

Speech at the Katuaq Cultural Center

(2 of 3)

Nuuk, Greenland
September 9, 2007

It is a great privilege to be standing in Greenland's capital.... For your gracious hospitality, for your help in making our symposium possible, and indeed for your deep understanding of the purpose of our symposium, we offer heart-felt thanks.

The physical environment of your beautiful island is utterly different from the eastern Mediterranean, where the Ecumenical Patriarchate has been located for the past 17 centuries. There is also an enormous contrast between the silent dignity of the Arctic icefields which surround us now, and the abundance of life in all its forms which we encountered during our last symposium in Brazil.

But by today's standards, the distance we have traveled is not really so great, and in certain ways, both good and bad ways, that distance is becoming smaller all the time. Modern transport has made it relatively easy for us to make the journey to Greenland, and it is now possible for messages, images and ideas to travel between Greenland and every other part of the world in the twinkling of an eye. Depending on how they are used, these communications can be a blessing or a curse.

In many parts of the world, indigenous cultures have been undermined by seductive images from the supposedly civilized world, propagating the idea that happiness is only to be found in consuming more and more material products. But we have a strong sense that the people of Greenland, and their elected rulers, have avoided such temptations. You are bringing your people some of the practical benefits of modern science and technology, while also holding onto everything that is best in your traditional way of life, including your magnificent tradition of story-telling.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was also a great story-teller. He knew that a tale taken from everyday life was often the best way to communicate an important truth. He was once asked "who is my neighbor" — in other words, who is the person close to me, the person that I am obliged to love and care for? (Luke 10:28). He replied with the story of the Good Samaritan. This is the story of a man who was left wounded on the roadside and only received help from a person of a different race.

What Our Lord described was an act of compassion, an act of closeness, between individuals from sharply different communities, communities which normally kept far apart from one other. The broader point is that a person may seem far from us by the logic of this world, but in the sight of God, in the light of eternity, that same person can be close to us indeed, either because we need that person's help, or because that person needs our help.

For better or worse, we are living in an age when the destinies of all human beings and all human communities are ever more closely intertwined. Patterns of behavior and consumption in one corner of the globe can affect the lives and livelihood of people who live at the other extremity of the earth. If the environment of the polar region is now changing at a frightening pace, that is because of economic activities and energy choices in the industrialized world, far to the south. And the alteration in the Arctic environment has the potential to inundate islands in the tropics or cities as far away as Shanghai or New York. Borrowing a phrase from modern journalism, what we are experiencing is “the death of distance.” There is no segment of the human race which can hope to isolate itself from the destiny of mankind, and of life on earth in general.

This new proximity, this closeness, need not be a bad thing if we learn to read the “signs of the times” (Matthew 16:3). To some degree, we are all drawn closer by a common experience of fear and suffering as the consequences of climate change are felt in different ways. At a time when climatic emergencies of many different kinds are affecting the lives of hundreds of millions of people, we have no moral choice but to “bear one another’s burdens” as the New Testament (Galatians 6:2) enjoins us. Here in the Arctic, melting glaciers are threatening the way of life of traditional hunters. In our home region of southern Europe, we have seen an alarming combination of heat waves, drought, fires and also floods. Scientists inform us that these phenomena are connected. When we visited Brazil last year, the region was still recovering from a highly unusual drought. Brazilian scientists told us that illegal deforestation was leading to a decrease in rainfall and making fires more common. Fires and deforestation in Brazil are among the many factors which are altering the climate, and hence the environment, here on the northern edge of the earth.

If only we knew how to learn the right lessons, the web of causal connections between extreme events in different parts of the world could have a sobering effect. These linkages ought to bring home to every nation and every community how closely involved it is with every other nation and community. It should be more obvious now than ever that no state or ethnic group or economic class can hope to advance its own interests indefinitely at the expense of the remainder of mankind. To restate a simple truth which has guided all of our floating symposia on Religion, Science and the Environment, “we are all in the same boat.”

That truth must always have been evident to the people of Greenland. As inhabitants and administrators of this extraordinary island where the might and mystery of nature and the smallness of man is a constantly felt reality, you can see more clearly than most of us how futile it is for one group of human beings to seek unconditional control of the earth by monopolizing its resources. But to judge from the newspapers, there is a real danger now that the people of the polar region could find themselves caught in the middle of an intense competition by outsiders to achieve domination of the Arctic. If such a competition develops, then the best hope of restraining it may lie in the wisdom the Arctic peoples, in their instinctive sense that this awesome landscape cannot, in the end, be monopolized by any one group of human beings.

As administrators of Greenland, you face enormous responsibilities. Perhaps these responsibilities are graver now than at any time in your history. On behalf of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, endowed by history with a special responsibility for the welfare of the whole

inhabited earth, and of the scientists, ecologists and opinion-makers who have gathered here from all over the world, we would like to make you a promise. We promise to stand close to you, to pray with you, to be your neighbors. And we ask you to stand close to us.