

## **“Jesus Christ is my shield, my fortress, my refuge!”**

It is good to be here. In the community of God's saints. In the house of our Father. In the presence of our God. It is good to be with Him and it is good to be among His people.

Things are changing... I assume you have noticed that. Things have always been changing, but not that fast. The last Sunday we were looking forward to our next Forum right after today's service. In the beginning of the week it became clear that we need to cancel both our Forum and our Fellowship Lunch.

On Thursday we decided how to celebrate the Holy Communion, and on Friday we received the letter from our bishops that all Holy Communion services are suspended until ... this emergency is over. Things change rapidly... by days...

So, what is happening with this world? How do we as Christians respond to it? Where do we get the strength and courage to stand firm in situations like this one? What is happening, how we respond, where to get strengths?

**What is happening?** What do you think? What is your impression? It seems that we, the proud people of 21<sup>st</sup> century, are being reminded about a few facets of our existence that many have almost forgotten or at least neglected.

One of them is our mortality. Yes, this obvious and inevitable reality of our lives. Yet, because of all the advances in medicine we have been to great extent lead into this false assurance that no sickness can threaten us anymore.

Appears it can and it does. Such pestilences and plagues are nothing new. They have been around as long as history bears its witness. But... we have forgotten that they can intrude into our comfortable lives and cause quite a bit of distress. Which leads to the fear that we see in our society. Fear of not having enough. Fear of chaos. Ultimately, the fear of death. Yes, we are mortals...

Another reminder is about our lack of control over our lives. “Your life is in your hands! Do whatever you want!” It is true that during the last century we have achieved incredible progress when it comes to development of technologies and improvement of our lives.

It has been a marvellous journey. Which sadly has encouraged many to believe that we can control reality and adjust it to our whims. But this illusion is now being painfully shattered. The well organized and comfy world which we still inhabited just two weeks ago is crashing down. And we are not in control...

How should society respond to these reminders? We pray that the world would respond with repentance. Turning away from all the idols that can give neither life nor grant security, to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the source of life and the source of our security. We will pray and hope for this to happen.

Another reminder is about the importance of ordinary things. Things which we are so used to that we don't actually appreciate them much. On Wednesday I led the Lenten service at TLH. When the service is over I would usually greet all who are present... some handshakes, some gentle hugs... Not this time. Physical contact was not allowed. It felt so strange and so wrong.

Suddenly I realized, and it surprised me, how important these things are. We are bodily beings. We are not just minds traveling around. We are bodies, and we need this bodily interaction, we need to feel others.

That is one of the reasons why Jesus instituted the Holy Communion in a way He did it. So that we could touch Him. As Mary Magdalen touched Jesus' feet after His resurrection, as the apostles touched Jesus when He appeared to them, the same way He wants us to be able to experience this bodily contact with Him. To touch Him. Now we are instructed not to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

At least not together. For how long? I don't know. Jesus said: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." In the next couple of weeks, we will consider how to provide the Holy Communion.

Or think about the Divine Service. We are so used to it. It just happens to be here for us every Sunday. What a big deal?! Surely, from time to time we have reflected on how good it is that we still can come together to worship.

But no one expected that it can be taken away from us. But now imagine – that you may not be allowed to worship in the community of God's saints... for how long? No one knows... This is not something that is not essential, for us as Christians this is the most essential gathering.

Initiated, commanded and held by our Triune God Himself. That is His Service to us! How can we cancel it! Again, we will consider how we can keep gathering in one way or another. See, thus, we are reminded about the things that truly matter and which we may for too long have taken for granted.

Another reminder is about the blessing of our earthly government. When everything goes more or less well, as it has been for many, many years, often people mention government only to criticize and despise it.

Times like these remind us of how important our government is. How great a responsibility is entrusted to those leaders! How fervently we need to pray to the Lord to grant them wisdom and courage to make the right decisions.

I was pleasantly surprised, I almost applauded when a few days ago one of TV journalists said that we really need to appreciate our leaders and to support them as much as possible, that there is no time for political games and bickering, that we all need to get behind them. Wow! They should say it more often.

The last weeks have definitely reminded us about it, but... there is this uncharted territory before us. Many weeks, months of uncertainly and probably growing fear and irrational panicking among people. Dear Lord, help our leaders, bless them with your wisdom!

**The next question – how do we as Christians respond to this situation?**

First, how do we think about this situation? For years we have complained that our affluence has made people complacent and indifferent to the Gospel. That was true. The situation is changing right before our eyes.

And again, for us as the Church, this is nothing new. The Church has experienced similar situations many times, beginning with the first centuries in Roman empire, during the Reformation time and even after. Christians often needed to be creative to find ways how to gather together.

Plagues and pestilences more serious than COVID19 from time to time have reduced population by a third and more. And there was no cure that would help. As we read it today, Jesus actually warned us that it will happen. What now?

This is the time when we can show that we take seriously the great commandments – “love your neighbour as yourself”, and “consider others as more significant than yourselves”. That we not only say it, but mean it.

We have glorious history, so many great and inspiring Christian examples. We can learn what our brothers and sisters did when plagues and pestilences struck their world. They tried to serve their neighbours as much as they could.

When even closest relatives abandoned those who were sick and weak, Christians stayed behind and often joyfully risked with their well-being and even their lives to help those in need. Many died trying to save strangers.

As historians tell us, these acts of loving service explain why Christianity grew so rapidly in Roman empire, that was otherwise hostile to the Gospel. For people saw that these Christians had something unique, something they wanted.

Peace that surpasses all our understanding. Selfless commitment to those in need. The strength and courage that comes when you know that you are loved more than you can comprehend it, when you know what and who awaits you in the life to come. These acts of selfless love bore fruit. The Church grew. Many and many repented and believed in the Gospel.

How does this apply to our situation? We come from the same family. Jesus' family. We have received the same grace, the same love of Jesus Christ. We have the same strength and courage. It is given to us by the Holy Spirit.

So, how do we love our neighbours? Five hundred years ago Luther wrote the following in the midst of one such plague which took also his daughter's life: I will “use medicine; take potions which can help... [I will] shun persons and places wherever our neighbour does not need my presence or has recovered...

[I will] avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others. [But] if my neighbour needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely. See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.”

I think that roughly the same applies to us. Be as careful as you can to stay healthy, and at the same time, look out for those who may need your help. Keep in touch with your extended family. Visit your lonely neighbours.

We are communal beings. For some loneliness and separation can be harder to bear than sickness. We all need human contact. Ask brothers and sisters in Christ whether they may need some help. A conversation. Some simple and kind words of encouragement. Maybe help with shopping, and so on.

Reach out to those who don't know Jesus, if you have such an opportunity. Ask about their well-being, share with them where your hope and peace come from. Ask our Father to grant you His wisdom and opportunities to serve and witness.

Brothers and sisters, we are the light of the world, we are a city on a hill, we are messengers of the Good News, we are called to bring hope and peace, joy and comfort into this world, and this is our chance to do just that.

Also, be gracious and forgiving to your brothers and sisters who are in positions of responsibility both in our church and in our congregation. This is something new for all of us. We try to do what we can, praying for God's guidance, listening to what others are doing, trying to be obedient to the authorities and also to remain faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ.

I am quite sure, we will make mistakes, we will fail to react as quickly as may be needed, or we may overreact, we will come up with suggestions that don't satisfy everyone, please, be gracious and forgiving, we are all together in this.

Thus, we come to our third and last question. **Where do we get the strength and courage to stand firm in situations like this one?** One of our little brothers often provides the answer – the Bible. That's right. The word of God.

The eternal Word of God, who became flesh. Jesus Christ. He really left His comfort zone, He left His Father Kingdom and took the form of a servant, He really emptied Himself.

He endured all the inconveniences – hostility, beating and flogging, and He did not open His mouth to complain. He exposed Himself not only to all the sicknesses of mankind, He exposed Himself to the deadliest of all – our sin.

He went not just an extra mile and He didn't just take some risks for the sake of His friends. No, He went all the way to the cross and stretched His hands to be pierced by nails. And He did it for His enemies. He did it for us. He did it for you. This is how much He cares for you.

And now, all authority in heaven and on earth is given to Him. To Jesus. He is in charge. That's why we can rejoice together with Psalmist: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most-High, will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place – the Most-High, who is my refuge – no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent." The Scripture are saturated with words of encouragement.

They are addressed to all God's children. To you. "The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."

Jesus Christ is your fortress, your refuge, your shield. When we know this, when we are continually reminded of the most precious love of God, of His promises, of what He has done for us, we too can stand firm, not on our own, but in the strength of the One who loved us and sacrificed His life for us.

For we know, that at the end, where He is, we will be also. With Him. With Jesus. Amen.