

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference

24th-28th August 2018

Pastor Thomas Jantzen's sermon in the Martin Luther Kirche, Newcastle

Although it doesn't reflect well on the preacher I will start by assuring you that this will be a very short sermon! I just want to connect your topic, 'Where is Christ Alive?' with the topic for this Sunday, from the point of view of an ex-pat congregation. Two things are made clear by Jesus according to the Bible verse for this week, 'Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters you did it to me.' There is no border to whom I shall do good things, and the parable of the Good Samaritan shows that there is no border the other way round – it doesn't matter who does these good things. Love is universal – completely universal, and it doesn't matter to whom you are doing the good deed, and it doesn't matter who is doing the good thing. The good deeds matter.

It might sound strange for a Lutheran theologian to emphasise good deeds but it is, from my point of view, a misconception of Christian Faith to contrast faith and deeds with each other. This is because faith itself is focused on a deed – it is Jesus's deed on the cross which we have to believe and trust, and which sets us free to do deeds of love.

Love is itself a deed! You can't just say, 'I love you,' and not do it! You can't just say, 'I'll help you,' and not do it! You cannot think that God would say, 'I love you,' but not do it! And that's what we see in Jesus Christ – he is the deed of God. Jesus Christ's whole existence is about being there for other people, for us – completely for us – complete love. And that's what I think we have to believe, that it doesn't start with us, it doesn't depend on us; that love has already been done to us. And that love sets us free to do good things because God first did good things for us. It's already started through Christ.

So it isn't us who are making Christ alive, it is Christ who is making us alive. And to answer the question, 'Christ is alive in Newcastle! Really? Where?' the answer is not the amazing things Christians in Newcastle do, even though there are some as we've heard today. The answer is every particular deed of love, independent of size or reputation, shows us that Christ is alive.

If there are Christians caring about refugees, this shows us that Christ is alive. And if a humble Christian cares for his elderly mother, this also shows us that Christ is alive. The snag is we don't see all the little deeds, or we overlook them. A teacher who ties a pupil's shoelaces, a person who gives a stranger a smile – how alive Christ would seem if all deeds of love were as visible as the sunlight itself. That would be an overwhelming statement of love against all the bad news that surrounds us.

When I first thought about your topic I was wondering, 'Why do they come to us as a very small congregation of German-speaking people? Why don't they go to Newcastle Cathedral, for example? But your marvellous and provoking topic made me think about where and how Christ is alive among us, and is making us alive. Of course, we feel very honoured to have you as a conference of Christians from all over the world here, and it makes a bit of sense to me somehow because we don't do big things, we just want to be a place where German-speaking people can live part of their German identity – not against the new identity they might have acquired when they have lived here for many years, but to live their German identity too – for example, at Christmas when the German Christmas Eve is something very special for every German! Indeed, we are told that it is counting and praying that people do in their mother-tongue, even if they have lived abroad for a long time.

We, as a congregation, have been so much welcomed here in Shieldfield and Battlefield. If you are a foreigner it is important to feel welcome, as we've heard this afternoon. And it might be important to have a counterpart who speaks your language. I will give you an example of what my wife Verena and I are doing apart from services. A couple from East Germany, not very secure English speakers, were in a very serious car accident on their holidays in Scotland. Due to their very severe injuries they were taken into two different hospitals, one in Aberdeen and the other in Inverness. Luckily there was a police officer who was a German who decided to look after them, which was a bit of a challenge because of the difference between the two cities. She contacted us and Verena went up to Inverness just to ensure that the man had everything that he needed, and later a German-speaking nurse was found in Inverness who took over. This was nothing special – just talking, bringing some German books and asking if he needed anything. All this happened because of this woman Police Officer and the fact that she cared about these stranded Germans who were in such a vulnerable situation.

It is, of course, something of a luxury to have someone available who speaks your language when you are living abroad. But there is another language which helps here, a language that everybody can speak, and does speak every time he or she cares about somebody else. This is the language of love which is universal so everyone can be in good counterpart to each other, independent of heritage, religious belief, age or sexual orientation.

And for showing us the power of love, Jesus gave himself to us completely, in Godly mercy, to become the risen Lord and Saviour and the living power of love amongst us. And this is what we share as men and women from different nations, as Lutherans and Anglicans, Roman Catholic and Reformed, or any other denomination, and this is what connects us across the planet. And this became my ecumenical approach, not the way to unity but the unity we already have, that we learn from each other, of course, from each other's differences, but that we celebrate what already connects us, the living and eternal love of God which is poured into our hearts by Christ our Lord.

Love is both truly universal and truly practical – wouldn't that be an approach between all religions as well? I'm sure that the universality of love, because it is always the universality of acts of love, of charity, is the ground of all religions and could be the foundation of reconciliation among nations and religions all over the planet, focusing more on what we can do rather than what we believe – and there's a lot to do on this planet.

For us as Christians this love has a face and a name. For us it is the Christ who made this love a power that everyone who believes can experience themselves. So what I wish for us as churches in Newcastle and you as the Anglican-Lutheran Society is that we celebrate what connects us and share the love that is already given to us.