

Ecumenical Celebration for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2012

Transformed by the Victory of Jesus Christ

I should like to thank the Inter-Ecclesial Committee for the great honour of being invited to preach on this special occasion here in the German-speaking Evangelical church.

Ecumenical relationships between the Church of England and the Evangelical Church of Germany are governed by the Meissen Agreement signed by our two churches in 1988. This agreement committed our two churches to “to take all possible steps to closer fellowship in as many areas of Christian life and witness as possible”. Meissen was a very practical agreement and it has led to many partnerships, visits and exchanges between Christians in England and Germany. At a personal level, one of the senior members of the EKD representation to the European Institutions was until recently a faithful member of my own church. He spoke perfect English, and his prayers for the health of the British Monarch always seemed to me more heartfelt than anything I heard from my fellow Englishmen! So it is in the light of these very warm ecumenical friendships that I thank Pastor Reinhard Weißer and the people of the Germanophone Evangelical Community for your welcome and hospitality this evening.

The text we are given tonight is at first sight a surprising one. 1 Corinthians 15 is the classic statement of the resurrection. It is a passage we are used to hearing at funerals, where its relevance is obvious. But it is only when we put this chapter in the context of the whole letter that we uncover its powerful relevance to the ecumenical movement.

Corinth was a cosmopolitan seaport and one of the great cities of the Roman Empire. The church in Corinth reflected the diverse population of the city, with Jews and Gentiles from Italy, Greece, Asia Minor and maybe other countries too. It was a complex multi-cultural community. And St. Paul had the challenge of building a church with a positive and distinctive identity that could hold together the different ethnic and cultural groups. So *the unity of the church* is the key issue in the letter.

We read at the beginning of the letter, in chapter 1, that factions have developed around certain leaders. The rite of baptism, which should have been the rite of entry into church membership, seems to have been subverted into a ritual of entry into a particular church faction. So Paul has to remind the Corinthians that whether they were baptized by Peter, Paul or Apollos matters not at all, the key thing was to receive the gospel message and to be baptized into Christ and his cross. For St. Paul, the cross of Christ provides the basis for Christian identity. It is the transforming power of the cross, which can reshape individual Christian existence and provide the basis for a new form of community. To both Jews and Greeks, the cross is the power and wisdom of God – wiser than man’s wisdom and stronger than man’s strength. Paul’s teaching begins in chapter 1 with the power of the cross - and much of the rest of his letter shows how this transforming power is implemented, through the building of loving relationships, through a godly lifestyle, through sharing in Holy Communion. The

goal is a cruciform community, a people whose life together is decisively shaped and patterned on the cross of Christ.

Now in a matching way, Paul's letter ends with teaching on the resurrection. Paul affirms that Christian faith not only looks backwards to the message of the cross but equally looks forward to the hope of resurrection. It is here that Paul's attempts to overcome divisions and discord at Corinth come to a climax. Karl Barth said that chapter 15 "forms not only the close and crown of the whole Letter, but also provides the clue to its meaning". The importance of the resurrection is that it is a message of profound, transforming and unifying hope in God. In relation to so great a hope, all squabbling and party spirit should be left behind. The minor gains and losses which arise in disagreements between people in the church are insignificant compared with the great final victory in which we shall all share.

It is, of course, the case that death is the great divider. We each face death on our own, however close to us our family and friends may be. And nothing divides husbands and wives or parents and children as terribly as death. Yet, says Paul, in the resurrection this last great enemy of human flourishing is overcome. And so all that spoils or divides our relationships is relativized by Christ's great victory over death. These things have no lasting grip on us – they will one day fall away.

Perhaps we might tease out the implications of this message, for individual Christians, for the church, and for the wider society.

Firstly in regard to the individual, our moral and spiritual life is placed on an axis defined by the cross and resurrection of Christ. We die with Christ that we may be raised with him. So *transformation* is at the heart of the Christian life. This doesn't mean that we turn into different people. Modern psychologists rightly tell us that much of our basic character is defined by our genes and by our experiences in childhood. But change is possible. As Cardinal Newman said, "to grow is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often."

The basic direction of this change is to move us from preoccupation with ourselves to concern for others. Martin Luther described the state of sinful man as man "turned in on himself". And another great successor to Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer remarked that transformation is fundamentally about moving from being "men and women for ourselves" to becoming "men and women for others."

This is not about acquiring a vague sense of benevolence to the world in general. It is about real, practical action in the places and communities in which God has placed us. Our own context in this city of Brussels is a challenging one. 25% of people in Brussels live in families where income is less than €900 per month. 50% of people in Brussels are of foreign origin. So being men and women for others will be something in which we are all engaged in different ways.

Secondly, the message of St. Paul establishes the *church as an alternative society which encourages unity in diversity*. Much of the 20th century ecumenical movement was concerned with overcoming theological divisions between churches. Such divisions still exist, but the more important divisions are now, in my opinion, cultural rather than theological. It used to be said, for example, in South Africa that "Sunday

morning is the most segregated hour.” In their worship, white people just preferred the company of other whites.

Churches reflect the cultures in which we are placed. It is naïve to think that we can function with the simple formula that: ‘people have problems and the gospel resolves them’. The fact is that our churches themselves are places where Christian people struggle with the same issues that everyone struggles with. People want services in their own language like they want road signs in their own language. Place people from different social and economic backgrounds together and fellowship is strained.

Yet, at its best, and precisely because we draw on the transforming power of the cross and resurrection we can sometimes do things miraculously well. My own church of Holy Trinity somehow does hold together people from 40 different countries and from very different economic backgrounds and from time to time we share in worship that is genuinely beautiful. Or again, a few months ago, some of us shared in a memorial service at the Cathedral of St. Michel and St. Gudule to commemorate the events of 9/11 and to pray for peace. Several churches were involved plus the Jews plus the Muslims. And the result was very moving. We might contrast the commemoration events that took place in New York itself, where the Mayor of New York excluded religious events. In an age when people routinely think that religions are a part of the world’s problems, we in Brussels demonstrated that religion can be part of the solution.

And then *thirdly* and finally, the *transformation of the church is intended for the transformation of society*. The victory achieved by Jesus Christ is a global victory. It is the means by which his kingdom is brought in. The church exists not for itself but for the service of this kingdom. To quote Bonhoeffer again, “The church is for others...not only for herself.”

In the current circumstances, I believe the ability of Christian churches to hold together people of different languages and culture is of prophetic significance. Our European continent has been shaped for the last 60 years by a vision inspired by Christian politicians who sought to build peace and prosperity after the ravages of war. But that vision is now under great strain. Sovereign debt, pressure on banks and market speculation against weaker economies are all generating political as well as economic tensions. Many of those who work in the European Institutions here in Brussels feel pessimistic. At the same time, there is a rise in nationalist feeling. The so-called populist parties, generally of the far right, are attracting new members, particularly amongst disillusioned men in their 20s and 30s. People struggle to see how central European Institutions are compatible with local cultural aspirations and identities.

The Christian church does not present itself as the answer to society’s problems. We struggle with the same problems ourselves. But we can indicate some ways forward. We can, for example, hold together the *particular* and the *universal* in remarkable ways. We can show how communities can treasure individual cultural identities whilst still being part of a universal church. We recognise and celebrate particular, authentic experiences of Christian life that have a universal appeal. We embody a form of unity that is comfortable with difference. That is a gift and model we offer to a continent

where unity is too often felt to be the enemy of difference, and the particular and the universal are often opposed.

To conclude, the gospel of transformation is an encouraging message but also a disturbing one. “The trumpet will sound and we shall be changed”, says the apostle: and the conservative part of us immediately protests that we should prefer to stay the same. But change is inevitable and the church has changed in many ways for the better. In the last 100 years of the ecumenical movement huge progress has been made, in bilateral agreements and friendships between individual churches, as well as in multilateral co-operation across many or all churches.

The challenges that face us into the next 100 years grow ever more complex both as churches and as European countries. We are reminded tonight that unity is not only the missionary aim to which we are called, it is also the destiny which God has purposed and planned. So we open our hearts anew to God’s transforming power, for the good of the church and for the salvation of the world. Thankful for all that has been achieved: we commit ourselves afresh to pray and work for that unity which is his will. Amen.

Canon Dr. Robert Innes