

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference

Turku, Finland, September 2009

The Rt Rev Rupert Hoare, former Dean of Liverpool Cathedral in the United Kingdom, is Anglican Co-Moderator of our Society. His sermon, preached to the Finnish congregation in Turku Cathedral on 13th September 2009, was based on readings from Nehemiah 8.5-10, I Thessalonians 5.16-24 and Matthew 11.25-30

Those are splendid readings we have just heard: Nehemiah telling the people not to grieve (even though they have let their city, their faith and their integrity fall into ruins); they're not to grieve because (as he reminds them) "the joy of the Lord is their strength". What a splendid rallying cry!

And the Epistle also starts with joy and rejoicing: "Rejoice always" and St Paul goes on, spelling out the truly positive attitude to life that Christian faith can and should give us: "Pray always, give thanks in every circumstance...." Two phrases in particular strike me: "Do not quench the Spirit", and "The one who calls you is faithful". We can trust the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore we can and must rejoice.

And the Gospel gives us those great words of Jesus, known in the English Prayer Book as the first of the Comfortable Words: "Come unto me all you who labour and are heavily laden, and I will give you rest". The Gospel strikes a quieter note than that of the Epistle, but in the invitation to take on the way of Christ and so to find rest for one's soul, there is deep joy.

I want to return to those readings, especially the epistle, but first let me say how good it is to be here, to thank the Dean for his invitation to preach, and to say also how delighted we all are, in the Anglican-Lutheran Society, that we can hold our conference this year in this fascinating and beautiful city.

I would also like to take this opportunity to express the gratitude of our Society for the generous support the Finnish Church has given us over the years, and especially for your hospitality at this time.

It may well be, of course, that some of you have never heard of the Anglican-Lutheran Society! Let me explain who we are and what we stand for. We're mostly Lutheran or Anglican Christians (though we also have Methodists and Roman Catholics in our number), who are committed to working, living and praying for greater unity between Anglicans and Lutherans world-wide, as important and realisable steps that can be taken now towards the unity of all Christian people.

We are from Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Ireland, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, Sri Lanka, and probably elsewhere as well; there could well be a group in Hungary soon.

In our Conference here in Turku nearly all those nationalities are represented, and we have two from India with us as well. So, although we're based in England, we're an international, voluntary group of Christians looking, praying and working for the unity of all Christ's Church. And Christians here in Finland are stalwart members – and we're always looking for more to join us! (End of Advertisement!)

Just a word about the Theme of our Conference here in Turku; it is: "Keeping Connected". At first sight a very secular title - but the more one thinks about it, the more relevant it obviously is to what Christians are about. All of us here this morning are coming to this Eucharist (Mass) to re-connect ourselves or (to put it better) to be re-connected with our God.

We are to 'keep connected' with God as known in Christ through sharing in the bread and the wine, His body and blood; we are 'to keep connected' with one another, in order to fulfil our calling as the Body of Christ in the world. We are 'to keep connected' to the communion of saints, and to the riches of the Christian tradition through the ages.

Finally, we are to 'renew our connexion' (to use a Methodist term) with the world-wide church, worshipping our God in many different cultures, many different denominations, in many different languages – and this is the first time I have ever preached through an interpreter, and I'm very grateful to him!

That inter-connectedness with one another, across all barriers of race, of denomination, of colour and of language is indeed (to go back to St Paul's words) a matter for great rejoicing. Through the ecumenical movement we are experiencing how what used to be barriers between us are becoming pathways of meeting, discovering a unity which is God's longing not just for us Christians, but for all humankind, indeed for all creation.

That brings me back to St Paul's words: "Do not quench the Spirit" - Spirit with a capital 'S'; do not quench the Holy Spirit of God at work among us, and between us, leading us towards each other to discover (yes) how diverse and varied we have been made, but also how rich our unity as Christians and as human beings can be. It is to THAT, that we are called, and, (as St Paul said) "the one who calls you is faithful, and He will do it."

Some years ago one of our bishops in England, a great missionary bishop who had spent much time in Africa, wrote a very wonderful book (I wonder if it has been translated into Finnish) called: "The Go-Between God". It was a study of the Holy Spirit, whom he calls "the Go-Between".

In the English language, a 'Go-Between' is a person who gives messages from one person to another, who brings people together, interprets one person to another, whether on an individual or group level, reconciling where necessary, but always 'connecting', or 're-connecting', to return to the title of our Conference. That's the work of the Spirit! And, says St Paul, "don't quench it!" On the contrary, we're to rejoice in it, to work with the Spirit of God, for it's the work of the Creator, bringing the Creation into that unity that Christ

worked for, prayed for, died for, lives for, and invites people into: (to go back to the Gospel's words) "Come unto me all that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest, rest for your souls".

And the 'rest' of which Jesus speaks does not mean 'sleep' (though sleep is one of God's gifts!); it doesn't mean (as we say in English - and I imagine there's a Finnish equivalent!) 'putting your feet up' while others do the work. Jesus is pointing towards the eternal Sabbath rest of the Kingdom, which we can begin to enjoy here and now. It is the gift of his peace, offered to us now.

For the 'rest' which He offers is genuine peace, genuine 'wholeness' of body, mind and spirit, where all fractures, all brokenness, are overcome. St Paul hints at the same state of being in our Epistle this morning, by constantly repeating the word 'all' and the word 'complete'. We are always to rejoice, always to pray, always to give thanks, becoming 'completely holy', 'completely sound in body, mind and spirit.'

No-one can do that on their own, no-one can overcome their brokenness by themselves. We need each other; we can only be ourselves when we are turned towards our neighbour, when we have learned to love one another as He has loved us. Therefore "do not quench the Spirit". For the Spirit is the Go-Between who draws us and binds us together.

Therefore we come to the Lord's Table, at His invitation, to give thanks, in other words, to celebrate Eucharist, to keep connected - or better, to be re-connected with God in Christ, and with one another, not only for our own sake, but for the sake of the unity He came to bring to the whole of humankind, the whole of the created order. Thanks be to God. **Amen**