

**Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference**  
**16th-20th September 2011**  
**“THE WORD PREACHED – THE WORD READ”**  
**Salisbury, Wiltshire, UK**

**SERMON ON PSALM 119 VERSE 130**

**At the closing Eucharist**

**By the Rt Rev Jurgen Johannesdotter (Lutheran President of the Society)**

"Thy word is revealed, and all is light; it gives understanding even to the untaught."  
(Authorized Version)

"The unfolding of your words gives light; even to the untaught."  
(New International Version)

"Wenn dein Wort offenbar wird, so erfreut es und macht klug die Unverstindigen."  
(Luther Revised 1984)

Dear friends,

We have gone a long way during these days listening to some valuable experts and their contributions and discussing it in public and in personal conversations during the social parts of our gathering. "The word preached - the word read" - in many different ways; as diverse as Christians usually are, and not only Germans, of whom Honoré de Balzac once said: "On the ground of each problem there is a German." No, we did not only "problematisieren" (Sorry, I did not find any English word for this maybe exclusive German way of discussing) "the word preached and the word read"; we also gathered around word and sacrament with prayers and hymns, both in the magnificent cathedrals and the chapel in Sarum College. Thank you so much, all of you who contributed to make this possible in preparation and carrying out.

And now: "Thy word is revealed, and all is light; it gives understanding even to the untaught."

A collect used on the Second Advent says:

"Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy word we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ." Protestants are said to be people of one book, the Bible. When I was a foreign student in Boston during the early Sixties, the Baptist Church in Boston had as its motto: "Preaching from the Book That the Pilgrims Brought." Oaths continued to be administered upon it, cornerstones and arches bear inscriptions from it, its stories and allusions form the common

vocabulary of the Western intellectual and aesthetic experience. These things cannot be denied; the book is very much with us and is an integral part even of our secular world. That the Bible has a cultural and aesthetic influence in the world is quite evident and well attested, but what has the Bible to do with the believer, the church, the community of the faithful who, represented by such as ourselves, are bade "read, mark, learn, und inwardly digest" what is read from these books?

Growing up in the church where they preached from the Book the Pilgrims brought, the answer seems very clear. In most of our churches there is a large central pulpit, behind which the minister stands and expounds the word of God. As a confirmand I was expected to learn large portions of the Bible, Luther's Small Catechism, and the Hymn Book (135 hymns). The pastor who confirmed me had a dog-eared Bible which fit his left hand like a glove and appeared to open itself to the relevant passages. I got to know many of the inhabitants of this book. As the compass was to the wandering Boy Scout, and the evening star to the pilot at sea, so was the Bible an infallible guide to the wandering Christian: "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest." And the hymn we had to learn was:

Herr, dein Wort, die edle Gabe,  
diesen Schatz erhalte mir,  
Denn ich zieh es aller Habe  
und dem grossten Reichtum für.  
Wenn dein Wort nicht mehr soll gelten,  
worauf soll der Glaube ruhn?  
Mir ist nicht um tausend Welten,  
aber um dein Wort zu tun.

After confirmation I put many things away from what I had learned. What had the Bible to do with many questions that were essential to me and others at that time? What had the Bible to do with the atom bomb, with the war in Vietnam? The Bible has always had its staunch defenders, men and women, who have risen in its service against all the odds of the secular world. I am reminded of the story of the minister and the local agnostic who were arguing about the validity of scripture. The agnostic said to the minister: "Well, Pastor, how can you read this book and preach from it every Sunday of your life? It is filled with utter nonsense." And the reply was: "Nonsense or not, it is the word of God."

Travelling in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the Bible as map and compass was like taking a road journey with a 2000-year-old atlas: interesting to read but hardly likely to get you to where you wanted to go. It was the century of two world wars and many others. What was supposed to be the "Century of the

Church" turned out to be the "Century of Martyrs". Against these experiences our biblical text says: "The word is revealed, and all is light: it gives understanding even to the untaught", and in the equally rhapsodic earlier verses of Psalm 119: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light on my path ... Thy instruction is my everlasting inheritance; it is the joy of my heart. I am resolved to fulfil thy statutes; they are a reward that never fails."

And in the book of Romans, we are reminded: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." By this I believe St. Paul and others want to remind us that the scriptures are a means to God's sublime end of redemption, a means that we cannot afford to ignore, but a means nevertheless. Contrary to popular opinion, the Bible never was meant to be an object of worship. What is holy about this book that we call holy is that it directs by precept and example the mind and spirit toward the mind and spirit of God. In other words, one's devotion begins when one closes the Bible. The faith becomes the lively word when it becomes rooted in the hearts and lives of the believers, and by such means secures us in the hope that the promises made and the guidance offered are trustworthy and true.

Now what does all this say to the vexing problems of the modern age of biblical criticism, where some of the faithful feel it necessary to defend the Bible from the hands of the literary and textual critics. Others whose lives are a light in our times believe that to apply secular canons of criticism to the Bible is to reduce its stature.

I think it is important to note that the scriptures have never been unexamined. Rabbinic scholarship for centuries has been based on the principle of interpretation. What does it mean and how came it to be so? If the scriptures were always self-evident, and without need of interpretation and understanding, teachers such as Jesus and Moses and Hillel would not have been necessary. St. Augustine and the fathers of the Western church spent long hours and countless volumes trying to make clear the levels of scriptural meaning, and they, living closer in time to the formation of the sacred canon, would have recoiled at the notion and term of "fundamentalism".

Their sense of the scriptures as lively and organic and the agency of God's spirit and our understanding was far more sophisticated than many of our contemporary opponents of biblical criticism, and they were able to do what they did with the scriptures because what they had what many of us have lost, a context of the faithful community within which to work, the church, and a firm belief that the Holy Spirit is the means by which our understanding is enlarged and enlightened.

The Bible was for those teachers not an isolated set of yellow Pages cataloguing God's will and our necessity. It was one of the means by which God had chosen to reveal through human instruments and examples his will for the world, and it was no more or less infallible than the life of which it was composed and toward which it was directed. It was the record of an all too - human people seeking, finding, losing and being found of God.

The Bible spoke, and speaks, not the last word but the lively word by which we would be kept in remembrance of the things that were, and in hope of the things that are yet to come. Because it is not intended to be a substitute for science or history or even religion, it can neither be made nor destroyed by these agencies for it is at the same time both less and more than all of these.

The Bible then is the church's book; it records in its pages the mystery of God's continuous incarnation through the prophets, the judges, the kings, and, indeed is the supreme example of his coming to us in the advent of Jesus Christ. As we read in the letter to the Hebrews: "God, who at sundry times and in diverse manners spoke in times past unto our fathers by the prophets has in these last days spoken unto us by his son."

Through this book we hear the history beyond history of our people who have travelled before us the road upon which we now find ourselves, but by that book we are not called to lead our lives as pale imitations, trying to reproduce in our times the circumstances and characters of third century Bible - Land. If that book speaks to us with the same power that spoke to our fathers and mothers and to those whose lives are recorded in it, then we led by that same spirit that says that we too must live our lives in the fearful and faithful search for the will of God who made us and the love of Jesus Christ who saved us. With the Bible, then, our work is not done but is just beginning, for in its penetrating light we must now live our lives even as our ancestors lived theirs.

The Bible is the beginning of belief, but for the Christian it must never be a substitute for belief. What is written is indeed written for our learning, but as we are reminded by St. Paul, "... written for our learning that we through the patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope."

God bless all of you and renew this hope in you and your parishes and your churches every day.  
AMEN.