

To stop and to walk for justice and peace

Sermon by Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, WCC general secretary

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Gospel: Luke 10:25-37: The Good Samaritan

Epistle: Romans 15: 7- 13: Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

I greet you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I bring you greetings on behalf of the other 345 member churches in our fellowship of the World Council of Churches. I can assure you of their prayers. Following the ecumenical prayer cycle, congregations worldwide pray for peace, safety and justice for all people in your country.

There are also several staff colleagues in the Ecumenical Centre who come from Colombia or have relatives here. They remind us of the situation in the country and invite us to be in solidarity with you in prayer and action.

We will not forget that the conflict in Colombia has torn the nation apart, with thousands of deaths, widespread human rights violations, the internal displacement of millions of people, disappearances, kidnappings and threats to human rights advocates both inside and outside of the church.

There are many human beings, children, women, men, entire communities, we can even say nations that fall in the hands of robbers – or dictators or warlords. They do not care for the human rights and the needs of everybody, but rape them from their belongings and their dignity – and their hope. The challenges to us - today - is to counteract those effects of injustice or violence are enormous. The challenge to us as an ecumenical fellowship is to care and to give hope for justice and peace.

The World Council of Churches, together with the Geneva based development alliance for Action of Churches Together – the ACT Alliance, the Lutheran World Federation and the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) we encourage peace negotiations to go forward.

“There’s hope for Colombia. Yes Colombia.” This was a headline of Bloomberg’s news service a couple of weeks ago. They referred to economic data of Colombia in comparison to some of its neighbours, but pointed also to negative consequences of falling oil prices etc.. The New York Times spoke of “Hope for Colombia’s peace process” only to underline in the text how fragile this process still is and how difficult the questions of transitional justice that need to be addressed in view of brutal violence and grave human rights violations committed by state and non-state parties in the conflict. I do hope the negotiations – supported strongly also by my own Norwegian government – will bring real fruits of justice and peace for all Colombians.

We do speak of hope for the people of Colombia, because we believe that the prayer “God of life lead us to justice and peace” will be answered by God.

We are called both to stop and see, and to act, like the Samaritan did. But we also need to stop before the violence happens, and see and act together to prevent that it happens. We need to stop and address the powers and the structures that support this violence to happen. You and your children deserve peace and justice now and for the future.

“God of Life, lead us to justice and peace” was the theme of the 2013 assembly of the WCC in Busan, Republic of Korea. This prayer proved to be very relevant in the world of today with its conflicts, wars and grave inequalities. Many people from various parts of the world shared with us that we need to overcome fear and prejudice and to heal wounded memories.

The story of the good Samaritan and Pauls letter to the Gentiles and Jews in Rome are both very relevant, when we are searching in such contexts for the way to peace. They tell us that we can overcome fear and prejudice, that we can regain courage and hope for peace and justice. We hear in the story of the good Samaritan of the day to day violence on the streets of the country and of the boundaries of prejudice that separated Jews and Samaritans. We know from the Acts of the Apostles how Saul persecuted the Christians before he encountered Christ. On the way that follows this transformation, he calls again and again for mutual recognition, reconciliation and peace among Gentiles and Jews in their diversity.

The road from Jerusalem down to Jericho was not safe. Robbers took advantage of the landscape of steep hills and deep valleys.

“But a Samaritan while travelling came near him.” For all those listening to Jesus this is a provocation. Priests on both Jewish and Samaritan sides declared that it was absolutely unacceptable to have relationships with the other group or - even worse - to enter their territory. And it was practically unthinkable, for both sides, to speak with one another. But the unthinkable is possible.

Everything is said in these words: He came near him. He proved to be his real neighbour. Fear and prejudice can be overcome in the encounter between true human beings who see each other and recognize the need of the other. The separating walls break down. They give way to the very basic human relationship of care and love for the person who is near to us, because we encounter him or her on our way.

“Go and do likewise”. Stop spiralling deeper into violence. Turn around. Leave the walls that separate us behind. Let us be near to one another in a process of reconciliation, open up for the true encounter with the humanity of the other. Violence can start and it can be stopped.

We know from our work together with you, that many of the concrete steps on this way are not that simple and have their price: such as

- the disarmament of fighting groups,
- protection of social leaders and their organizations and communities,
- strengthening of capacities for advocacy,
- investigation, prosecution and punishment of those State and non-State actors responsible for human rights violations against civilians,
- compensation for the victims,
- land restitution,

- an independent judiciary and the rule of law.

This is only to name a few of those that were mentioned in WCC statements concerning Colombia.

Justice and peace are gifts from God. We are called to share those gifts, to welcome one another to a fellowship of justice and peace. We can take part in the pilgrimage, the movement of this justice and peace. The way towards the goal of being one includes the crossing of dividing boundaries.

Sometimes that means leaving our comfort zones. Luke tells us for instance a few chapters later the story of Zacchaeus, the rich chief tax collector from Jericho (Luke 19:1-10). It is enough information for the people who listen to understand that Zacchaeus is a collaborator with the unjust rulers – most likely the Romans. He has moved to the side of the oppressors and left his own community and identity. Perhaps he had compensated for his “smallness” and “powerlessness” by taking this step to influence and power. Through encounter with Jesus Christ, God incarnated and our true neighbour, the opportunity of change and transformation was opened. Even for him.

Also Paul, who persecuted the followers of Christ, were welcomed as an “untimely born” (1 Cor 15:8). Even him.

Why should the Church be where nobody is excluded due to who we are? Our hope is given to us by Jesus Christ, through his death and resurrection. Our hope is that Christ has welcomed us, just as we are. We are not excluded from the life of God, from the future of God.

Paul tries in different ways in the letters to the Romans to answer the question why and how people that are so different belong together in the Church. These are people that do not belong to one another from a perspective of having the same ethnicity, history, religion, power, material goods, social status, gender, whatever – they still belong to one fellowship.

Because it is a fellowship in the triune God, and there is no partiality in God. Therefore we can be so different - as we are – and belong to the same fellowship. Therefore we can be in the same journey of faith, the same pilgrimage of justice and peace together, as the Busan Assembly called for. Therefore we can abound in hope.

This cannot be a way of selfishness, pride and privilege. It is time for a common journey of the churches, following the footsteps of Christ, praying every day together: Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done on earth as it is heaven! Amen!