

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference

Turku, Finland, September 2009

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THE MESSAGE OF JESUS TO OUR CHURCHES

Yes, dear friends, we heard in the Gospel reading that Jesus was filled with great joy when he saw simple and unlearned people both understanding and accepting the message concerning the Kingdom of God. They were given the grace to get to know the Father through the Son - not because they were wise and intelligent, but because they listened, and because they believed and obeyed. On other occasions Jesus was overwhelmed by sorrow and compassion when he saw the misery of the ordinary people. He saw how harassed and helpless they were under the many burdens of this life. But this time joy took the lead and he gave praise to God for all he was doing among these people, and in his joy he says: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

Today we are joined by members of the Anglican-Lutheran Society who are meeting here in Turku for this service in which we are celebrating the mission of the Church. Therefore, let us look upon these words of Jesus as a message to our respective Churches. When looking at our Anglican and Lutheran communities we too can be filled with joy over all that God is doing, but also with sorrow and compassion because of all that is burdensome or heavy.

There are so many things to be thankful and glad about. There are so many priests and church workers who are doing a very fine job and who are good shepherds of the flock. We see both young and old finding life in God. They are leaving behind their old life in sin and shame and selfishness and turning back to God. In this conversion to God and in the strength of forgiveness through Jesus they are finding a new quality of life exceeding anything they could have dreamt of. This is happening all the time in Anglican and Lutheran churches both here in Northern Europe and across the world - and in East Africa, the area to which my wife and I will be returning again in a few days time. There the Jesus joy is spreading like an irresistible tsunami, catching both young and old with it.

But our churches are also carrying heavy burdens. Both in Africa and elsewhere we are carrying the burdens of our own sins and faults which cause the work of God to be destroyed from time to time and the name of

Christ to be dishonoured. We are carrying the burden of economic and moral offenses which often have their roots in selfishness, greed and disobedience to the commands of Jesus. We are carrying the burden of disunity over questions of how Christian people should believe and live. Still today Jesus looks on us and on our churches saying: Come to me - come and I will give you rest - come and learn from me - come and I will teach you how to live.

Well, which way is Jesus asking us to go in order to find the way of life as Christians and as Churches? What is the medicine he offers us so that we might become healthy? In today's Gospel we find a twofold answer to this question. It is so simple, and somehow self-evident, that we can easily overlook it. But now, let us try not to be wise and intelligent. Let us be like children reading the word of God just as it is. What do we see then?

The first thing that we recognise or learn is that the Gospel for today is welcoming us into a **Jesus-movement**. Jesus says, 'Come to me.' He is calling us into a movement towards a centre - and he is that centre. In him we will find rest for our souls. There we can finally breathe out, relax, and feel ourselves to be both safe and free. But the movement does not stop there. When Jesus asks us to take upon us his yoke he is inviting us to walk with him and at his side. This way the movement goes on. Jesus goes forward and we can go with him.

All churches have their origin in this Jesus-movement, and every church and congregation is still called to be part of it. It was first a Jesus- movement within Judaism, and to some extent we still have to see ourselves as a renewal movement within Judaism. This identity will follow us until Christ returns. But before long the same Jesus-movement was to be found within Hellenism, and within other cultures. For example, the Apostle Paul, writing to the Celtic Galatians in Asia Minor who were about to go astray, commented that he was again in pain of childbirth with them until Christ was formed in them. So Paul was thinking that there should be a Galatian form of Christianity in those villages. All do not have to be the same. The Jesus-movement is taking different forms in different peoples and among different cultures - but all the time it is a question of the confession of the same Lord Jesus Christ and of conformity to him. For this reason you can recognise and identify the same Christian movement wherever you go. If I had started this sermon in Tanzania I would probably have greeted the congregation with 'Bwana asifiwe!', which means 'The Lord be praised!'. The congregation would have answered with a loud 'Amen!' This way both the preacher and the congregation would have confirmed and communicated to each other that they all belong to the same Jesus-movement. This is the first thing that we learn from today's Gospel. The lesson is so simple and self-evident that a child can grasp it, whereas the most learned among the learned in their learnedness can pass it by!

The second thing, which is both simple and self-evident, is that the Jesus-movement **is movement**. Jesus invites us to **walk** with him. He says, 'Come to me - Join me - Walk with me.' When he gave the missionary commandment to his disciples he said the same. He said, 'Go!' And he

added, 'I am with you.' Think how easy everything would be in our congregations and churches if we started to walk more, to walk and walk and walk again. To walk to each other and care each other - walk to those who are visited by no-one - walk to those who are standing far away, with their hesitations of suspicions - walk with the good news to immigrants or strangers - walk until we reach the utmost borders with the Gospel. It is as simple as this, and perhaps that is what makes it so hard - because we would prefer to sit just where we are. We would rather discuss projects and strategies. We would rather sit in our own privacy watching TV, rather than going to others or inviting them to come home to be with us. A well known German scholar, Gerd Theissen, has written a book about this very strange phenomenon - the way that Jesus was constantly moving and walking about - and the first Apostles too. Evangelists and Prophets were all the time on the move. In a Church Order dating from the beginning of the second century, called The Didache, it is said that if somebody comes to you claiming to be an Apostle or Prophet, and he stays for more than two nights, he is a false prophet! Such people were expected to be constantly on the move with the message of peace, and they should never stop. No wonder that the Gospel spread so rapidly during those early days of Christianity!

So, dear friends, our Anglican and Lutheran churches do not need new liturgies or new ideas of strategies - they need new shoes - convenient and suitable shoes fit for wandering evangelists. Paul speaks about those shoes which will make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. May God give us such readiness in our Jesus-movement, found in so many different forms worldwide, in Europe, Africa, Asia and America.

The best thing of all is that in this way both family life and church life will become much less complicated and expensive. 'My yoke is easy, and my burden is light,' says Jesus, looking on us and on our Churches with great love. He wants us to feel free and comfortable in his presence. He has only good intentions for us. He is not brutal towards us, not demanding of us more than he gives us. And the heavier the burden, the more he will carry himself. 'Come to me,' he says. 'Learn from me - walk at my side - here is a good place for you - here you will finally find rest for your soul - now you have arrived - now you have come home.'

Amen