

**Advent Reflection
Tallinn Cathedral
1 December 2022**

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Honourable Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Brothers and Sisters!

Introduction

We are in the middle of the first week of the church year. The past First Sunday of Advent marked the beginning of a new church year for Western Christianity. Advent candles were lit on Sunday everywhere in the country – in cities, towns and villages.

Our last meeting for Advent reflection and reception was in December 2019. In the meantime, we have experienced a wave of pandemic and we continue to live in its wake. For the church, like for the rest of society, it has been a time of adaptation to many changes. We have now a much broader understanding of what it means for the church to be *present*. Attendance through electronic means has appeared as a new mode of being present. Even this Advent reflection is broadcast online.

War and peace in Ukraine

It is now nine months since Russia's aggression and escalation of the war on Ukrainian territory on 24 February 2022. The EELC and all other members of the Estonian Council of Churches were quick to respond to the war and the resulting refugee crisis. Multiple statements have been issued, condemning Russia's aggression and the war. In practical terms, churches and congregations have reached out their helping hands to Ukraine and war refugees, opening their doors and hearts. We continue to pray in our churches for the coming of peace on terms that would ensure, in addition to cessation of hostilities, peace in Ukrainian hearts.

I am particularly pleased to see that we, as Lutherans in Estonia, have been able to offer Ukrainians real, and not merely formal, support both here and in Ukraine. It is expressed in the form of shipments of material items and accessories from several congregations and communities, as well as monetary donations. We have allocated some €80,000 of aid through the EELC government, supported by our partners and congregations. About a half of these funds has been spent on receiving refugees in Estonia and the other half has been sent to support the diakonia organisation of our partner church in Ukraine. There are numerous people who deserve gratitude for all of that. A beautiful overview of this support for Ukraine is provided in the new publication, *Towards Peace*, which was distributed today.

Cultural identity and religious literacy of Estonian people

In general, our collective position in Estonia is that we are living in a Christian cultural sphere. However, based on the recent census results, it would seem that the present-day Estonian cultural environment is made up of many other components besides Christianity. According to the census of 2021, as many as 58% of Estonia's adult population do not feel affinity to any religion. In addition, 13% refused to answer the question about religion. It means that 71% of Estonian people do not consider any religion to be important enough for a declaration of affinity in the census.

This raises the question, Does the annual lighting of Advent candles by local authority leaders to cheer the crowds all over Estonia actually reflect the cultural expectations of the people? Celebration of the Advent is, after all, also a Western Christian tradition. However, the results of the 2021 census confirm that Estonia has more Orthodox Eastern Christians who do not celebrate the Advent season and who have their Christmas Day, according to the old calendar, in the beginning of the new year. In this context, it is incomprehensible why the Christmas Day of the old calendar is not included among our national holidays, or why do we even have Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Boxing Day, Good Friday, Easter Day and Pentecost listed as public holidays at all. All these public holidays are about to lose

their meaning when we do not dedicate any school lessons to explaining the Christian origin of these holidays and to reinforcing our culture.

As long as the proposals, which have been put forward repeatedly by the Joint Committee of the EELC and the Government of the Republic, as well as by the Estonian Council of Churches, for introducing religious education and improving the management of religious and cultural knowledge keep being ignored by decision-makers, we will have to accept that the Western Christian way of thinking that has guided our development into an independent nation is no longer a particularly important cultural influence factor in Estonia. This leads to the question, Is the ethos of the Constitution's Preamble – to guarantee the preservation of Estonia people, the Estonian culture and the Estonian language – secured when we fail to present Christianity, as one of the most influential components of our culture, to the new generation to a sufficient extent?

Least of the people

In the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25, Jesus describes in a parable the Last Judgement, when the Son of Man will say, *"Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."* (Mt. 25:40.45)

Who are the least of the people? Everyone who is not important. These are the people who are not featured in the Top 100 of influential persons. Not even in the Top 1,000, 10,000, 100,000 or 500,000. The least of the people, the unnoticed ones, are all who are invisible, who have been dehumanised and instrumentalised, who have been deprived of their individuality, who have lost their identity, who have become nothing but round numbers, a statistic.

While, usually, we think of evil as the opposite of good deeds, this parable indicates that the opposite of good is not evil deeds but a failure to do good – closing one's eyes and ears, hiding one's hands behind the back from fear of losing the safety of impartiality. But indifference paves the way to destruction.

To all who have acted rightly, the Lord says, *"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."* (Mt. 25:35–36)

Many people among us are afflicted by hunger, thirst, homelessness, nakedness, illness or imprisonment. Leaving aside, for the moment, the political parties and politicians who are preparing for the coming election, we need to ask ourselves, What can we do for our neighbours? This question is particularly relevant for Christians and churches.

Hungry

"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat," says the Son of Man to the righteous. We, too, can relieve the hunger of our neighbour. Hunger denotes deprivation of everything that nourishes a person. It is hunger for being recognised; hunger for justice; hunger for care and love, for a kind word and a shoulder to rely on; hunger for peace. Whenever someone hungers for these things, the people around them, including the government and the church, can do a lot with their decisions and working arrangements. In addition, we as individuals are in a position to relieve physical deprivation by donating food, clothes, basic commodities and money to someone who does not have access to these things. In Estonia, nearly one fifth of the population lives on the boundary of relative poverty. These people are right next to us – in our neighbouring apartment, in public transportation, on church benches.

Thirsty

"I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink," says the Son of Man to the righteous. Thirst due to a lack of water does not usually happen in Estonia. However, the way we use clean drinking water – flushing many litres of it down the toilet – indicates how unfairly rich we are compared to other places on the globe where people need to walk kilometres to bring drinking water to their family from a well, water body or a single tap. In addition, millions of people live in regions where drinking water can only be bought in plastic bottles, whereas the price is controlled by a foreign manufacturer. The thirst experienced by the people next to us is a real need for something in life that cannot be provided by laws or orders. People feel thirst for love and tenderness, for a kind word and a smile, for being noticed and cared for. It boils down to the need of being loved without conditions, of being happy on one's own terms, not according to someone else's rules. We all have the capacity to be a neighbour to other human beings and to love them as they are. However, we are prone to impose conditions. We would like to be, not the last, but the first judges. In reality, there is only one who is both the first and last (judge) and he is the Lord Christ.

Homeless

"I was a stranger and you invited me in," says the Son of Man. It is important to discern whether a person has a shelter where they can hide from the cold, where they feel safe and have everything they need for life, or whether a person has a home. There are now more than 60,000 Ukrainian war refugees in Estonia. I believe that none of them is prepared to call their new place of residence a 'home', even if it happens to be as comfortable or even better than what they had in Ukraine. Their home where they would like to return to is in Ukraine. The social system of a country can provide refugees, orphans and homeless with a shelter, but can it provide someone with a home? A person can be homeless even when they have comfortable housing but still feel as a stranger. Recently, mental coping and mental health has been an increasingly relevant topic of discussion. There are people around us, even among our loved ones, who do not feel at home even when they are at home, in their homeland, amongst their loved ones, even inside their own body. They are troubled by disturbing thoughts; their soul is anxious, and they are not happy. It can be the pandemic that causes depression and anxiety, it can be the war taking place in the vicinity, it can be dissatisfaction with school or job, with family members or friends who do not understand them, with injustice experienced in society, in the state or in the church... Sometimes people even blame God. How can we help? *"I was a stranger and you invited me in,"* says the Son of Man. You invited me in! Not shelter first, but invitation, acceptance and noticing are important. People like that are unique; they do not fit the boxes of understanding created by others, or they can simply cause discomfort because they are problematic, too different from everyone else. Even we tend to ignore and overlook people who do not believe in the same way as we do, who vote for a different party, who do not live or love like us, whose lifestyle and customs deviate from generally accepted norms, whose behaviour is problematic due to addiction or special needs that make us feel uncomfortable. There are people around us who are different as a result of their own choices or someone else's actions or who have been created like this by God. Do we invite them in? Do they feel at home in this world and this society? Even religious people can sometimes feel in Estonia that they are different and that the only approach people know to take when they encounter us is to make us invisible or 'delete us from the picture'. We all yearn for Estonia to be a home where we are cared for, we are loved and heard.

Naked

"I needed clothes and you clothed me," says the Son of Man. We choose our clothes based on the weather and the surrounding environment. But not only that. Being clothed does not only protect us from the elements, but also from peering eyes. We wear clothes because we are vulnerable. People only take off their clothes in situations of utter trust or when it is required due to a medical condition. Or people can be stripped nude when someone wants to humiliate them. Jesus was disrobed before crucifixion. Similarly, if someone's personal and delicate details of life, memories or thoughts entrusted to someone become public, they feel naked. Stripping people naked is one of the most

effective methods of cancel culture to bring someone to shame, to undermine their social status or position at work. It is more likely to happen with public figures whose status requires them to lead their lives in the public – without secrets, without concealing anything. In fact, public life means living in the nude. But the same can happen between best friends, family members, schoolmates or colleagues. One quickly snapped photo or video clip in a smart device, posted in social media, is enough to strip you naked in front of the world. Administration of justice in the media, especially in social media, has become a generally recognised method of stripping. It does not matter anymore whether everything that is disclosed is actually true. Even deeds that never happened or words that were never said can be brought into the light. It is said that truth is naked. However, it seems more and more that, whenever someone is stripped naked, being naked itself becomes the criterion of truth. The Son of Man says to the righteous, *“I needed clothes and you clothed me.”* Our task is not to strip naked but to clothe. It is a Christian and a humane approach to assume that everyone can have their dignity restored and their nakedness ended, even if their misdeeds have been justly disclosed. It means that disturbing topics are closed when it is time, that people apologise and ask for forgiveness if something is unfairly revealed or stripped. In particular, this applies to those who have been quick to judge and have tried to take on the job of the judiciary or of the Last Judge. It is the way of a Christian to maintain a charitable share of understanding and warm attentiveness, to be offered to all neighbours, including those who have been cancelled.

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“I was ill and you looked after me,” says the Son of Man. The Son of Man does not expect us to treat each other like doctors – this can be left to the professionals – but to be prepared to commit our time to visiting the ill and serving them with what their soul needs. In the context of the pandemic of declining mental health, we are all forced to admit that we, too, can be exhausted, burnt out and mentally fatigued, just as we can care for those who have broken down next to us. When we dedicate more attention and time to each other, we can care for each other’s souls.

Prisoners

“I was in prison and you came to visit me,” says the Son of Man. Being in prison does not necessarily mean being behind bars. We are prisoners of our habits, many written or unwritten dogmas, rules and norms, prejudices and comforts. Some people are prisoners abroad, with no prospects of return, or they can be emigrants in their own homeland. There are many such examples in the history of our people, and Russia’s war against Ukraine has made this imprisonment a present reality for Ukrainians and Russians, in both countries. Then there are those who are prisoners of money, of their job; prisoners of norms and rules; prisoners of policies and ideologies. Many people have been instrumentalised, voluntarily or involuntarily – turned into slaves or tools for someone or something. God does not expect us to liberate prisoners but to be there for all who are in chains; to go to those who are prisoners of various circumstances; and to serve them with our understanding. We do not need to reason with everyone who is not as free as us. Freedom requires courage. We can encourage people to make decisions that give them the gift of freedom. A changed and liberated prisoner will never return behind bars. Similarly, a person who is prepared to hear and understand others can be liberated of their obsessions, prejudices or attitudes.

Conclusion

I would like to thank everyone who accepted my invitation to participate in this Advent reflection and reception. At this time, as we anticipate Christmas, I would like to wish you all a better ability to see and notice, so that the invisible would become visible in front of our eyes. I wish you a beautiful Advent season, peace and sustenance for your souls, and abundant blessing from God!