

Uusikaupunki 31 July 2020

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Psalm 118:15-24 Funeral Sermon for Anssi Simojoki

Where does one get help when alone and distressed? Where does one seek refuge when constantly anxious about congregations and the preservation of the truth of the Gospel? How does one stay upright in the midst of illnesses and the body is weak? Where does one get wisdom and strength when called upon to give counsel, mediate in quarrels and respond to countless messages? On what does one focus when one knows that time is nevertheless short? We all know what he did. He delved into the study of God's word. That is what he preached steadfastly. He used his strength for translation work and the teaching of books. He left himself, his family and the future of the church in prayer to the promises of God's word.

We all know who did this: the reformer Martin Luther. His eventful life had a particular 165-day phase in Coburg castle. The future of the whole nascent Reformation was on a knife's edge. Emperor Charles V had called a Diet to Augsburg in the spring of 1530 in order to gain vassals that were united in religion for a united front against the attacks of the Turks. Luther travelled there with his colleagues, but because he was under a ban, he could not participate, being an outlaw. Thus, he remained as close to Augsburg in a castle his prince John owned in Coburg. There he worked on the translation of the Old Testament into German. Even though he enjoyed the nature and the birds, he was engaged in a spiritual battle and a tremendous inner anxiety. That is when he took up Psalm 118 of which he said, "That is my psalm, which I love." At the same time, on 25 June 1530, when the Augsburg Confession – which defines the Lutheran faith – was being read in the Diet, Luther was working on an explanation of that psalm. Above all, he lived of its promises. He took one verse, which became his motto. He set it to music. He had it inscribed on the wall of his study in Coburg. In solitude, illness, the danger of death and the attacks of the Devil he rested on it again and again: *Non moriar sed vivam et narrabo opera Domini*. I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord." Ps. 118:17

Today we have gathered in order to leave pastor, doctor of theology Niilo Anssi Ylermi Simojoki by prayer in God's hands to await the final judgement. The husband of Marja, the father of Martti, Tapani, Anna, Helena, Tuomo and Lassi, the grandfather of 24 grandchildren, engundu, our dear relative, friend, shepherd, brother-in-arms, received a heavenward call in his own garden on 6 July 2020. A strong and familiar bass voice has been silenced from the midst of the singing church. The boat is moored by the jetty in Vohdensaari without its captain. In Laitila, in the vestry of Amos Congregation, the pastor's alb is hanging, orpharned, in the wardrobe. Anssi's work is done and his race is finished. In the midst of sorrow, longing and gratitude the words of Anssi's cross-revealing words are set before our eyes: *I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord*.

How can these words belong in the funeral of a man called from our midst suddenly and still fit for work: I shall not die, but I shall live? And yet these words have marked Anssi's life from its beginning. In the fateful year in Finnish history and after the decisive defensive battles of 1944, at the same time as armistice negotiations were taking place in Moscow, a boy was born into the evacuated family of Niilo and Siiri Simojoki on 7 September 1944 in Isokyrö rectory. He was completely blue, because the umbilical cord was wrapped around his throat. If the starting point was

poor, illnesses followed Anssi throughout his childhood to such an extent that his older sister was constantly worried that her fragile little brother would be called to heaven. *I shall not die but I shall live*. Whether it was a stormy voyage in a damaged boat or countless dangers on the road, whether it was shivering in the grip of malaria or travelling poisoned and unconscious on a coach, whether it was a heart bypass surgery or cardiac arrest, these words have been fulfilled in a manner that few get to experience in their lives. *I shall not die but I shall live*. I will live precisely those hours and days which God in His goodness has reserved for me. “in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.” (Psa 139:16) The Lord made no mistake, had no accident, left nothing incomplete when he called Anssi home. With gratitude we can wonder at what a rich and significant life Anssi received! Every one of us could make a long speech about it.

The starting point of Anssi's life come together today in a thought-provoking way. After all, this church in Uusikaupunki is the very place where that man of a good memory, impressive singing voice and Ostrobothnian principle, the young officer Niilo Simojoki entered into matrimony with the lithe, wise and sensitive South-Westerner, Siiri Palmu. In the union of the rector's son and the caretaker of the working men's association, white and red Finland joined hands. But what was at stake in particular was that the couple who had experienced a revival among young people walked together hand in the Saviour's hand. The red blood of Jesus gave a conscience whiter than white! Although materially the Simojoki family lived modestly in Helsinki, music, history, foreign languages and cultivation of both the heart and of knowledge were esteemed. Alongside the forging of patriotism, what mattered most was being a partaker of heavenly treasures. Although the spiritual heritage of the home for Anssi was sturdy, finding his own place and calling before the Lord was preceded with struggles both between the world and the kingdom of God, between Christianity as a tradition and a faith that trusts in the grace of Jesus Christ. It led to anxiety and even gloominess. I remember Anssi telling me how he once looked down from a cliff, thinking how much better things would be if he wasn't alive at all.

But it was into this darkness that the Lord gave the light of His word. You, Anssi, will not die, but you shall live. What is this life? It is not only a good, successful both financially and career-wise, long earthly life. For what does Paul write? “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1Co 15:19) However, a new life begins already in this time. “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:20) I live in the faith of the Son of God. Not in the faith given by a clergy family, no in the faith of my parents, not in a self-chosen faith, not in a faith built on pretty words of people, but in the faith of the Son of God. Of Him, who in love has snatched me from the road to hell to be His own, given me a new life in holy baptism and come to live in me!

In this faith and accompanied by the prayers of an old family friend of the Simojokis, Anssi also found his life's task. *I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord*. He became a recounter of the deeds of the Lord. He was ordained into the office of preaching in June 1972. Anssi has told me how he struggled to give Christian talks, which is hard to believe, since we all know that Anssi if anyone was able to speak vividly and without glancing at the clock. But he told me how after ordination his tongue was loosed to proclaim. There was and is plenty in the deeds of the

Lord for poetry, composing, proclamation, singing, study, writing, thanking, praying! And that is what Anssi did faithfully. He preached Christ and recounted the deeds of the Lord to His very last day. The saying of Scripture fits him well: “Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel!”

To what sort of situation did the Lord send His preacher? I am reminded of two books of the professor of history at the University of Helsinki, Henrik Meinander. He has thus far written incisive accounts of our society on the basis of two significant years, about how the surrounding world influenced the development and culture of our country. He has chosen the years 1944 and 1968. It is clear that what was at stake in the year of Anssi’s birth, 1944, was the preservation of our independence, our homes, our faith and our way of life in the maelstrom of the second world war. The mad year of Europe, 1968, was evident in Finland as a cultural turning point as the rise of urbanization, consumer goods, youth culture, sexual revolution and left-wing radicalism. Not only was the decision made in 1968 to build a car factory in Uusikaupunki but the baby boom generation had grown up and the vanguard of student radicalism began its march through the media, school system, parliament and other institutions of society. By this march, many things that had been held as sacred came to be trampled down. The human worth of the unborn child. The institution of marriage. The holiness of God’s name. The ten commandments and creed of the Catechism.

Anssi was there, too. I remember a conversation with a teaching colleague and it turned out to my surprise that he knew Anssi from his student days. He told me how he had valued Anssi’s independence and courage. As an eye witness he reminisced how in the student occupation of the Old Student Union House in 1968 Anssi had gone on stage and spoken against the prevailing frenzy and the raising of the red flag.

Where did the Lord send His servant? On the one hand, He sent him to those people in Kodisjoki, Pori, Lappi Tl and South-Western Finland who in spite of the societal revolution had seen the war, who still bent their knee at the name of Jesus, sang the hymns of the old hymn book and read the Svebilus explanation of the Catechism and Luther’s Postils at home. On the one hand, Anssi found an old, deep and refreshing spiritual stream in the home gatherings of the Old Prayer Movement. On the other hand, he became a pastor in a church where the winds of societal change were blowing. The church was declared open for improvements. And the tools for the improvements were not sought from the Word of God but from the surrounding society. According to bishops, the church could not have a different teaching in moral questions from that of society.

At the spearhead of the cultural transformation was the ideology of egalitarianism, which created an enormous pressure in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland to open up the pastoral office for women. The question was then and still is what God in His word has decreed when Christ instituted the apostolic office. After all, the office belongs to Christ, and the administration of the office is Christ’s own work. *I shall not die, but I shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord.* And what was it like to rise up as the pastor of a small rural parish to recount the deeds of the Lord in the public eye in the church struggle of the 1970s and 80s, against a liberal-minded media and the narrow-minded anger of the church leadership. It is in the opposition awakened by God’s word that the power of the Word is frequently seen.

This was not a matter of a power struggle or the need to prove that one was in the right; rather, what was at stake was that it is true as it is written. For whoever loses or forsakes the Word of God loses

God and eternal life. A few years ago Anssi told me how he had read the enthusiastic comments of an old acquaintance, an older pastor, in support of introducing in the church the rainbow ideology that militates against the Creator. Sadly Anssi said, “Doesn’t even he want to go to heaven?”

I don’t know whether professor Meinander is planning to write further volumes, but I would like to suggest the year 1989 as one watershed. For that is when the totalitarian communist states of lies and persecution collapsed in a moment and the world began to be connected to the internet. Although the eyes of the world were fixed on the breaking of the iron curtain, the Simojoki family looked south, towards the great continent of Africa. They began to put down roots into a new, colourful and dynamic home country of Kenya. Anssi hardly realized, nor did many others, how the future of the Christian faith was moving from the North to the South, from the old mainline churches that had lost their salt and sold their birthright for a portion of pea stew, to the mission churches. Anssi did not retreat to a backwater but rather advanced to the frontline of Christendom! There a whole new way of recounting the deeds of the Lord was opened up for Anssi. From 1996, in the work of Lutheran Heritage Foundation Anssi concentrated in the translation of foundational Lutheran books, the training of translators and the teaching of the publications. Enormous vistas were opened for him, together with opportunities to plant Lutheran doctrine in churches that were rising and growing in strength all over Africa. If Luther focused on the translation of the Bible in Coburg, Anssi focused on the translation of Lutheran’s Catechisms, the Augsburg Confession, and the whole Book of Concord, which rightly explain the Bible. Missionaries come and go but books remain. And I doubt any of us can guess how many people are reading even today of the great deeds of the Lord as a consequence of the translation projects led by Anssi.

Having been ordained by archbishop Martti Simojoki, Anssi was sent from Turku cathedral to administer the office of preaching. In that office, there is no such thing as retirement, even though employment may come to an end. Having returned to Finland to enjoy their pension, Anssi and Marja moved to his beloved summer home of Uusikaupunki. Years in often small but growing confessional Lutheran churches had further clarified this truth: where the Word is, there is Christ; where Christ is, there is the Church. From the church struggle beginning, in the 1970s and in St. Paul’s Synod, over the authority of God’s Word in the teaching and decision making of the church we had arrived at an emergency situation where there was no longer room in the congregations of the national church. And so it became necessary to gather together in Divine Service, to found congregations, and ordain pastors for the congregations. In the founding meeting of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese in Lahti in 2013, Anssi proclaimed: “The Bible is the book of our Saviour Jesus Christ. That is why we love and follow its word, because it is the word of our dear Jesus who is present with us. It is our inheritance, our possession, our right, our freedom, our table, of which now one has the right to deprive us.”

For the sake of this word of the Bible and a church life in the Mission Diocese that accords with the Bible, Anssi was removed from the pastoral office in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland in 2015. But the work did not end there. Neither I, nor the office I received from Christ, nor His flock will die but it shall live and I shall recount the deeds of the Lord. Go to their website and listen to what deeds of the Lord Anssi recounted in the Amos Congregation in Laitila. In his final sermon on 5 July 2020 Anssi proclaimed, “The cross of Jesus is the altar for the reconciliation of the whole world with God. To that altar God calls and seeks all sinners through His word.”

When I think of my dear uncle and fellow worker Anssi Simojoki here by his coffin, one characteristic arises over all others. I don't mean his extensive erudition and spiritual wisdom, his courage and firmness, or even his lively sense of humour and love of sailing. What I mean is that Anssi had an irresistible desire to take the side of those who were being oppressed, who were belittled and who were unjustly treated. Any petitions in such situations always included Anssi's signature. He made himself and his pen immediately available. He was prepared to stand by one, whether the person on the other side was a servant of the law or whatever official. Was this because he himself had been bullied as a child? Or because of the wrong suffered by his own father which affected the atmosphere at home so strongly? Or was it the mind of Christ that was willing to give up the self, take on the form of a servant and to help those who could not help themselves? Or was it that he knew that with all his faults and failings he knew he was wholly and entirely dependent on the grace, forgiveness and aid of Christ?

Who today is the most helpless of us? Who cannot help themselves anymore? Who most needs a helper who cannot be found among us? It is a terrible thing to be standing alone before Holy God, depending on oneself, without a helper with one's load of sin. But that is why we do not grieve today as those do who have no hope. Christ's eyes of mercy look into the darkness of death, inside the coffin and the depths of the grave. Only the voice of Christ, the Prince of Life, reaches to places where we no longer reach. The hands pierced as payment for our sin reach beyond the boundary of death. The risen Lord sings His own psalm: *I shall not die but I shall live and recount my own works* – both to the living and to the dead. And because I live, you too shall live (John 14:19). Can you hear, Anssi, you too shall live because you are mine! Because you live, your voice has not been silenced but it will be glorified to recount the deeds of the Lord. You have not been left without your alb: you will receive garments washed in my blood. Your journey has not come to its end in the harbour, but the most wonderful journey will only begin now. "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him." (1Cor 2:9) The bliss of that summer shall never end!

What was it that Martin Luther wrote in Coburg castle on Psalm 118:17? "The devil, or pursuer, presses in on the saints with death. How do they react? They turn away their eyes, yes, their entire bodies. Emptying themselves, they cling to God's hand and say: 'Devil and tyrant, I shall not die, as you pretend. You lie! I shall live, for I will not speak of my own works or those of any man. I know nothing about myself or my own holiness. I have before me only the works of the Lord. Of them I will speak; them I will glorify; on them I will rely. He it is who delivers from sin and death. If you can overthrow His works, you have overthrown me too. ... Though I die, I die not. Though I suffer, I suffer not. Though I fall, I am not down. Though I am disgraced, I am not dishonoured.' This is the consolation. Furthermore, the psalmist says of the help: 'I shall live.' Isn't this an amazing help? The dying live; the suffering rejoice; the fallen rise; the disgraced are honored. It is as Christ says: 'He who believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live' (John 11:25)."

Therefore, dear family and friends, if there is one thing of which I am sure, it is this. Anssi would want to say to you today – even more, Christ is saying to you today: Your time is short, soon it will be your turn to lie in a coffin, but today is the day of salvation. Today is the day of grace and the forgiveness of your sins. I do not desire your death. I do not desire your condemnation. I do not

desire that you perish. I desire that you live, that you live today and live with me always and for ever.

Therefore, I ask you: could this word of Christ Himself, Martin Luther's motto and the guiding light of Anssi Simojoki's life be also the word given by the Holy Spirit to your heart, for faith, for joy and as your call: *I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord!*