

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

THE FACE OF JESUS CHRIST
Sermon preached in Winchester Cathedral by
The Very Rev Dr John Arnold (Anglican President of the Society)

From our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah 45, verses 20 & 22, “come together, draw near, you survivors of the nations...Turn to me and be saved all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.”

It is a great pleasure and privilege for me to be back in Winchester Cathedral more than sixty years after I first came here as a schoolboy in the 1940s. I have never forgotten the impression this wonderful building made on me, as I slipped in through the little west door and was overwhelmed by its magnificence and sheer otherness, an early experience, though I would not then have used the word, of transcendence. Later, when I was teaching Russian at Southampton University, I used to compare Tolstoy’s ‘War and Peace’ with this nave to make the point that length that can sometimes, rarely perhaps especially in sermons, be a function of beauty, quantity turning by a strange alchemy, into quality. Let me give you another example, this time a visual one.

One day in the 1960s I was preaching in the nave here to a girls’ school in the days when schoolgirls wore straw boaters and sat demurely with downcast eyes, so that the view from the pulpit was of a kind of enormous Venetian blind, or rather of two blinds, each about five yards wide and fifty yards long, in a regular geometrical pattern of horizontal lines of discs of golden straw reflecting the afternoon sunlight. It was stunningly beautiful in an abstract and inorganic way. I began by saying something mildly amusing, as one does when preaching to schools; and they all looked up together and smiled, a thousand faces opening like flowers and animating the scene with human life and barely suppressed laughter. This was beauty of a different order, indescribable, ineffable, both immanent and transcendent. I remember thinking at the time that if I were a Hollywood mogul, I would film this scene from above like a 1930’s Busby Berkeley musical and the cameraman would win an Oscar for it.

What happened in that magic moment was that a regular, regimented, inanimate and abstract pattern had suddenly acquired human faces, irregular, animated, real and personal. When we

think of other people, we always begin with stereotyped patterns. We have to; it's the way our minds work as they try to impose order on random perceptions. We start with labels and categories, Lutherans, Anglicans, Germans, Balts or British. The purpose of a society, like the Anglican-Lutheran Society, which you have been kind enough to welcome here, is to go beyond that, to pull the cord on the Venetian blind and to recognise one another by our faces, to get to know one another, to listen to one another's stories, particularly those of recent immigrants and students from Somalia and Eritrea, from Indonesia and China and those of the older generation, washed up upon our shores by the tides of war, in obedience to the word of Isaiah, "come together, draw near, you survivors of the nations... Turn to me and be saved all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other." (Isaiah 45, 20, 22)

But my anecdote is of wider than individual application and in two particular ways. Through the Meissen Agreement between the Church of England and the German Protestant Churches, the 20th anniversary of which is being celebrated in Westminster Abbey at this very hour, former enemies see each other as friends. In the Porvoo Agreement, establishing communion between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the Scandinavian, Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches, we paint a biblical portrait of 'a church living in the light of the gospel'; and we go on to say that we recognize each other as churches, as we do people, by our faces and our likeness to that portrait. This doctrine of the church has been called 'an iconic ecclesiology'. Be that as it may, it enabled us to recognize each other's ministries without further ado; and the rest, as they say, is history, church history at its best.

Beyond that, it offers us a way of approach to God. If I just say the word 'God' to myself or to you, we run the risk of forming in our minds images, literally idols, made up of half-digested fears and fantasies, historical and cultural stereotypes, outworn theological and dogmatic formulæ, none of which does justice to God as He is in Himself, and some of which are the exact opposite of the truth. But God is God and there is no other. That is why He had to pull the cord on the Venetian blind Himself and show His face in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, so that the ossified concepts, the clear straight lines, the perfect circles, the objectified patterns of thought could look like us and the Word become flesh, dwelling among us full of grace and truth, vulnerable to mortality and capable of Resurrection life. As Canon Charles Raven used to say, "Jesus is what God means by man and what man means by God." Or, rather, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "It is God Himself, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Cor 4.6.) Amen.