

Sermon 25.8.2024 St Nicholas, Helsinki

What offends you? —

I have been extremely offended this week by the incident that took place in a remote forest creek in the North-East Finland. Biologists were studying fresh water pearl mussels when they suddenly realised that a forest machine was about to cross the stream. They tried to stop the driver, who completely disregarded and verbally assaulted them whilst continuing to go about his business, crossing the stream several times.

This stream was one of clear water, one of the very few where these extremely endangered mussels were still multiplying, one that was so obviously being conserved. The forest machine could have taken another route, if the driver had so wished. It might have taken him a few minutes more, whereas these mussels had been there lying in the riverbed for ages. Indeed, some of them were older than this or any forest machine as they can live for over 200 years, filtering hundreds of litres of water a day and making the stream a better place for a plethora of other species. But for the forest machine driver this was just a matter of convenience, perhaps an abuse of the little power he thought to have in a remote forest (where the laws may or may not abide) and where no outsider should come to tell him how to live his life.

Or so he might have thought. On the contrary, I am absolutely convinced that the local people were, and still are, the most offended by this act of gross negligence. Part of their heritage that they are rightly proud of may have been irrecoverably destroyed in a blink of an eye. Indeed, the biologists as well as several volunteers did their best to save the mussels that were left; they washed them and carried them upstream, and now we can only wait and see what will happen to the remnants of the mussel population.

What follows now is an investigation; who is to be blamed for all of this? The individual working with the forest machine obviously takes a great part of the blame, but what about the big Finnish forest company that contracted him to work there? How did they instruct him? How were the company values put into practice?

The scale of destruction is such that the Finnish cabinet minister for environment and climate has demanded that the big company carries full responsibility and pays for the reparations and future conservation work in other places where these mussels are found. Right and good. However, one of the major owners of this company is the very State of Finland, besides the state subsidises the company annually with sums far greater than the possible fines and reparations.

So in the end are we all, as tax-payers in Finland, to be blamed? Aren't we all stake-holders through the state? One body politic in all effective ways. Furthermore, why am I now so scandalised? Wasn't this the same company that was accused of environmental crimes in South America? But did I believe or even care about that? Somehow it feels much closer now. An environmental crisis there, or the use of child labour or shady deals with oppressive regimes in another place, and I am crying for the endangered fresh water pearl mussels in a remote Finnish forest stream.

There are so many reasons to take an offence. The people in our Gospel today are offended by Jesus' teaching of himself as the living bread, and the invitation to eat his flesh and drink his blood to gain eternal life. We may struggle to come to terms with that offence, unless we understand the Jewish culture and mindset of the day. All things were divided into clean and unclean; things that soiled or polluted you, or things that didn't. If you were unclean, you were excluded, simple as that. The state of cleanliness was what mattered, and the flesh and especially the blood were the things that soiled you for sure.

We know from elsewhere in the Gospels that Jesus didn't conform to this thinking. Unlike others, he did not turn away from the people who were considered unclean. His touch was exceptional; he didn't contaminate himself by touching the sick and the sinner. On the contrary, his touch cleansed, healed and restored. Exclusion turned into inclusion, mourning into joy, and they were restored both in their own body and the body political.

Now this is at stake in our Gospel today. Jesus teaches us to abide in him by eating his flesh and drinking his blood. There is no institution of the Eucharist in the Gospel of John, besides this section, so this is a serious matter. By eating his flesh, the body of Christ, you join his community, the body of Christ; by drinking his blood, you share his life blood which now runs through your veins fastening you to his life. This is what the reference to the 'living Father' means. These gifts are more than the manna in the desert, these are the means by which we partake in the divine life of God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. That is why the flesh is useless without the spirit, but the words of Jesus "are spirit and life" in this, our body.

So, "Because of this" many of his disciples were offended, they "turned back and no longer went about with him." They were scandalised, as it is said in the New Testament Greek, and could not be incorporated into this kind of reality that clearly crossed the borders of the cleanliness in the Mosaic law, where there was no playing with blood. Our unity in Christ, is indeed, sacrificial in nature. He shed his blood for our life.

Simon Peter, however, knew better: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

And now comes the tricky part for us, the present day disciples of Jesus, because we too are sacramentally incorporated in to this Holy body of Jesus through Baptism and the Eucharist. The old is left behind, and we are made new so that we are what we eat, the body of Christ. Therefore, we too are holy through him.

So, the question for us today is, whom do we offend and to what end?

Often, when people are offended by the Church, the body of Christ, they are offended for a good reason. The abuse of power, real or imaginary, the unseemly behaviour and uncharitable acts which all take place in our communities, and the people are rightly scandalised. They may even ask, 'what would Jesus do?' Surely not this? And we know that we are judged by being measured against our Master, and all falling short.

However, sometimes, and just sometimes, we might face the fate of our Saviour and be judged exactly because we have followed him more than our own passions or earthly rulers. This happens when the words of Jesus to John the Baptist comes true: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." (Luke 8. 22b-23) Pray God that this too would happen in our midst.

Incidentally, we would do well to remember that John the Baptist ministered by the river, and called people to purify themselves in the stream of clear cleansing water, and rectify their life on emerging from the stream. What a perfect image of the reality that water needs to be running in order to stay clean.

Indeed, there was just an interview in the local Lutheran Parish Federation periodical Kirkko and Kaupunki of the Professor of Environmental Change, Atte Korhola, who spoke about the two lakes in the Holy land, one where Jesus ministered by the Sea of Galilee and the other, we know by the name of the Dead Sea. The first one, he said, is full of life, because the water runs through it, and the second is not, as it's the final destination of the stream with stagnation and death.

So eventually, beloved in Christ, it may be that we as Christians are called to be the sweet water pearl mussels. We are called to minister in the stream and make the passing water clear for all to share and enjoy. It is not our task to turn away but to welcome, to receive and heal, sometimes even at our own expense. And if it happens, that in that process we suffer a loss and digest even a tiniest grain of sand, let us pray that God, by his grace, will turn it into a pearl. Amen.