

Kongshaug, 2. juli 2015. Øystein Skauge:

**“The Eye of the Storm.”**

**Diaconia - the biblical Challenge for the whole Church in the World we live in.**

### **The beggar**

Until a month ago, I had my office in downtown Bergen. Almost every day I drove my car for 30 minutes to town. I did my parking in a big city garage. I went into the elevator, bringing me two floors down into an underpass ending up 100 meters away, right in front of the door to the house where my office was.

In this underpass I was almost every day, during a long period of time, confronted with a beggar. He was not a Norwegian. I guess he belongs to the Romani people. Every time I passed by him, he looked at me. He said: “Please”, and reached out his hand, pointing to his empty cup, while he **was** smiling. He probably knew that I would just pass by him. Like thousand other people did, every day.

But from time to time, there was someone who stopped in front of him. They put a few coins in his cup, and proceeded to their work.

I believe this beggar had found a quiet and peaceful place down there, under the street where all the cars were thundering by in six lanes above his head. I never saw someone bother him, neither anyone doing something extra good to him. But I know for sure that this man is despised by many. Like so many despises beggars and foreigners and others who annoy rich Norwegian people, giving us bad conscience.

Still the beggars are here. I think their experiences are that they have found a peaceful island in a storming ocean.

Maybe these people right now are in the eye of the storm?

Well. Not quite. Because the police may hunt them on the reason that someone has made a complaint. Peace comes to an end. To the extent that it is possible to have peace and quiet when all life is about, is to get some coins in your cup to keep hunger stay away.

We'll find beggars like this in many cities in our country. They have found their way to us from a life in poverty and debasement. They may know that it is cold here during the winter. Perhaps they go home then. But in the summer they are here. Because it is tranquil here. The storm in their lives feels weaker here than in many other countries.

### **The door to my life**

This one beggar is a symbol of need, knocking on the door into my life.

This is a need that I, myself, know very little about, and is not familiar with, because I am a privileged Norwegian who already have everything that is necessary for my daily

living, plus a lot extra that I do not need. My life is an abundant life. Some will say – a life in richness. I am a part of the Christian church as well. The church in our country. I am even a priest. As a rural dean I have one of the highest positions among all the clergy in Norway's second biggest city.

There is not much storming around me and my life. Therefore I've never reflected on that I am in need of diaconia in my own life.

Maybe it is now time to make a stop? To do some reflection?

What is the challenge from the diaconia to me?

### **The focal point**

What is the Biblical challenge to everyone, accumulating in the focal point diaconia?

My starting point is something that is more strongly underlined in the new liturgy in the Church of Norway. In this new liturgy, also the order of baptism is revised. Here it is said both to the child that is being baptized and to the parents of the child:

*My dear brothers and sisters, God accepts us into his worldwide church through baptism and gives us a part of Jesus' call and mission. Let us stand together in witness and service until the day comes when all of creation will be redeemed by our saviour, Jesus Christ.*

As a baptized member of the Lutheran Church of Norway, I am also a part of God's worldwide church. In this church, I also have a part in the witness and the service of the worldwide church.

### **The baptism breaks boundaries!**

All of us who are gathered in this conference, we are baptized, believing Christians. We come from different parts of the world. Our passports show where we belong, nationally. But still, we are united as one people and one family. We are the people of God. We belong to the kingdom which knows no boundaries or no passport controls. We call it The Kingdom of God.

From time to time we experience that the weather is so bad that our life is in danger. Rain and storm may tear down and ruin what man has build up. This may happen very quickly.

In our country too, this has happened, quite recently, and when something like this happens in a country, the whole nation is united in rebuilding what is in ruins.

In this way we all have a responsibility to stand together against storms, raging far away.

Because boundaries shall be unknown to all of us who are united in the worldwide church, I cannot withdraw myself from my responsibility for those places where the storm is blowing.

I have a fellowship to churches different places in the world, and also to individual men and women who are fighting in the storm. Some of them both suffer and are in deep pain.

One of these men was for a long time begging in an underpass on my way to the place where I until recently had my office. Now he has left. I don't know where he is. Maybe somewhere out in the storm?

### **The rich churches**

I am a part of a fellowship of rich nations and rich churches. In this rich part of the world important decisions are made which may lead the world even closer to its end. In the midst of this I have a voice that shall sound when justice is threatened or the creation needs protection.

But my actual feeling in my daily life is that I am living in the eye of the storm. I've been told that this is where there is tranquility.

Norway is a peaceful nation. Our country is situated in the eye of the storm.

### **In the storm**

Around this country the storm is raging. In Syria. In the ocean between Africa and Italy. And in many, many other countries, countries which probably are represented in this room just now. We can see a lot of destructive forces in the world. These forces and powers are ruining and destructing

From the eye of the storm I look around.

And I believe that I have something to bring with me into the areas where the tornado went through. This is what I call Diaconia.

### **The visions**

The Church of Norway, which I am representing right now, has formulated its vision. According to this vision my church is supposed to be

- confessing, - open, - ministering, - missional.

By the word "ministering", our church want to focus upon showing mercy, promote justice and protect creation.

And this is also what will be in my focus now.

In this diocese, where we are just now; Bjørgvin, we also have a bishop who has lifted up a vision to our diocese. The rest of us are all behind this vision because we all feel that these words are in line with an overriding vision for the Church of Norway. And we also feel that this vision is biblical. This is why I will use the words from our bishop

when I am going to say something about “Diaconia - the biblical Challenge for the whole Church”

This is the vision of the Diocese of Bjørgvin:

*Together we will honor the triune God by proclaiming Christ, build congregations and promote justice.*

### **Promote justice!**

This is what diaconia is about in our daily life.

There are many definitions on the word “diaconia”.

Those who are listening to me right now are all professionals on this subject. I guess you will be able to speak up with a lot of good formulations to define diaconia.

But I will stay to the official words, uttered by my church to explain and define what diaconia is:

*Diaconia is “the caring ministry of the Church. It is the Gospel in action and is expressed through loving your neighbour, creating inclusive communities, caring for creation and struggling for justice”*

In the following I will try to point out the biblical justification for these main points in ecclesiastical diaconia. The formulation for this lecture is the question for the challenge to the whole church in the world we live in.

### **The diaconal challenge**

Because the church is worldwide, and each one of us became a part of it when we were baptized, the diaconal challenge is the same, no matter if it is the local church in this diocese, or it is a European church in one of our neighbouring countries, or it is the challenge in a far away church, i.e. in Africa

Everywhere the diaconia is about

Loving your neighbour

Caring for creation

Struggling for justice

Many of us are able to be caring humans, doing good deeds to fellow citizens.

We are all familiar with great international humanitarian organizations. All of them do a fantastic effort to help people in need, e.i. The International Red Cross/ Red Crescent Movement or Doctors Without Borders.

The Bible also recognizes all the good deeds done outside the church, done by what the Bible call the Gentiles.

We read more about this in Rom 2,14:

*whenever they do by instinct what the Law commands.*

### **Created to do good deeds**

But diaconia cannot be conducted by any else than the church. This is why diaconia is founded on the mission of creation, given by God. A mission to which the believing christian is called to enter upon, and a mission the whole church is dependent on.

*God has made us what we are, and in our union with Christ Jesus he has created us for a life of good deeds, which he has already prepared for us to do.* Eph 2,10

When Jesus was embarking on his public work in Nazareth *he went as usual to the synagogue. He stood up to read the Scriptures and was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written,* (Luk 4,16-17)

### **Inaugural speech**

These words, which Jesus then reads, are later known as his inaugural speech. This is what I want to do! This is my mission! Jesus said, and read the following:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people.”* (Luk 4,18-19)

These are fantastic words!

### **The program**

These are words which enlightens the path for his followers through all ages.

His program is our program.

His program is the program of the church.

Just like Jesus proclaimed the good news to the poor, so shall his church do the same today.

Just like Jesus proclaimed liberty to the captives and set free the oppressed, so shall his church do the same today.

To the extent it is within the power of the church.

At least, these words give the church the authority to lift up the Scripture, to open it, like Jesus unrolled the scroll. We shall open the Scripture and read to everyone who wants to listen, and to everyone who needs to listen:

Liberty is the gift from Jesus. Oppression is what Jesus came to set us free from.

The call to the church is always to be on the same side as the weakest among us. Of course, this is a special biblical challenge to those of us who are the most privileged, to live and to stay in the eye of the storm. This must be like living in “the Sea of Tranquility” on the moon.

We, the privileged, cannot sit still, watching all the millions of people, children, women and men, thrown around by the storms beyond our borders.

### **Diaconia and politics**

In my country it is controversial that the church makes decisions on some of the cases that the church is defining as diaconia. Of course, that is why many of these cases are tangering cases which the politicians are working on.

A typical case is how our nation shall react to the enormous refugee catastrophe facing the world in these days.

All over Europe country by country are challenged to contribute with acute emergency aid. Refugees from Syria need help. We need to help African refugees, risking drowning in the Mediterranean ocean on their way to Italy and Europe.

The need for aid is evident.

Still there is a hard discussion on the matter if we as a nation can afford to help all these people, so far from our shores.

Many say that first we need to help our own citizens, or we must help those who already have come to our country.

### **Prophetic voice**

In this situation it is a call to the church to uplift a prophetic voice. It is a call to the church to lift up the Scripture and do like Jesus did: Proclaim our mission by the word from Jesus himself:

*- to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to set free the oppressed  
and announce that the time has come  
when the Lord will save his people.”*

There are Norwegian politicians who have left our church, protesting against several of our bishops. These bishops have a prophetic calling to listen more to Christ than to political arguments. They have used theological arguments on economical matters.

I think that the politicians may protest against the bishops. But this is how the church always must appear. The church cannot dance to this music, played by the political orchestra.

### Political vetoes

The mission of the church must not be stopped by political vetoes.

In Norway we are still in the lucky position that it is with no risk of persecution for any bishop, any priest or deacon or voluntary worker to follow the call of Christ instead of dictation from a politician.

Unfortunately, this is far from the situation in many other countries.

That's why there is a constant call to solidarity and action when we know that probably there have never been so many Christians facing persecution because they obey God more than people.

### Righteous purposes

St. Paul gives us the argument:

*- give yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life, and surrender your whole being to him to be used for righteous purposes. (Rom 6.13)*

### Our history

Last week, there was a very well written article, printed in Norway's most important Christian newspaper "Vårt Land".

In this article, the Norwegians were reminded on our national history. During the 2nd world war ten thousands of Norwegians escaped across the border to Sweden, or they found their way as refugees across the North Sea to England.

In this article, the historical facts were contrasted to the unwillingness many in our country raises against refugees seeking somewhere to escape in "the eye of the storm".

In the same newspaper there was another article, covering two pages with the headlines:

**Churches are lifebuoy for the boat refugees.**

**Christians in Spain and Italy try to give the boat refugees a piece of heaven after being in hell**

In this article it was pointed out that pope Francis was a good role model as he went ahead with the good example when his first visit outside the Vatican was a trip to the refugees on the island of Lampedusa.

## Be merciful

By his action, the pope underlines that the call to the church is a call to practice diaconia. It is this biblical challenge that Jesus overstates when he tells his disciples: *Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.* (Luk 6,36)

Of course, the diaconal call to the church is always first of all a call to be involved locally. It is about reaching out a hand to our closest neighbor who has a similar address as I have, in my street or my town.

But at the same time, the church is worldwide. This call does not stop when we cross the border to our own municipality or on the border where there is passport control or customs.

## The end of the world

The call to the church does not stop until we reach the end of the world, wherever that may be. This is how far Jesus has promised to follow each of us and stay by our side: *“Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: ..... and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age.”* (Matt 28,19-20)

## The climate crisis

Today the world faces at least one overwhelming challenge which in no way knows the same limits as the nations do. It's about the climate crisis. It's about commitment to environment and nature.

In the same way as it is on the issue of refugees, this is also a subject where the church may crash with the politicians.

Today we know that there is more and more acceptance of the view that the changes in the climate are results from human behavior in the world and with the nature. But never the less, there is also strong resistance among many of the politicians to take the full consequences of this knowledge.

This resistance is very often rooted in that we emphasize an economic profit on the short term, more than changing a life style so that we can repair as much as possible of what went wrong.

## The earth belongs to the Lord.

For many years the church has been a driving force in the environmental movement. And it is not difficult to find the biblical reason for this: *For, as the scripture says, “The earth and everything in it belong to the Lord.”* (1.Cor 10,26)

Facing these almost unreal challenges in everything connected to environmental and climate issues, the church is above all called to be a prophetic voice.

This is also why my church has a very clear goal, pointed out in the *Church of Norway plan for diaconia*.

## Study

1. That Church and parishes study the biblical view of the created world and humankind's place in it.
2. That Parishes and individuals make an active and practical contribution to the development of a life-style that furthers balance and wholeness.

As a rural dean in Åsane, I cannot stand here in front of you without mentioning one of the priests in my deanery

## Eco-theology

This is the vicar Tom Sverre Tomren. One year ago he presented his PhD thesis

**Environmental ethics and Eco-theology in The Church of Norway.**

**An analysis of the environmental statements of The Church of Norway in the years 1969-2007.**

This great work is a very good example of how ..Church and parishes study the biblical view of the created world and humankind's place in it.

Tomren is focusing on an important theological concept, the issue of stewardship. On several levels he finds this concept, the issue of stewardship, a problematic issue.

At first, Tomren is pointing to a traditional thinking of stewardship. According to this, man is outside the nature.

But Tomren is focusing on that mankind is a part of the nature. And he emphasizes that we hardly are able to understand the consequences of our manipulations to the creation.

Tom Sverre Tomren says that this issue of stewardship carries within itself a source of dualism which may put mankind in conflict with their own subsistence.

Further, Tomren thinks that the idea of a steward may be haughty.

-Does nature really need a steward?

The earth would in many ways be better off if man was not there. Then there would be a greater diversity both of animals and vegetation, Tom Sverre Tomren says.

Tomren points to the biblical word for steward – the Greek word “oikonomos”, which we recognize in the English word economist. He says that this word is not about stewarding the nature, but it is about stewarding the spiritual gifts (like in 1.Cor 12,4)

In Norwegian preaching this word was first used when it was necessary to preach about being a Christian donor in the parish.

Using this word in new fields become bad Bible theology. It is even worse when we understand that this is also an invitation to consider nature as something we can rule, Tomren says.

### **Man is to protect and serve**

Instead, he believes that man is set to protect and to serve Gods creation. He refers to the words of Gen 2,15: *Then the Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and guard it.*

- In the light of the ecological crisis it s my opinion that the theologians must start using these terms to highlight that man’s first commitment is to protect nature, Tom Sverre Tomren says.

### **Guard the garden**

If he is correct about this, it will be a diaconal ministry to “guard the garden”. It means that we shall guard or protect the earth where we all live. *Then the Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and guard it.*

It’s more about guarding and protecting than it is about stewarding. Stewarding in the meaning economical household, stewardship.

It will takes us too far if we in this lecture go deeply into the Biblical texts and subjects in Gen 1 and 2. As we all know, these texts are about the creation of the world, and about mans place in Gods nature.

But, enlightened by the title of the theme of this conference:”- the biblical Challenge for the whole Church in the World we live in”, it will be a task for all of us to re read these texts.

We have to consider once more if it is an economical way of thinking (Stewardship) that brings us further on in the struggle for a better world in an ecological crisis, or if it is a genuine wish to live in harmony with nature's laws. Do we really wish to guard and protect our earth as if it was the most precious garden, Paradise itself?

The Church of Norway has formulated this in a way that very well may be adopted by other churches. That is if these churches not already have made their decisions about how to think about climate and environment: *That Church and parishes study the biblical view of the created world and humankind’s place in it.*

The climate and the environment are of course very big issues which have to be considered much deeper by politicians, scientists, media workers, schools, researchers, philosophers, writers and so on.

### **Theology is relevant**

But as a church it is important that we do not accept that theology is irrelevant when we are discussing these matters.

This is about our firm belief and true conviction.

We are convinced that the earth is created by God. This cannot be changed by any kind of non Christian way of thinking.

That's why theology, that is the teaching about God, always is relevant in these big matters.

It is the *“biblical Challenge for the whole Church in the World we live in”* to lift up the very first words of the Bible: *In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate.*

So far, I have delimited what I've been speaking about to what is a special challenge to diaconia, encountering the problems with refugees or the struggle for climate and environment.

These two issues are perhaps what are most important to underline as a challenge for the whole church in the whole world.

However, some of us have to take a stronger responsibility than others when it comes to lift up the heaviest burdens.

### **In different countries**

This responsibility is resting upon the shoulders to those of us who are living in “the eye of the storm”. Here it is quiet and peace, which make it possible both to stop and to act and to consider the future.

Where the storm is already raging, or just ruins are left from the catastrophe which passed by, there is nothing else to do than sit down, take a short break, recuperate, and look out for solidaric acts from that part of the church where it is possible to live a privileged life.

Diaconia will look a bit different from one country to another. Locally there may be extreme impacts to the church on how to be caring.

We all know the traditional way of helping poor and outcasts who have ended up on life's dark side, both in the big cities and on the countryside.

Drugs and alcohol represents enormous challenges everywhere. No deacon is to be unfamiliar to this part of his or hers ministry.

### **Traditional diaconia**

It is my guess that to most deacons, working on the ground level, this is where most of the daily challenges are to be found.

The church is to be thankful that this diaconal vision is lifted up, into the light shining from Jesus' own words, as we read them in Matt 24, 35-36.40:

*I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.' .... 'I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me!'*

I would like to give you an illustration of how different the diaconia may find it's tasks. Therefore I'll tell you about some parishes in one of the richest municipalities in Norway. In these parishes there are some youth deacons, receiving teenagers for pastoral counseling. The problem for many of these young people may be that they feel very lonely, almost like an outcast, because their friends do not accept them anymore. Why? It's why their parents cannot afford to spend so extremely much money as some other parents are able to do. These teenagers does not get 10000 kroner (= 1100 Euros) to buy a new jacket, or their family cannot spend more than 10.000 Euros on their next holiday trip.

Of course, this is nothing else than an extreme manifestation of how it can be to live in "the eye of the storm". But also rich people may have their problems. Real problems. And if the church can help them, that is a good thing to do.

To define diaconia locally, and defining diaconia world wide, is a challenge which is very relevant to a church similar to my own church. That is because diaconia in "the eye of the storm" is different from diaconia where the storm is raging.

### **Poverty**

There is a difference between what we call absolute poverty and relative poverty.

Absolute poverty is failures to meet basic needs like food, clothing, homes, access to education and primary health care.

Relative poverty is not only about survival and fulfillment of basic needs, but also that the standard of living is measured in relation to the society we live in.

When we are talking about poverty in Norway, it is almost always a relative poverty.

That is when some inhabitants are relatively worse off compared to most Norwegians.

Finally-

Many places, the storm is raging almost continually. It is not only refugees who notice this. It is not just those who experience natural disasters as a consequence of climate change.

Wars and natural disasters are well known back to biblical times. According to Jesus they will always be there:

*Countries will fight each other; kingdoms will attack one another. There will be famines and earthquakes everywhere.* Matt 24,7

Where the storm rages, beyond the eye of the storm, there the church must be. There the diaconia also must be

In our country, the church has its own organization which more than others has its great responsibility in being where the storm at any time is strongest.

## Changing the world

Very soon now, we will greet bishop Atle Sommerfeldt. For many years he was the leader of Norwegian Church Aid. Within our church, we have no one with a clearer international diaconal profile than this organization.

On their web pages they are introducing themselves in these words:

**TOGETHER FOR A JUST WORLD.**

Norwegian Church Aid works with people and organisations around the world in their struggle to eradicate poverty and injustice. We help those whose needs are greatest, regardless of race, creed, political or religious affiliation.

How we work:

**SAVING LIVES**

The poorest are always hit the hardest in times of crisis. Many lives are lost each year due to the lack of clean water in emergencies. This is why we provide clean water first. Together we save lives and protect the vulnerable.

**CHANGING LIVES**

To be poor is to lack opportunity. But where there are challenges, we also find the best solutions. Permanent access to clean water is one of them. Together we can help people find their own way out of poverty.

**CHANGING THE WORLD**

Poverty is injustice. There is enough water, food and work for all, but global structures help keep the rich rich and the poor poor. Together we can give a voice to the voiceless where decisions are made.

This is our challenge

This is our biblical call

This is the echo from the voice of Jesus to everyone who is baptized into his worldwide church:

*I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me!*