

## **Hope**

Bishop Teemu Laajasalo's comments in response to the World Council of Churches' General Secretary Jerry Pillay's speech at the church's Mission Partnership Consultation in Helsinki on 27 August 2024.

Your Eminences and Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear General Secretary,

Welcome to the Diocese of Helsinki. Thank you for your excellent keynote speech, General Secretary. And thank you for the opportunity to make a short speech in response. When I say short, I should tell you that I was told I had exactly ten minutes. No more than that.

There's a joke about this. What does it mean when a Lutheran pastor looks at the clock in the middle of a sermon? The answer is nothing.

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In the autumn four years ago in Finland and throughout the world the pandemic had closed churches and separated people from each other. My 96-year-old grandmother had to move from her own home into a nursing home just before the pandemic began. The pandemic also closed the nursing home. Relatives were no longer allowed to visit, and the elderly residents were isolated from each other inside the home. Apart from three visits a day from nurses in full protective gear, my grandmother was otherwise completely alone. We could only communicate with her by phone. Grandma had had a pretty difficult life. Her childhood had been spent in poverty. She had lost two husbands and two children. She had lived through the wars in Finland.

The sun is shining here today in Helsinki, but four years ago the weather in November was very different. It was dark all the time, and the sleet rained down from the heavens.

One night in November my grandmother rang me to say she had something important for me to do. I asked her what I could do to help. She said she needed a sunhat – could I buy one for her? Before I could tell her to look out of her window at the November darkness, she said she needed a sunhat because spring was almost upon us, and she wanted to sit in the garden – the pandemic would surely be over by then. I told her it was a great idea, and I'd definitely buy her a sunhat. Then we hung up.

After a while the phone rang again. It was my grandma. She asked if I could buy her some new party shoes at the same time – the ones she'd always used for dancing. I wondered what this could mean. My grandma was in a wheelchair. She didn't need any dancing shoes.

Then she said that as soon as the pandemic was over, she'd like to go immediately to a traditional Helsinki restaurant – just her and me. And she needed some shoes. I told her it was a great idea, and I'd definitely buy her some shoes. We hung up again. The phone rang once more that evening. My grandma asked if a hairdresser could be arranged to do her hair at that moment. I told her it would take a few days to buy the sunhat and shoes, but I could arrange a hairdresser for her through the nursing home as soon as tomorrow.

This happened on a Thursday night. On Friday the hairdresser came. On Saturday she was hospitalised. On Sunday she died.

I tell you this story because I think it encapsulates the meaning of hope. Hope doesn't depend on the environment or what's going on. There's something in the nature of hope that sustains life. It wasn't an accident that my grandma had a long life – she was full of hope.

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There are many important things in the General Secretary's speech I could comment on, but I'll focus only on one.

You said that "Most importantly, what churches can offer people is hope." You continued with two important explanations of what hope is about.

"Hope is an eschatological gift for the future; but with the resurrection of Jesus, hope breaks into the present."

"Genuine hope means working with God as instruments to bring in God's kingdom of justice, righteousness, love and peace."

Hope is both gift and mission. Gift and mission.

The concept of hope as a gift from God is connected with the idea that even if no human hope is visible or felt, human beings still have permission to hope because Christ himself is hope. By placing our trust in him, we can receive hope as a loan from heaven.

Because of this gift of hope, human beings have the miraculous ability to see hope even when there really isn't any. Even if the situation appears hopeless at a cognitive level, we possess the ability to think about whether things could be better someday. Hope allows us to think that every trial will be overcome.

What the church has to say about hope as a gift tells us that the hope Christ gives is something the world can never give. But it's also the kind of hope this world can never take from us. And hope lives amidst hopelessness – even when we can't properly feel it.

Hope as mission means we must try, in spite of everything, to maintain an atmosphere of hope and bring help, consolation and fresh opportunities amidst our neighbours' hopelessness. We must support those who stumble, raise up those who have fallen, show mercy to those who are struggling.

Hope isn't a calculation of probability. Hope isn't merely a feeling of hopefulness. Hope is a mission we are given. Martin Luther summarises this at the beginning of his "Table Talk": Everything that is done in the world is done by hope." ("Alles, was in der Welt erreicht wurde, wurde aus Hoffnung getan.") Our mission is to resist gloom and hopelessness, to encourage our neighbours, and to reassure them that everything will be fine once again.

A new reality has been awakened in Finland and in many other countries. Children and young people are suffering from depression, even though many life indicators suggest that they should have much

better life opportunities than previous generations. The experts are seeking explanations. One of them, of course, is the lack of hope.

Children and young people hear about climate concerns, the pandemic, ceaseless wars and the threat of a world war in the news.

At the same time the demands of responsibility appear to be constantly growing – and among younger and younger people.

We adults, with a longer perspective on life than children and young people, must focus on maintaining hope. What we're currently struggling with isn't permanent. As past generations have survived their own crises, we will survive these difficulties. The future promises joy and light. We must always proclaim the gospel more than law. We must proclaim mercy more than what is demanded. We must proclaim life more than death.

The church builds hope. It doesn't merely talk about it. The church builds new beginnings and creates new horizons for people amidst



their troubles. At the same time the church is founded on the idea that hope never depends solely on us. Hope is Christ himself.

We priests and bishops working in the church can be confident of this, be thankful amidst our successes and comforted when we fail.

May God bless you all. May he bless the work of each one of you and our days together in Helsinki!