

In our midst

Matt. 13: 24-30

Kaisamari Hintikka, Sermon at Espoo Cathedral, 10.2.2019

In the last few years I've often travelled by train between Geneva and Strasbourg. During the journey you have to change train two or three times. One of these changes is always at Basel. You cross the border between Switzerland and France in the process. You would scarcely notice the border if it weren't for the customs officers monitoring the flow of people.

Over the centuries, however, there have been many wars over this border and where it should be.

And today's Gospel also speaks of a border crossing. The kingdom of heaven is a central theme of Matthew's Gospel. Indeed, the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God, runs like a red thread through the entire proclamation of Jesus: the Creator of everything has not stayed in heavenly seclusion, but reaches out to all that is created, towards humanity, breaking down the border between heaven and earth. A new time for the world has begun. "The kingdom of God has come near."

This message is so radical, so important, that Jesus speaks of it in the New Testament some two hundred times. He speaks about the kingdom directly, and he also tries to explain it with the help of parables.

Seventy-two years ago the Paris Peace Treaties were signed, finally resolving the outstanding issues of the Second World War. The price of peace was the imposition of new borders which fundamentally changed Finnish society. For those uprooted from the ceded areas and many of their descendants this redrawing of the border continues to mould a large part of their identity. However, the biggest challenge was perhaps between cultures and the feeling of otherness experienced by those crossing the border.

We have a deep-seated need within us to erect borders. Borders around our own continent, around our own country, around our own culture, congregation or faith community. We want to define who belongs, and who is excluded and why. When there are few means or there is little will to resolve common problems, walls are erected, and hostile images are created.

Shared rules and norms are needed if the weakest and most vulnerable are to be protected. So borders must be drawn between the right and wrong acts, and never between the right and wrong people.

We feel safe when we're among those who are like us and who think like us. Drawing a line between people like us and the weak seems to offer a solution to the problems we face. And yet... Even among the like-minded each of us is different and unique; each of us is shaped by our own life story and history. There is no community so small that it isn't multifaceted. The community of the like-minded is an illusion, a fantasy that doesn't exist.

But it doesn't have to be like that. As in Jesus's parable, the wheat and the weeds are allowed to grow in the same field. We too make a good life and interact with a wide range of people. What unites us is not that we are the same, but that we are all images of God. Images of God and therefore of equal value. The good wheat has been sown in us all.

The border between good and evil, right and wrong, sin and salvation does not run between us. It runs through us. In each of us live good and evil, selfishness and love. Each of us is at the same time a sinner and righteous, guilty and merciful. So none of us is in a position to point at anyone and say: go away, you don't belong to the club, you don't belong here. When the workers in the field ask the master in Jesus's parable, "Do you want us to go and root out the weeds?" he replies "No" – promising that he himself will see to it all in time.

What then should we do?

Jesus urges us to seek the kingdom of God. “Your kingdom come,” he teaches us to pray. Instead of making borders, we are to pray for the coming of God’s kingdom and live in such a way that it can already break into this reality.

The kingdom of heaven is a gift, a secret, a mystery, which is completely different from anything we might imagine, and whose reality we will only understand when it meets its fulfilment. It is as God sees it. “The kingdom of God is among you,” Jesus promises. Already – and not yet.

Let’s return to that old station in Basel for a moment. The eagle-eyed traveller will notice a small brass plaque on the wall. It reveals that between 1917 and 1918, when the First World War was tearing the world apart, the people of Basel welcomed 192,000 refugees from occupied France. At such moments we catch a glimpse of the reality to which God calls us. A glimpse of the hospitality, solidarity and love that cross borders.

In the last few months I’ve been asked several times what the Diocese of Espoo is like. From what I have seen and heard I can say that the Diocese of Espoo seems to be a precious community. There is a variety of parishes here. The parishes give a home to a wide range of people: seekers and sensitive questioners; critics and revivalists; those responsible for all kinds of different witness. What is precious is the understanding that in the midst of all this diversity we are united by the invitation to build this diocese and the Church of Christ together. It’s an invitation that transcends any border between us. It’s an invitation that will carry this diocese forward.

The kingdom of heaven is already in our midst – even today, here in the chaotic and ever-changing reality around us. Even today, here in Espoo Cathedral. The kingdom of heaven has come into our midst in Jesus Christ. In the God who is born as a human being, lives a human life, dies at our human hands. In the Christ who overcomes death. In the atonement, which calls us to be reconciled with each other.

In a little while we will be invited to the table. In the bread and wine Christ gives himself to us. Christ is broken, so that our borders may be broken down, and the connection that is already in our midst may again be intact.

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