

## **THE LIGHT OF CHRIST STILL SHINES ACROSS THE PLAINS OF OSTROBOTHNIA**

Sermon at Kauhajoki by Bishop Simo Peura 28.9.08

### *The sorrow of Ostrobothnia*

Sorrow has descended on the plains of Ostrobothnia and choked our inner strength. Kauhajoki and the whole region has lived a silent week which has been filled with anguish. People of the north know their limits and respect their Lord. It has been a time for kneeling in humility and submission. Our sadness is silent and spare.

We have sought comfort in others' company. It is better to be together than alone, even if there is so little to say. Despite this talk of insignificance and smallness, our hearts cry out in anguish to God. There is a place for this in the church of Kauhajoki. It opens from the ground, upwards towards heaven.

We are comforted by the fact that the sorrow is shared – it spreads through the whole nation. From far and wide have come strong messages of support which have helped sustain us at this time. We know that in our sister churches prayers will be offered for the victims, their families, the staff of the school and for local people. Those prayers have sustained us. The time for tomorrow's grief is tomorrow.

### *The burden of the Finns*

A weighty burden has been placed on the shoulders of Finnish society this week. Bearing it takes strength. Now is a time of severe introspection. It is imperative to ask why all is not well in Finland. Should we be doing something quite different? What kind of society have we built? What values have guided us?

People who are filled with anxiety are bursting to let it out, and preferably easily and swiftly. But searching for the guilty doesn't help. Oversight or negligence must of course be investigated. Laws must be revised. Physical and spiritual support will be needed for a long time to help people manage and continue their lives. But still we must peer deeper into our selves, and address those basic and existential questions. None of us can now avoid this self-examination.

### *The blind and the seeing*

The Gospel reading today tells of the blind and the seeing. Jesus heals a man who for all his life has been blind. The Pharisees are outraged. They dispute the event. They try to show that the one who performed the miracles, Jesus, is suspect, is sinful. On these grounds the miracle could not be true, good or right. And when the blind man did not give in, they mocked him.

The man's answers were assuring. "Whether he's guilty or not, I don't know. But I do know that I, who once was blind, can now see." Asked how it had happened, he answered: "I just answered that, but you weren't listening." The man's answers were not acceptable and he was thrown out of the gathering.

The story leads us to ask which of us are blind and which can see. The Pharisees could have made this distinction themselves at any time in their lives. They had the knowledge and the learning. But they didn't believe their own eyes or ears. On the other hand the man was totally blind from birth. Only after meeting Jesus did his view of the world open for him.

### *Children's and youths' distress*

We have heard in recent days of the distress of children and the young. The message has been simple. "Parents and other adults must be with their children, must give them time, must speak

with them.” Their presence has been needed this last week. The significance of the message must go further: adults must now see the importance of inspecting their own lifestyle and their daily value decisions. For their children’s sake they must give up whatever consumes their time. They must concentrate on everyday life.

The tragic events in Kauhajoki show us unequivocally the importance a philosophy of life and of values. At this point we must ask if somehow we have been blind. We have celebrated the quality of our schools’ results internationally. Little by little we have lost sight of the fact that our childrens’ ability to form values and opinions is weak. Facts and knowledge are mastered, but the creation of values and convictions is not. They are left up to the individual. They should not be spoken about, but neither should they be meddled with.

The teaching of right and wrong begins at home, in the close company of others. Values are learnt in the making of choices in everyday life. A local girl explained this in a TV interview: “My mother says that now I must be friendly with others. I could even give them my handky.”

Parenthood means speaking with children. Adults must offer them love as well as the wherewithal for developing life-affirming choices. The idea that a child chooses his or her own values freely, independent of interactive discussion with others, is a misleading illusion. If you care for your children don’t leave them alone with their computers. If you care, don’t hit them or let *them* use violence. If you care, accept your children for what they are, and help them to manage without aggression or violence.

Have we adults been so blind? Or is the distress of children and young people somehow linked to the shallowness of the adult world? This is the discussion that all Finns must engage in. It requires the involvement of the whole nation.

*When those blinded by sorrow and agony begin to see*

When sorrow and agony really strike it is hard for a person to see ahead. Despite that, in a heart filled with sorrow there is still longing. A person hopes that God will not desert them, and that they will see their loved one again. A small ray of light relieves their sorrow for a moment.

The story of the blind man comforts us today. He had suffered blindness all his life. Surely he had never expected any change, nor longed to regain his sight. The Bible tells that Jesus noticed him, blind at the roadside, and went to him.

In the middle of darkness Christ sees us blinded by sorrow, by fear, by guilt and by distress. He comes to us, once or more often, and brings His light. Christ is the light in our ever dark and unforgiving world.

And when Christ comes to us, little by little we begin to see our own situation and that of our loved ones who need us. Although it is still dark we can now hear Christ’s voice. His words are merciful and forgiving. “I am here and speaking with you. Look at me. I have suffered for humankind, and broken the bonds of death,” he assures those blinded by sorrow. Through the darkness these words and promises of Christ open new sights and visions of the future. To weakness of faith comes strength, and to Christian hope a clear focus. The light of Christ shines out also across these plains of Ostrobothnia. Amen.