

IT'S NOT OVER and that's the point!

A letter about discipleship and action.

By bishop Åke Bonnier, Diocese of Skara



Kära församlingsbor

Do you enjoy sports? Do you practice any sports? Or do you like watching sport from the spectator stands, the tv or the computer? Perhaps you have no interest in sports at all. It is not really sports I want to speak about, but the position we humans can find ourselves in and what difference it makes where we are. As a spectator I can encourage those who play and I often have a larger overview than if I am active in the game. Sometimes it is a though I think I know how those that play the game really should play. If I participate in the game, I might not have that same overview. However I'm part of making the game move forward, even if I make both mistakes and good passes.

In the book of Job, chapter seven, verse seventeen in the Bible an important question arises that touches on our position as humans - the difference between looking at, having an overview on the one hand and participating on the other. It reads as follows: What is mankind that you make so much of them and give them so much attention. Job was a man who was greatly tested under a period of his life. He almost lost both his hope and belief in God. Under one occasion he asks precisely this question - What is a human, what is mankind?

The answer to that question can actually be sensed in the question itself; you making so much of mankind and giving them so much attention. There's something great with us humans, something we are, and can do - that make us so special. We can sit in the spectator stalls and participate in the game - and I think that's what we're supposed to do. Both speak and act. Both get an overview and participate. Both give support and play the game. That's how we can change the world and that's how we can bear hope for each other. That's how we become whole as humans.

This is what my last letter to you, as the bishop of Skara diocese, is about. This is a letter about what we refer to as the church's credibility, or in other words - the church's diaconal mission. Or, as we sing in hymn 292 in the Swedish hymnbook; May action and prayer be one. This is a letter about being human and church in the truest sense of words - a diaconal togetherness.

The church is here for the sake of the world.

The church is not here for it's own sake, not as an end in itself, not as something for itself. The church is here for the sake of the world. The church should be a witness of Gods kingdom in the midst of the world, a witness about a hope that won't give up, about the life that needs to be protected and lived, about the faith in every person's worth and dignity. The church should be a witness about humans being created in the image of God. The church should stand on the side of the vulnerable and raise its voice when mankind no longer can live as humans. During the second world war, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the church is only a church when it's there for others. God is in the center of the world and that's where we find God. Not elevated, distanced from us humans. In hymn 25 in the Swedish hymnbook, we read "God, we do not find you high in the starry sky but in the midst of humanity" It's in the world we live, with each other and with a longing for a world we can all live in. The goal of the church and the of Christian faith is not to make us more religious, but to make us more human. It's hard to hear and understand that so many people today have lost their ability to see that others are also human and that every human life is sacred regardless of ethical background, religion, sexual identity etc. To raise your voice in places where human lives are threatened is one of our most important diaconal missions.

Being human and being church is, as God beloved and created co-creators, becoming aware of our need for God, for creation and for our fellow human being. We have to remind ourselves about the words from the first letter to the Philippians chapter two, verses five to seven. "In your relationships with one and other, have the same mindset

as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature with God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" We cannot in the true sense of the words become neither humans nor church, on our own. We can only do it together - in the world. It's as important to remind yourselves of this as it to remind yourselves that the life is not in our possession - it's a gift we receive every day, nothing we own or dispose of. Life can only be received and lived, like we inhale and exhale. It's not through ourselves, but through God's life-giving spirit that we gain the power to be seen, to be heard, and to act.



Four relationships - at eye level

We speak about humans mainly living in four relationships: the relationship to ourselves, to other humans, to creation and to a higher power, to God. I like to think of a human in this way, that we need all of these relationships to live as fully as possible during our time on the earth.

We need relationships with at least one or a few other people. Completely alone, without meeting another person, we won't make it in the long run. There's so much going on with us when we meet another person. We experience love, friendship and exchange of thoughts. We give and receive help. We give and receive love and friendship. In the meeting with another person, a Thou, we receive the opportunity to meet ourselves, our I, just as the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber puts it.

In the same way we need the relationship with the creation to both understand and be reminded what we are here as humans on this earth. We're not here to devastate and exploit everything for our own sake. We need the creation. Without it we can not live. We need the forests, the animals, the seas and the incredible ecosystem to be able to breathe and exist. It also means that our relationship to the nature and the creation needs to be cared for and maintained.

We also need the relationship to ourselves. We need to get to know ourselves in the changes of life, our aging, new perspectives that affect us, and adjustments and challenges give us the time to settle in with what's new and perhaps

different. Sometimes we need to withdraw, sometimes be together with others, while we are together with ourselves. To be a human is to always be part of a constantly ongoing process, or in the words of Tomas Tranströmer "A faceless angel held me and whispered through my entire body, do not be ashamed of being human, be proud! And inside of you, arch beyond arch open endlessly. You will never be complete and it is as it should"

And finally we have the relationship to God, or as you also could say-the relationship to a higher power, to the one I cannot control, God whom I believe has created me and you and all that is. When life shows its depth, in profound joy, sorrow and pain, we are made aware of this relationship. For some of us it's a relationship we long for on a daily basis and relate to, something that is there for all, whether we think about it or not. I believe that God is close to everybody, regardless of what we have done or how we believe or don't believe. I believe that God is the innermost mystery of creation and the origin of life.

In all these relationships looking eye to eye matters. That is, how I encounter myself, another human being, God and creation. If our approach is, as we sometimes say "von oben", from above, then there is no relationship. Then we are above all and everything, and believe we can decide and rule, often aligned with what suits ourselves the best.



If we are below, underneath, or if we live in fear for any of these four relationships it is easy to become paralyzed and do nothing. Then we lack courage for any relationship and stand at risk of becoming very lonely.

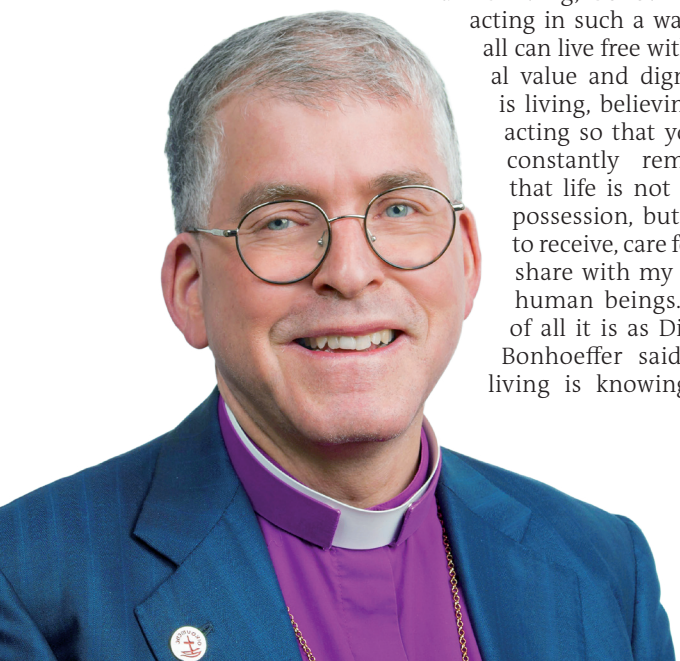
However, eye to eye, you live with equal value. No one is above or below. No one is in control or in ownership, we all rather give and receive. Then we are humans together, sharing our humanity, being part of creation, being Gods created co-creators in relationship to the world - loved beyond measure.

It's not over! That is the very point!

There is great concern in our world today causing worry among many of us. What will come of everything? What will our future look like? Our children's future? Can the climate recover? Does it matter if I abstain from flying, eat vegetarian food, consume less? What are the vital conditions? And when will wars in Europe and in the world end? The list can be made long and it is hard not to feel resignation and lack of good spirits.

There is much I cannot speak of- what will come of everything? I am no climate researcher, not a war strategist or a politician. I am a Christian human being. I carry an unyielding hope. A hope that will not give up in the face of an unjust world, but a hope that will not accept injustice, unjust life, devastation and pollution of nature of what God wanted for humanity and all creation. I carry a hope that is neither opportunistic nor optimistic but realistic, impatient and rock solid. I do not believe it is "over": this is based in my Christian faith which holds a hope that never gives up on life, never gives up on a single human being, regardless of actions, appearance or opinions. It does not give up regarding the conditions of the world either, even if it from time to time looks dark. If I were to find other words for this hope I would say: It's not over! That is the very point! "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John. 1:5)

Being a Christian is living, believing and acting in such a way that a person who thinks she is not accepted or that it is too late for "someone like me" to join human fellowship can feel welcome and included. Being a Christian is living, believing and acting in such a way that we do not give up on a future possible for all of us. Being a Christian is living, believing and acting in such a way that all can live free with equal value and dignity. It is living, believing and acting so that you are constantly reminded that life is not in my possession, but a gift to receive, care for and share with my fellow human beings. Most of all it is as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, that living is knowing that



My days lie in your hand. It is living with the reminder from Zecharia 4:6 "Not by might nor by power, but by my spirit says the Lord almighty."

The hope is, for me, intertwined with the four relationships. In these relationships we can let word and action be one. That is how we become human beings. You and I are Gods created and beloved co-creators. You and I can both be spectators and join the game, not at the same time, but together, sometimes as participants and sometimes as spectators, knowing that both are needed. Being Gods created and beloved co-creators is living eye to eye. It is meeting what is as it is, with respect and with a hope that never gives up. It is not over! Be proud that you are a human being, one that God thinks greatly of and cares deeply for. And inside of you, arch beyond arch open endlessly.

Questions:

1. What does it mean to you to be Gods created co-creator?
2. What are your thoughts on living in the four relationships – to yourself, to other people, to creation and to God?
3. What does it mean to you to meet another person eye to eye?
4. What is hope to you?

+ *Åke Bonnier*

Svenska kyrkan 
SKARA STIFT