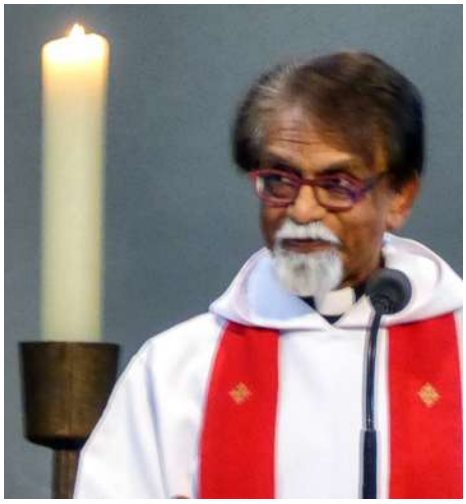
Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference in Hamburg

11th-15th September, 2026

'A Changing Church in an Age of Migration'



Sermon preached by the Venerable Leslie Nathaniel
at the morning Service of the Word
on Monday 14th September.

John 12.27-36a

Friends, it is a joy and a privilege to be invited to deliver a message at this conference. I know his building and I used to be a priest here in Hamburg at St Thomas Becket Church for about four years. So, in many ways, I've come back to my home ground which is an added joy.

During the first part of 2012 the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, visited the offices of the World Council of Churches and he addressed a round-table discussion on the subject of the unity of the Christian Church. At that time, I carried the responsibility for a large part of the ecumenical work of the Church of England at Church House in London and at Lambeth Palace. Archbishop Rowan told us that unity is neither a means or an end – it is what God has given us in the Church.

Christians who receive the gift of unity have a responsibility to seek, and I quote, 'a life in which no-one is without the other. This life is,' he continued, 'constantly moving us forward into further truth and compels all who live within the love of God to ask the question, "Who is not yet here?"

Certainly, a lot has been achieved in terms of unity between Anglicans and Lutherans, and it is my prayer that our journey will together will be strengthened in these changing and challenging times. Rowan Williams reminds us that our unity is God's unity in the Church. And so, friends, it is with this background, as well as my whole Indian upbringing, that I approach our Gospel text for today, and my focus will be on the Son of Man lifted up who will draw all people to himself.

This reading follows directly on from Jesus's triumphant entry in Jerusalem when the crowds acclaimed him as their king. Jesus's opponents are furious, furious because they resent Jesus's popularity. But it's at this point that Andrew and Philip come to tell Jesus that some Greeks, foreigners, have come looking for Jesus. These foreigners were obviously impressed by the Jewish Law and by God's dealing with them and God's promises for the future.

But instead of telling Philip and Andrew, 'By all means, bring them along', Jesus goes off on a meditative discourse about seeds and plants, about life and death, about servants and masters. Why? And what is he saying, we might ask ourselves. The fullest answer, I think, comes in verse 32: Jesus declares that when he is lifted up, he will draw all people to himself. In other words, if the Greeks want to see him and to see what he has come into the world to accomplish it was for him important not to impress himself on them but to carry on and complete the work the Father had given him. It was only after that that the world of the Greeks would come to know the truth and to have as deep an access to him as God had to him. They

would not just be meeting a wonder-working Galilean. Rather, they would be drawn by the love of God into an enduring fellowship.

Now the picture of the seed falling into the ground and dying is the beginning of his answer. Here we understand more clearly how, as stated earlier in John's Gospel, God will save the world by the death of Jesus. Jesus's death will be like sowing a seed into the ground that will grow into the mighty cedars of Lebanon. It may look like a defeat but it will actually be a triumph. This seed will be the triumph of God's self-giving love., the love that looks like death itself but defeats it by accepting it voluntarily on behalf of not just Israel but of the whole world – the world represented by those Greeks. Friends, Jesus realizes that his time had come. The fact that even foreigners, by asking to see him, functions as a sign that the time had come, that the great moment of love has come.

At the outset I mentioned that his opponents were furious at Jesus's popularity. Now this anger was not just from the religious die-hards but also the political rulers of the time, all of whom wished to keep the people under subjugation so that their power could not be destroyed. John counters this in verses 21-23: 'Now is the judgment of this world, now the ruler of this world will be thrown down, and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' All people have to be free from their bondage of the oppressors of the world. This is what was happening and continues to happen through Christ, the Son of Man. And the judgment takes place when the Son of Man is lifted up, not to heaven, but lifted up on the cross.

And so, who is the Son of Man that must be lifted up? Now the author of the Gospel knows that we shall ask this question and that the meaning of these words cannot be fully grasped. By referring to himself as the Son of Man who is to judge the world and cast out the rulers of the world, Jesus clearly suggests that he incorporates in himself the suffering Israel and, by extension, Jesus is in the midst of the whole of suffering humanity. John also points out that the Son of Man, the Son of God, has been given the authority to judge. This can be most clearly seen in chapter 5, verse 27, and he has given him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of Man. The Christian, confronted by the love of God, will understand that God draws people to himself in a diversity of ways, and it is our task to cooperate with him.

Friends, during these times of uncertainty, fear and change you have chosen an appropriate theme: 'Changing Church in an Age of Migration'. It is a time when society and across the wider world is increasingly marked by fear and fragmentation. The Church is called to respond with right, truth and more.

Racism, xenophobia, hostility, economic exclusivism, political exclusivism and the politicization of identity continue to wound human communities, and to undermine the human dignity of countless human people.

These realities are not distant social concerns. The shape the daily experience of migrants, refugees, minority ethnic communities, indigenous people and all who are treated as outsiders, the strangers in our midst. Friends, within the German Church context we have all seen the rise of a political party's ability to win elections by its anti-migration policies. One of the daily newspapers I was reading the other day noted that the relentless daily discussion and propaganda has resulted of that party gaining 44% of the votes. In Saxony-Anhalt, even children of migrants are no longer safe going to school. Fascism is rapidly taking root in all levels of the society there.

And so, let us turn to the Son of Man lifted up on the cross in the hope of the resurrection to speak truth to power. We, as Christians, embrace and taste the friendship and the presence of the risen Christ and we cannot but continue to share that experience, recognizing in humility that God can draw people to himself in diverse ways. We should hold on to this action of God and cooperate with him. It is for this that the risen Lord sends his Spirit upon us and sends us into the world to be present with all victims of oppression and to identify ourselves with their longing for fulness of life. Amen