

Sermon at the Armenian Evangelical Bethel Church,

31st March 2019

Presiding Bishop István Szabó

Isa 53:4 (NIV)

Surely he took up our pain, and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.

Lk 24:21 (NIV)

...but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.

Lk 24:33-36 (NIV)

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread. While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

My beloved Brothers and Sisters!

First of all let me start my bringing to you blessings and greetings on behalf of the Hungarian Reformed community. We have been praying for you constantly, and we continue to address our Merciful Lord regarding your cause, fulfilling the Apostle's command: "carry each other's burdens" (Gal 6:2 NIV). And we are thankful to God that we can be here today, in communion with you, and we can appear together before God to express our gratitude and our imploration. At present, we are in a period of great fasting. I use the expression 'great fasting', because this year it is not the regular way of preparing ourselves for celebrating the death and resurrection of our Saviour, through humility and prayer, but in a way that our ancient predecessors have taught us: if we are in danger or destitution, if we are stricken by war, the whole nation must appear before God and address Him in a joint cry for help. In times like these it is not only the individual believer's duty to engage in fasting, but that of the whole community; in fact, it is the duty of every single Christian all over the world when any church is in a desperate situation. So here we are, praying with you for blessing and peace.

I have read aloud three Bible passages. All three of them prepare us for the incredible secret of Christ's resurrection, revealing a solid foundation for our hope.

1. The first one is Isaiah's prophecy about the suffering servant who "took up our pain, and bore our suffering" and "yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted" (Isa 53:4). That is what we considered... This word – considered – does not suggest a fleeting impression; on the contrary, it expresses careful consideration. In other Bible passages the same expression is used to describe skill: for example, the tabernacle must be made by skilled workers (Ex 26:1). Similarly here, in Syria, skilled men are needed to rebuild the church buildings, schools, bridges and homes that have been destroyed by the war. You need skilled men who are able to determine what must be done, and are also able to plan and actually perform those tasks.

What the prophet is saying here, therefore, is that seeing the suffering of the Messiah, it was not a fleeting impression, but real, careful consideration that led to the conclusion that the man was suffering because of God's punishment. Yet it was him who took up our pain and bore our suffering. This short connecting word – yet – is significant. Instead of 'yet', we could also say: 'surely' or simply: 'but'. He bore our pain but we thought he was suffering because of himself. What is more, the prophet says in the previous verse that we were so sure in our belief that we "held him in low esteem" (Isa 53:3). We did not really care him about at all. We only paid attention to him until we passed judgement on him, and then we turned away from him. We joined the group of people who despised him.

And this was so because suffering always makes us take a stand. Not only because we want to make sense of suffering, to discover its secret or to acquire some kind of wisdom, but mostly in order to be able to bear suffering and to constantly have the question of hope in our hearts. And the question of hope is not: "Why does evil exist?" but "When is evil going to end?" The question of hope is not trying to find some clever wisdom that we can tell sufferers, but rather investigating whether we can suffer together with the sufferers. One of the great insights of Christ's suffering is that He also had to bear our judgement: we held the firm conviction, after careful consideration, that He was being punished by God.

2. The second passage is an excerpt from the story of the Emmaus disciples (Lk 24:13-36). In this story, too, we read the word 'but'. Two disciples tell a "stranger" who Jesus was, what he did, what happened to him, how he was betrayed, sentenced to death and crucified. This Jesus

was “a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people” (Lk 24:19 NIV). And yet, he was betrayed, sentenced to death and killed. The evangelist does not detail the way the disciples tell the story. We, on the other hand, can hear all words and deeds of Jesus in this one expression: he was powerful before God and all the people. So powerful was he, the disciples go on to say, that “we had hoped he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Lk 24:21). Let us carefully inspect how this idea is introduced: they say “but we had hoped...” The same word – but – appears here as well, implying a painful contrast. The prophet says that we did not recognise God’s solution in the sufferings of the Messiah – that is, we came to the wrong conclusion. And now the disciples say the same, we came to the wrong conclusion, we misjudged the situation. We had hoped that this mighty Jesus would bring us redemption, but it has been three days since all our hopes have been shattered.

It is not only suffering that makes us take a stand; we must also ask questions when we see a miracle. Because if we see the working of divine powers – and this is indeed what we see in the words and deeds of Jesus – we must try to make sense of them. And these questions open up in front of us the gateway to hope in the same way. Not only do we ask where evil comes from, we also ask: Where does good come from? And we also ask whether God’s good is a mightier power than all powers of evil. And we also ask whether we may hope that when evil does end, it does not simply mean a short relief from suffering, but indeed the arrival of blessing and peace.

3. The last passage I have read out from the Bible relates the joyful realisation disciples make and the events that follow. The stranger with whom they have shared the story and death of Jesus stays with them for the night. When he breaks the bread and gives thanks, the disciples finally recognise him: this stranger is not an ignorant pilgrim, but Jesus Himself. And this means that what the women and Peter have been telling them is true: Jesus is alive! He has risen! It is truly Him! It is not a possibility, an alternative they recognise, but Christ Himself! And this is what matters! The evangelist goes on to say that the disciples “got up and returned at once to Jerusalem” (Lk 24:33 NIV) – In other translations, the expression “they rose up” is used, the same word – rise – that we use for the resurrection of Jesus. I am aware that it is a shaky interpretation: suggesting that the disciples themselves have risen. Still, I feel it is not a coincidence that the evangelist chooses this word. He uses it to indicate what it means to rise from sadness, to rise from misery, to rise from danger, to rise from the horrors of war, to rise from fear – to rise and return to Jerusalem –, and utter the word ‘but’ for the third time. This third utterance, however, is not our own sad word, but God’s resurrecting word.

We believed that God also threw Him away – but He bore our pains!

We hoped in vain that He would resurrect His people – but God resurrected Him!

We thought that we hoped for peace and blessing in vain – but He conquered death through His own death!

We thought we could never return home – but God turns our misery into something good.

We thought that evil would never end – but God has kept all of His promises.

We thought one thing – but God thought another.

We cannot stop thinking about evil – but God has ensured that there is good in this world.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, both now and always, Amen.