

WE WILL MEET WHEN THE DANGER IS OVER

The car ferry Estonia had its bow gate removed by a large breaker. It happened in the Baltic Sea on a stormy September night. The ship capsized. Inside was chaos. When the boat lay floating on its side, some of the passengers managed to climb outside and up on it. It has been told that two people who had never seen each other before, sat side by side on the hull, a man and a woman. As the waves were swiping towards them, they gave each other a promise: When this is over, we shall meet in a café in Stockholm. Then they jumped overboard and swam away from the side of the ship through the dark waters. On September 28, 1994, Estonia sank in the Baltic sea. Many passengers died. But it is said that the two who met each other sitting on top of the capsized hull, survived. The next spring, they met in a café in Stockholm.

I had been worried for a long time because of the news about the corona virus, that took so many lives in China. When the virus spread to more and more countries, I started cancelling meetings and seminars that had been planned for a long time. On Thursday March 12, the crisis was a fact. The Norwegian government held a press conference. Our Prime Minister made a deep impact when she said that this was the most comprehensive crisis in our country since the Second World War.

In the hours that followed, the story about Estonia started rolling as a movie through my mind. The story of those who sat on the sinking ship and promised to meet in a café. A song came to my mind. "We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when, but I know we'll meet again some sunny day". This strong motive meant so much to so many during the great war. I sat down with my mobile phone and started writing.

We will meet when the danger is over,

we will meet in a crowded café ...

Some weeks earlier I had been in a small church in one of the suburbs around Oslo. The church has a large, pitched roof. It is situated on a hill, overlooking the entire district that it serves. This congregation had invited me. They wanted to sing some hymns that I wrote and translated. Some of them are from the Iona Fellowship in Scotland, and they are being widely used in the Church of Norway. The February sun was shining. A little choir was practicing. I rigged a small PA system and tuned my guitar. The Church Coffee was being prepared. People started arriving.

What struck me, was all the faces shining with love for this little church. People came with the expectation of being met and to meet. The day after the Government's press conference, the Church of Norway announced its own measures. Churches were closed, services cancelled, even the confirmations, the spring's most beautiful adventure, were postponed. People could not meet in the small church anymore. No parents could carry their child to the baptismal font. No confirmands could walk the aisle in their white cloaks. No bride and bridegroom could meet at the altar, while children with flowers followed, shyly giggling. No one could stretch out their hands to receive the bread and the wine of the Holy Communion. "You don't know what you have till it's gone", a saying goes. I looked at the mobile.

... at the door of a church, where together

we will know that this is a new day.

We will live in a different way.

The two who sat on the side of the ship, gave one another a promise. Promises do bind us together. Sometimes they bind us to life itself. I think that the promise they gave each other, sitting on the

capsized Estonia, may have kept both alive. Why do we live, if not for each other? If we promise each other to endure, the chances that we do endure, are much higher. I wrote:

We should give one another a promise,
that when darkness is done, we'll be there.

I wonder what those two from Estonia talked about when they met in a café in Stockholm. Initially I think they were filled with an immense feeling of joy, just to see each other again. Last time, it was dark. They were surrounded by heavy seas. They knew that they had to fight for their lives in the waves. Now they could let their thoughts journey on hand in hand, through the ice cold, bottomless water. They could think about how a helping hand lifted them on board the raft. How they sustained the long and freezing hours of night, until darkness was split by a floodlight that had located them, and the roaring of the sea was drowned in the sound of a helicopter who said that rescue had arrived. And slowly, slowly, they could let their thoughts return through a long winter behind frozen windowpanes and return to a day in spring. The cherry trees were blooming, the café was full of people and sunshine. Maybe they talked about what they had learned through all this. I kept writing.

When what we've endured, lies behind us,
and when all that we missed, can be shared,
we'll discover its meaning laid bare.

I stopped. It struck me that I did not have time to wait for the answer. I could not wait the way those two from the Estonia had to. This very morning, Saturday March 14, 2020, I had to know what the answer was. What remained? What was the important thing when everything else seemed to be chaotic and without meaning? It was the frail ties to the others. The ties that did not break, and therefore became anchor chains in the storm, or hands who helped aboard the raft while the sea was raging. Another thing struck me. These ties and this reconciliation have a name that I know. My fingers were dancing on the mobile phone keyboard.

But already we sense it, we know it,
that love, only love will bear through.

I have worked as a street minister in Oslo City Mission. From then on, and from long before, I knew this. Relations to other people are cords that are woven with this thing what we neither can describe fully nor contain in words alone. It is the word that you have on your lips, and that you only dare to whisper. For you know that it cannot be spoken without a lifelong and all-encompassing commitment in all relations: l-o-v-e. Be it. Live it. Not so that we should always be on the giving side, but exactly because we sometimes must receive to survive. When I am bowed down or when am on my knees. I know what it means then that somebody is there.

We must carry the burden together ...

The last couple of lines just had to pin down the most important thing. Another motive rose: to have a calling. A calling gives you a choice, and a gift. You get the opportunity to honour something basic in life, something that does not come by itself. The Swedish author Astrid Lindgren has written about this in her book "The Brothers Lionheart". One of the brothers rescues the crook from being swallowed by a large waterfall. The second one asked him: - Why did you do it? The first one answered: - There are some things that you must do. If not, you are no longer a human being, only a little turd.

I wrote the last couple of lines:

... that's our calling in all that we do.

Only love can make everything new.

The text was finished. I hit the "publish" button. It was Saturday, March 14, around eleven in the morning. By evening it was shared a thousand times in Social Media.

Easter approached. Maundy Thursday came. The churches were closed, but the story of what once happened on this day, came to life anyhow. It lived on thousands of computer screens, mobile phones and TVs, and on many digital platforms. The story reminded us about our own situation. We were behind closed doors, without knowing what was to come. In the story of Jesus and his disciples, it was the same. The disciples were in a crisis. They knew that the city that they were in, had received Jesus as a liberator. Everybody expected him to throw the Roman army out of occupied Jerusalem. But Jesus talked about something totally different. This night, when they celebrated the Jewish Easter Meal, he said in his own way: - We shall meet when the danger is over. According to the gospel of Luke, he said: - I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God. And Jesus continued (translated from Greek): - You stayed with me during the testing I went through. Now I give you the Kingdom, as my Father has given it to me. You shall eat and drink at my table, in my Kingdom.

In every catastrophe someone is perishing. This time it was Jesus. But before it all happened, he wanted to say one thing: - We shall meet when the danger is over. In the days that followed, a double catastrophe struck. Jesus was arrested. He was falsely accused and brutally executed. And one of them, Judas Iscariot, proved to be a paid traitor. Their leader, Peter, failed his promise to stick with Jesus despite any danger. But when he was put to the test, he swore that he did not know him, just to save himself. And still Jesus said: - We shall meet again.

I have lived these months in fear and hope. Using the time well has become important. People are dying around me. I might lose someone dear to me. I do not know much about my own future. I am scared. I really need faith and hope, but most of all, love. Only one power in the world is stronger than death. It is love. I think that love has a source. It is in Jesus. His love stood the test in three ways: He walked the road. He conquered death. He came back to his friends who failed him. Everyone who loves like that, even if there is anxiety and treason, tells that this love is real. It is the deepest. It is the red cord that runs through the text "We will meet when the danger is over".

Epilogue

On March 28 I sent an English translation of "We shall meet" to my colleague and friend John Bell, to ask for his assistance with the English language. He gave me two precious gifts. One: He worked through my draft and helped me finalizing it. It is the English translation that you have read above. It was recorded by Norwegian Artist Hilde Svela and is on YouTube. Two: He let this text so deeply into his own heart that it emerged again, weeks later, as a new hymn, an adapted version in beautiful lines, a fully-fledged version, with a new melody. He did it, he told me, for a friend who needed hope and faith. And so, the story continues. Love shows its capacity to create in new ways all the time. The love of Jesus Christ comes walking towards us from the hearts of loving people around us, saying: - My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. It happens in the time of crisis, in the hospitals, in the local communities, in the congregations and in a song. Glory be to Love incarnate.

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