

Sermon--Opening Worship

Rev. Elena Bondarenko (Russia)

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations (Isaiah 61:1–4).

Dear brothers and sisters,

It is an old model: first people build temples and houses—temples for worship and houses to live in—and then certain times come, and they destroy temples and faith, houses and their own selves. But the violent times come to an end, and descendants come to the ruins and mourn, and pray and decide to restore, to renew the “ruined cities, the devastations of many generations,” as Isaiah says.

In my country, in Russia, this year we are celebrating not only the 500th anniversary of Reformation—it is also the 100th anniversary of two Russian revolutions, which brought about the fall of monarchy and persecution of the church as a consequence. Thousands of churches were closed and destroyed, pastors were executed, homes were ruined and whole nations were removed from their historical places. Of course, it happened not all at once, but the beginning of all these tragic events was 1917.

When everything was done to make the Church silent and dead, it is a real miracle, that the Bride of Christ, the Church, survived—perhaps, it is because one cannot exist without faith, but we as Christians believe that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church, as Jesus our Savior and Lord promised us.

God's promises are really held. For 2000 years the Christian church has been teaching, proclaiming the gospel and administering Holy Sacraments. The gates of hell tried to prevail, but the Church is victorious because Jesus promised it.

Do we believe in God's promises? Do we know God's promises?

This year we see wonderful colorful posters for the Assembly of Lutheran World Federation. Let us play with them a little bit: we can put them in different sequence every time. I think the sequence could be like this: creation—human beings—grace—salvation. This is the order of biblical history, this is also a series of the most important of God's promises to us.

God is our Father and Creator, God created and continues to create life in different forms. And human beings are one of God's creations—a very interesting creation in

fact. However, human beings need God's grace and salvation because of the tragedy of human sin, and God donates us God's grace and salvation in God's Son Jesus Christ. This is a very important promise for all of us: the promise of salvation for every person.

God's promises concern life and everyday existence, our daily bread and all our works, God's promises open for us a truth that everything makes sense, all our deeds and even thoughts and feelings have a meaning, and the ultimate goal is that we, with all our thoughts and deeds, can be saved.

Just imagine every single day in a world without God, without our faith in God—it is not a fantasy, it was a usual routine in Russia for almost ninety years. Atheism was an official ideology, church going people were absolutely marginalized, excluded from society and deprived not only of privileges, but sometimes even of basic standards of human rights and protection. More than that, they were persecuted for their faith. The life of most average people was a life without God, without the beauty of the Holy Scriptures and church liturgy, a life without God's guidance and support in the chaos of times.

It is much worse than a life in exile and persecution, because life without God is a blind alley. There are no promises in it. Only one fearful promise that everything and everybody die in their own time—and that is all.

It is a victory of the Church that we are here today, on a wonderful morning, and it is still Easter time. Nature, our prayers and a communion of brothers and sisters proclaim that Christ is risen! So is the Church. In spite of all tribulations the Church is also alive and people need it to sanctify their lives, thoughts, emotions, and deeds. The seeds of the Kingdom of God were planted, and the green sprouts are visible, the Kingdom is growing, and some day it will rejoice in its victory in the world, as Christ rejoiced in Christ's resurrection, as the Church rejoiced in its survival.

The Church faces new challenges now: wars and persecution are still there in the world, technologies are developing with a cosmic speed, and many new ethical questions are raised. What will be the reaction of Christians? Do they still believe in God's promises? How will they answer these new questions?

This is what determines our way in the future. We do not know many answers, and it is right not to know, because we are just humans. Let us humbly confess our ignorance and trust in God our Creator. What is in our power is to be honest and honestly to proclaim God's grace and to preach creation and salvation not for sale. This was the basis of the Reformation 500 years ago, this is the principle which we renew in a modern way nowadays.

God's gifts are not for sale. God gives us freedom and grace in abundance. God comes to save us in our time. And it is time to rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated, it is time to worship God according to the tradition, but also with our own, new song.

This is our faith, hope and worship. Amen.