Sermon at the LWF European Pre-Assembly

Höör, 3 February 2017

John 15:9–17

*“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.This is my command: Love each other.*

Less than two weeks ago, a bus with Hungarian students returning from a ski camp experienced a terrible accident in Northern Italy. The vehicle colliding into a pole caught fire and in a few moments, flames and smoke covered everything. Sixteen people died. According to the eye witnesses, one of the teachers managed to escape from the burning bus but he returned several times to save others. At last, he suffered so many injuries that he died in the hospital. The survivors and his students in general are moved when remembering his heroic example as he put into practice Jesus’ words from our text: “*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends*”. I guess the same applies to that Polish truck driver who gave his life in December in Berlin in order that the insane terrorist couldn’t smash even more people at the Christmas fair. I am sure you also know many examples of people who gave their life for their friends. Moreover, sometimes for unknown people – knowing that life is precious and it has to be protected in all its fragility.

In this year’s cold winter when many lives have been put to danger, it is worth rereading Oscar Wilde’s short story *The Happy Prince*. In this story, a swallow travelling into Africa spends the night before departure in the coverage of a statue. At night, he feels a drop of water falling on him but sees at once, that the statue is crying. The statue tells the swallow that he used to spend his lifetime in the Palace of Sans Souci [that is, ‘free from care’] which was surrounded by walls. He did not face the sorrows and misery of the world so the courtiers called him the Happy Prince. Now, standing as a statue on a high pedestal on the main square of the city, he sees the suffering and the need of many people. There is a little boy for example in fever whose mother cannot pay the doctors.

“Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow, will you not bring her the ruby out of my sword-hilt? My feet are fastened to this pedestal and I cannot move.”

“I am waited for in Egypt,” said the Swallow. “My friends are flying up and down the Nile.”

“Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow,” said the Prince, “will you not stay with me for one night, and be my messenger? The boy is so thirsty, and the mother so sad.”

Although the night was cold, the swallow decided to stay one more day. He picked out the great ruby from the Prince’s sword, and flew away with it in his beak over the roofs of the town. Then the swallow flew back to the Happy Prince, and told him what he had done.

“It is curious,” he remarked, “but I feel quite warm now, although it is so cold.”

“That is because you have done a good action,” said the Prince.

The next day, the swallow really wanted to leave but the Prince said again:

“Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow,” said the Prince, “will you not stay with me one night longer?” “Far away across the city I see a young man. He is trying to finish a play for the Director of the Theatre, but he is too cold to write any more. There is no fire in the grate, and hunger has made him faint.”

“I will wait with you one night longer,” said the Swallow. “Shall I take him another ruby?”

“Alas! I have no ruby now,” said the Prince; “my eyes are all that I have left. They are made of rare sapphires, which were brought out of India a thousand years ago. Pluck out one of them and take it to him. He will sell it to the jeweller, and buy food and firewood, and finish his play.”

After finishing this mission, the swallow really was really bound to leave. He thought about the green palm-trees in Egypt where the sun is shining warmly.

But the Prince spoke about a little match-girl who let her matches fall in the gutter, and they were all spoiled. Her father would beat her if she does not bring home some money, so she is crying.

“Swallow, swallow, little Swallow, pluck out my other eye, and give it to her.” And the swallow did so. Then the snow came, and after the snow came the frost. Everybody went about in furs, and the poor little Swallow grew colder and colder, but he would not leave the Prince, he loved him too well.

The swallow flew over the great city, and saw the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates. He flew into dark lanes, and saw the white faces of starving children looking out listlessly at the black streets. Under the archway of a bridge two little boys were lying in one another’s arms to try and keep themselves warm.

The Prince asked the swallow o take off the fine gold covering the statue leaf by leaf, and give it to the poor; even if the Happy Prince will look quite dull and grey afterwards.

The swallow gradually losing its strength, said once to the statue:

“Good-bye, dear Prince! Will you let me kiss your hand?”

“I am glad that you are going to Egypt at last, little Swallow,” said the Prince, “you have stayed too long here; but you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you.”

And he kissed the Happy Prince on the lips, and fell down dead at his feet. At that moment a curious crack sounded inside the statue, as if something had broken. The fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two. It certainly was a dreadfully hard frost.

The next day, the Councillors proud of their city got rid of the statue now stripped of its wealth and of the dead bird at its feet.

“Bring me the two most precious things in the city,” said God to one of His Angels; and the Angel brought Him the leaden heart and the dead bird.

“You have rightly chosen,” said God, “for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me.”

The swallow helped the poor people in the dark lanes, the match-girls and artists in this imaginary story.

Jesus indeed walked through the towns and villages of Galilea and noticed the sick, the outcasts, the marginalised and the humble. The Samaritan woman with whom he was not supposed to speak as she was a stranger. The adulterous woman whom the hypocritical Pharisees wanted to stone, the leper who had to walk with a bell in his neck, signifying where he walks. Jesus talked about giving one’s life for one’s friends. But he actually gave his life not only for his friends but for his enemies too. For those who did not know what they were doing, for those who watched his humiliation with sardonic laugh.

Similarly to the swallow in Oscar Wilde’s short story, we also have to look around us. There we see the girls putting their body on sale –be it in a parking lot in Eastern Hungary or in the red-light district of Amsterdam.

We see the man in sunglasses who offers drugs to children going to school.

We see the refugees shivering on cold seas in shabby life-jackets or crouching next to a fence made of barbed wire.

We see the small girls sewing excellent footballs and the small boys proudly raising their rifles. The pale girls coming to the shooting of a porn film and the gentlemen in well-cut suits who are making money on them. And all the young, middle-aged and elderly people who feel good when watching those films.

We see the beggars on the streets, the politicians on the billboards, the sportsmen worth millions in a stadium and the old people being brought to terminal care.

And we say: Human beings are not for sale.

Or in other situation we say, in spite of everything we say: Creation is not for sale, our created nature is not for sale.

Because we are liberated by God’s grace. And therefore we are not servants anymore.

Jesus says: “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends”.

Do you hear that, my friends?

Jesus calls us his friends. As the Hungarian saying puts is, a bird is known by its feathers and a man by his friends.

Jesus is not ashamed of us. He fraternises with us. We are allowed to join his friends’ circle. And we can be proud of that. Therefore, let us stay together, in love and in Jesus’ name.

A bird is known by its feathers and a man by his friends. Let’s not forget the swallow who remained in the city because the Happy Prince asked for it and who helped those in need even if it was very cold.

Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.