, especially the sort of violence that so often accompanies people's beliefs in what is sacred. Millennia ago, people's beliefs in what is sacred led to the sacrifice of fellow human beings and animals. Centuries ago, beliefs about what is sacred led people into crusades, inquisition and colonialism. Decades ago and still today, beliefs about sacredness, purity and about one's countries greatness have led people into acts of nationalism, racism, and sexism – all of this accompanied by streams of violence, enforcing mechanisms of victimizing both human and non-human nature. The sacred, and what is taken to be sacred, always has the potential of being very violent. Because the more sacred something is, the more ultimate significance comes with it. And the more ultimacy, the less is usually our willingness to compromise and to tolerate others and their otherness. That is why tongues that preach the love of God so often have been found to also say “force them, for their own sake, and the sake of God.” The risk for such

violence is there, unless we recognize the wounded God at the center of what is most sacred. It is the recognition of Christ by his wounds rather than his glory – the recognition of the wounded God – that makes our faith a Christian faith.

For the theologians among us, this is of course a vital reminder of what Martin Luther pinned down in theses 20 and 21 of the Heidelberg disputation in 1518, namely: “He” [she] “deserves to be called a theologian ... who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.”

So, when we sing God’s glory on our way towards Windhoek, we know that it is the glory of the Christ who is recognized by his wounds. When we sing God’s glory as we journey on through this pre-assembly, we know that the glory comes together with these awesome words “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” AMEN.