

“IN A DRUNK TRAM”

Heb. 13.12-14

A few months ago I ended up one night in the reception area of one of our hospitals. Can you imagine what the reception area of one of our Russian hospitals is like at night? Now imagine that this hospital specializes, as ordinary folks say, in the “drunk tram?” I had very interesting neighbors that night – drunks and homeless with open wounds on their heads and on their faces. Their bandages were not tied very carefully, their cloths were dirty; no less dirty was the language being used, both by the patients and by those treating them. And, of course, blood was everywhere.

Beyond the gates of the hospital expensive cars were driving by, round-the-clock supermarket advertisements were flashing, people slept peacefully, made love or walked around under the beautifully lit buildings of the city center. But this was a place of pain, dirt, and blood. A place on the periphery, on the edge, even beyond the edge of our society.

At such moments your whole being fills with protest – this isn't your place! You should be out there with the normal people, living a normal life. What are you doing here amidst the blood and dirt? Yet, all the same, the ambulance took you to exactly to this spot, you are here, beyond the limits of your normal life, and you have nowhere to go.

This is approximately the same thing that the author of our reading today is talking about:

«Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.»

Jesus dies on the cross. The city at that time is going about its usual business. One person is preparing a festival banquet, another is painting his house, a third is playing with his children, a fourth is sincerely praying in the temple. Somewhere someone is walking around a museum, another is listening to classical music; a third has made himself comfortable in her armchair and is watching his favorite show, while a fourth is talking on the telephone with her friend and others are in class at school or in the university. Somewhere someone is singing an old song during the liturgy.

Jesus, though, he dies on the cross beyond the city walls, outside of the gates our usual life, even outside of the gates of our habitual religious life. Public nudity (without any of the loin cloths that artists thought up to hide the humiliation), pain, blood, torn cloths, cursing and the cruel laughter of others. If you want to understand better what happened back then on Golgotha, then you need not go into a beautiful, well-decorated church, but instead you should go into the hospital reception at a hospital that specializes in the “drunk tram!”

But, on the other hand, is the difference so very big? I am thinking now about my own church. I remember the history of the Russian Lutheran Church in the previous century. I think about it now. Sanctuaries that are half-empty, even completely empty. Windows shut up with bricks from the Soviet time. Plaster falling off the walls. There is, in some places, gold gilding, but it fools no one.

The majority of congregational members are old women who are constantly talking about their pains and about how to survive until their next pension payment. Repression and mockery are in the past. Now there is the whim of the state and its bureaucrats with their unbelievable rules and regulations. Pointless arguments that only upset the church. Uneducated pastors and preachers.

The flippancy of its leaders. And again the old ladies.... Many of them, to be completely honest, come to church only because they can get their blood pressure checked for free there and so that they can remember in prayer their relative who was executed in the 1930s or who died in World War II.

And we, we together with these old women, are one in Christ. And there is something that makes our unity visible. Holy Communion.

We have Communion today. No, of course, you won't feel anything special. Nothing except for the wafer melting in your mouth and the pleasantly bitter taste of wine. Everything will be respectable and pious...

You'll have no inner protest. There will be no feeling of being vulnerable. There will be no feeling that we're out of place here. We are, after all, in a beautiful and well-decorated church, and not in the "drunk tram."

But don't let the glimmering of the beautiful Communion silver, the sublime words of the prayers and the wonderful music lead you into deception. These few steps to the altar will be for you the path beyond the gates, outside the camp, to meet the naked and harsh reality of the cross – the reality of pain, shame, and pointlessness.

Before his death, Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane: "Let this cup pass from by!" You will be drinking today from this same cup. Even if up until this point the worship service consisted of beautiful rituals, deep music and smart-sounding speeches, a sort of meeting point of culture and piety to which we bring our best. The center of our comfortable little world. Let it be so. But now you need to get up and take a few steps forward, to the altar.

The wafer melting in your mouth and the sweet wine are really the body, pierced by nails and shaking convulsively. The blood has been mixed with dirt....

Why is this necessary for us? What are we doing here? Why not be like all normal people who strive to live in their own comfortable and well-decorated worlds, keeping away from dirt, shame and pain?

And so, are you ready for these few steps to taste the wafer dissolving in your mouth and the pleasantly bitter wine?...

May God help us!