

Uppsala Cathedral, 28 October 2018
Opening service ACT General Assembly
Matthew 15:21-28

Hope in action – putting people first. What a great topic for a General Assembly! Our world is yearning for hope, for credible hope. Behind the most tormenting issues facing humankind, the question of hope looms large. Why is there so much fear of those who are strangers or just “other”? Because too many people lack hope that nurtures the courage to think and act outside the box. Why is action on climate change so slow? Because there is too little hope that liberates people to give up things for the greater good. Why are there so many tensions, conflicts – and so we can go on to ask. Lack of hope is a serious condition.

“Hope in action” claims to be credible hope, liberating and empowering. It is hope that does not put bureaucratic processes or prestige first. It puts people first. It does not put one’s own particular interests first. It puts people and their natural and social environments first. Also, it does not put human failure first; it puts human rights first.

Hope is a tough plant. It can bear a whole lot. And resist a whole lot. Nevertheless, hope is also vulnerable. We need to cultivate our own hope, if we are to foster hope among people in situations of crisis, poverty and injustice. Praying and confessing, singing Kyrie eleison and Gloria in excelsis, reading and hearing the Words of Scripture, all of this nourishes the hope it takes to be bold in action and advocacy.

But wait a second. Isn’t today’s Gospel reading just a little bit odd here? In the story we just heard, Jesus of all people, does not put people first! She who asks for help is turned down. Only at the very last is she granted help. At the beginning of this General Assembly, we are offered a story about faith that fights, fights for the life of a daughter. A faith that fights with Jesus himself!

So, here she comes -- the woman whose name we do not know. She is remembered because of the noise she makes, because of her arguing with Jesus. Jesus is harsh on her. But she is bolder in her faith than Jesus is harsh in his love. In the end, she wins: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish,” Jesus says. Her child is healed.

Jesus appears very human in this story, maybe all-too-human! He had had a very busy time and finally gone on a much-deserved vacation on the Phoenician Riviera. At last, he was about to enjoy some me-time, together with his disciples! Inconveniently, this local woman shows up. She is pushy, and asks for help for her daughter who is being tormented by a demon. We do not know what that diagnosis would be today: maybe depression, epilepsy, anorexia or some other serious condition. Anyway, the mother is shouting, desperate for help.

Jesus won’t listen. Understandably?! Can he never have even a single day off? Is it not enough to take responsibility for one’s own people? Does he have to care for the whole world? Moreover, culture and tradition tell him that he is right in ignoring the woman. For a Jew of his time, it was not customary to entertain close contact with people in Phoenicia.

The disciples are annoyed too: “Send her away! She is embarrassing.” The woman persists. Jesus’s first reaction is: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” According to the rules, she is not eligible for assistance. Sorry, you don’t belong to the right group. You are out.

Her situation seems hopeless. And yet, she not only prevails; she comes even closer and kneels down before Jesus, saying “Lord, help me.” She humiliates herself for the sake of her daughter. Mothers and fathers do extraordinary things to help their children. Mothers and fathers take upon themselves inhuman efforts and degrading treatment in order to give their children the future they never had. They work many jobs, they beg, they flee, they migrate.

Jesus does not reach out to the nameless woman. Quite the opposite: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” he says. Remarkably, she once again resists the temptation to give up, although she had every reason in the world to feel offended, even victimized. Her daughter’s distress mobilizes her courage – and wit. She is sharp, disarming, and right to the point: That’s right, Lord, “yet, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” One up to her! There she scored. Jesus who had believed that he was sent to his own people only, rethinks and thinks anew.

What a powerful story: Jesus is brought to change his mind by the fighting faith of a single woman who has the courage and the stamina to ask for help against all odds. Her tough encounter with Jesus changes Jesus’s perception of his mission. It shapes Christian ethics, including the work of the ACT alliance, to these days. The prevailing woman changes the whole discourse. The gospel truly becomes a power that transgresses the borders that separate people from people. God can no longer be spoken of as the God of one clan, one nation, not even of one religion. God, the creator of heaven and earth, embraces all creation.

The Bible knows of many fighters in faith and questioners of faith. The nameless woman is in good company: Sarah questioning the promise of childbirth in old age, Jacob at the river Jabbok not letting go of the stranger-God without demanding a blessing, Martha in Bethany questioning Jesus’ late arrival at her brother’s grave, Thomas doubting the resurrection of the Christ. And the most famous fighter of all, Job, who says: “God has stripped my glory from me, and taken the crown from my head” (19, 9). Dehumanized by God self – that is what Job is saying.

All these people are witnesses of faith by being questioners of the faith and fighters in faith. Jacob is limping after the fight, but the sun rises after that terrifying night. The woman’s daughter is healed. Job at last proclaims the words that Georg Friedrich Händel has immortalized with the glorious Aria in *The Messiah*: “I know that my Redeemer Liveth”.

So, what do we make of this in terms of a theology that can speak not only to the issues on the agenda of the ACT General Assembly but also to the issues on the agenda of the world at large? On the basis of today’s Gospel reading, I want to say that we need a theology of resilience, a theology of co-existence and a theology of hope. Why that?

With a theology of resilience, we will be able to make sense of the fights of women and men for the health, wellbeing and future of their children. We will be able again and again to draw God’s mercy

into this world with our words and actions. Be it words of prayer and words of advocacy for human rights, equality, peace, justice and reconciliation. Be it humanitarian help and support for development. With a theology of resilience, we will be able to confront the trends and powers that hamper our constructive engagement with the greatest challenges of our time. We will be able to confront polarization that tears apart what should belong together and work together. We will be able to resist populism that pits people and so-called elites against each other. We will be able to counteract protectionism that puts one's own country, one's own people and one's own interests first, at the expense of the common good. We will be able to fight against post-truth, the contempt of truth that disfigures the vital triad of the true, the good and the beautiful. And we will be able to overcome patriarchy, which deprives the world of the full flourishing of women and children, and in the end dehumanizes women as well as men.

With a theology of co-existence, we will be able to revisit some of the borders that are harmful to our working and living together. We will be able to foster more adequate views of nature and will listen to creation's groaning and longing for the revealing of the children of God (Rom 8:19-23), which will put us in a more effective position to address climate change in a holistic way. With a theology of co-existence, we will be more eager to hear the stories of those who are suffering and will be suffering from the degradation of their environments and livelihoods. We will be better at listening to the voices of indigenous peoples.

With a theology of hope, finally, there is reason to expect change. If one woman could change the mind of Jesus, the change of human minds certainly is within reach. Both when it comes to our own minds and those of others. With a theology of hope, we will be able to counter narratives of hate and fear with narratives of love and hope. If we listen carefully to the voice of hope, Jesus's last words in today's gospel reading may come true for you and me as well: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." Amen.