

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference

Turku, Finland, September 2009

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His sermon at the Lutheran Completorium, with which we ended the day on Monday 14th September, was based on Matthew 11.

“You have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.”

I would like to tell you a story; a story about faith which is hidden from the wise and the intelligent. It's a story about the basic elements of Christian faith which are perhaps less dependent on our intellectual and mental capacities than we highly educated theologians tend to think.

The story is about an old man I knew quite well some years ago. He had had a brain infarct that had caused him to lose a part of his short-term memory. Once he asked me if I would write down the Lord's Prayer because he couldn't always remember it correctly. I did as he asked. I wrote down the prayer on a sheet of paper and I laminated it so it was easy to keep in his hands. He was very grateful, and in the evenings he took the laminated prayer and read it before going to sleep.

Later he had another infarct and he lost his capacity to read. Now he could not remember or read the Lord's Prayer. His wife told me later that every evening before going to sleep the man took the laminated paper in his hands and just kept it there for a while. Every now and then he would be in hospital for some weeks and he always took the prayer on the paper with him. He put it in a table drawer beside his bed so that in the evenings he could take it from it. In his last weeks he was again in hospital and by then quite weak. I'm not sure if he was any more able to take the Lord's Prayer in his hands as he used to. But it was, however, with him. It was in the table drawer next to him. It was found there after his death.

He was not an infant - of course not. He was an old man who had lots of years of experience. But his mental capacities became more and more limited. Of course I couldn't see into his inner world, but I think that, little by little, his faith lost its corpus as his mind lost its corpus. His faith could not be expressed any more. And perhaps, at the end, there was not any more conscious personal prayer. But the basic thing was left; it was in his table drawer. It kept him connected, not to his own personal faith, but to the common faith of the Church and to the common prayer of the church.