Lutheran Service of Holy Communion – ECEN Assembly Opening Worship

Sermon (Rev. Grzegorz Giemza, Polish Ecumenical Council

“For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.” (1 Timothy 4,4–5, NIV)

*Our Creator and Lord, we thank you for your Word and ask you to grant us understanding. Amen.*

Dear Sisters and Brothers!

The passage I’ve just read is short, and its message seems unambiguous. First of all, everything God created is good; second of all nothing should be rejected; and thirdly, in consequence, everything should be received. However, we do not treat everything we see as good, and there are many things we do not accept. This means we should look closer at Paul’s message. The context in which these words are situated in the Bible will help us do it. We mustn’t also forget that today in our congregation we are celebrating the Harvest Festival. And so the context of having something to eat is also important for us. It is also not without significance that we are here in an international group, and among us are members of the 12th Assembly of European Christian Environmental Network – an organisation of Christians from various churches connected by the issue of preserving the creation and taking care of it.

Let us have a look at the Bible text. Paul’s words about everything that God created, and that it was god, are pronounced in the context of the arguments within first Christian congregations. It was not yet clear then for the Christians how they should approach the matters of eating or not eating different food. For example, the Jewish law forbade eating certain foods – as it stemmed from the Old Testament. People asked whether Christ’s followers should obey these rules or not. The arguments were also caused by the issue of eating meat from offerings to the gods in pagan temples. Many claimed that the meat was impure and should not be eaten. In the New Testament Paul explains on numerous occasions that through the face of God which was shown in Him, Christ also changes the way of looking at the laws of the Old Testament. In today’s text Paul reaches with his arguments to the first chapters of the Bible. The history of creation presents the stages of the creation of the world by God. Always, at the end of each stage, we find the summary: „it was good”, and in the end of the creation: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen 1,31). Paul’s conclusion is clear: if what God created is good, it is also good to eat, and so what God gives us should not be rejected. Moreover, it should be received with gratitude, joy and satisfaction. Paul does not agree that using what is good should be a cause for the pricks of our conscience that we disobeyed God’s law by not abiding by the rules concerning eating or not eating certain foods.

We shall return to the issue of breaking God’s norms, that is the sin, a little later. Now a little about gratitude for the fact that God listens to our prayer “give us this day our daily bread” – we will look at the context of today’s feast. Received with gratitude – joy and satisfaction of what we get and what we work for. The harvest is a symbol of it. On the one hand, it is God’s gift, on the other hand – a result of a man’s work. I am personally connected neither with agriculture nor with food processing industry. From time to time I go shopping and I buy things. To be honest, while shopping I do not think how much work and God’s blessing were necessary, so I can put in my basket the blue cheese I like. I’m irritated when I see that there is no milk with just the right amount of fat on the shelf. I have to admit, to myself and to you, that it is hard for me to be grateful every day. Two years ago I was in Burkina Faso, one of the poorest countries in the world. It was there that I understood what it means to have access to fresh water. It was a really important experience for me. For a few days I stayed with a Polish group in a village in the north of Burkina Faso, and the return from there was a difficult journey which lasted all day – we travelled 150 km in 11 hours. When I remember how after these few days and the journey I was able to take a shower, I still feel that pleasure, joy and gratitude. It is hard to feel the same while brushing teeth every day, when clear water flows from the tap, it seems so logical.

Today’s celebration is an opportunity to thank God for the daily bread, as we have it, even if sometimes we don’t have enough. For the fact that we live in good conditions, even if we sometimes encounter difficulties.

And what about sin? I promised to return to this topic. Jesus said that the man is not defiled by what he eats, but the intentions with which he influences his surroundings. It is about the words form the Gospel of Matthew: “What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them” (Matt 15,11). When a man enters the stage of the world, there appear also the creations of his hands, thoughts, fantasies, desires. And they don’t always bring what is good… That is why, despite the fact that God’s creation is good, not everything that surrounds us is also good. When God created man and gave him the earth to subdue (Gen 1,28), he took the words literally and decided he was lord of the creation. In relation to the creation, he put himself in God’s place.

It is worth considering at this point what people do with the creation entrusted to them, if they are sensible or driven by greed. Today we know that people use what God created in quite an unreasonable way. An example? On one hand, we are able to produce more food, because we use substances to protect the plants, but this causes the bees to suffer, killed by some of the sprays. Other example. On the one hand, in case of a crop failure we can import what we lack, all the natural resources. On the other hand, we have failed harvests, like in case of apples this year. Why do we have call a great harvest a disaster? Because the buying-in prices of such produce fall drastically and the suppliers are in trouble. And what about the global warming and climate change which affect us in various ways? Some people experience them through natural disasters, others through a surprisingly warm summer. Some complain of a lack of snow for Christmas, others suffer as a result of a drought.

Perhaps I have tarred everything with the proverbial the same brush, but the problems I signalled undeniably belong to the complex of issues connected with climate justice. We are now aware that what happens in one part of the world influences its other part. Ecology and climate change are areas in which Christians should get engaged – and they do. Since yesterday the conference I mentioned at the beginning takes place in Katowice. Its topic is: On the way to economic and social justice – “To give you a future with hope” (Jer 29,11). The issue of climate change will also definitely be present in Katowice at the UN Climate Summit on 3–14 December this year. I hope it will also be discussed in congregations of the member churches of the Polish Ecumenical Council.

Gratitude and commitment are two key attitudes of a Christian. Gratitude for God’s blessing, for what God gives us, for the fact that He is by us, takes care for us by sacrificing himself in Christ. And commitment, because as people to whom life and abilities were bestowed by him, to each in a different way, we can take care of all creation, and through that of the people in the whole world. Amen.