

What of the Future? - a presentation by Jonas Jonson

As a Bishop I don't know how many times people have asked me to talk about the future. We don't know anything about the future. All we know is that there are a number of options open to us. We may do as the Desert Fathers and get away to an isolated island somewhere and try to survive for the next few hundred years. Or you may organise big campaigns, or whatever. We know nothing about the future. But let me say a few things.

After these days of rich sharing with each other, we should really start where we all started. We went to see some of the Gotland churches and we learn something very important about the integral function of the Church in those days when commerce and culture and religion were all held together and symbolised by these local churches. This is still relevant in our globalised and inter-dependent world, a world that is obviously in a process of fragmentation and increasing authoritarianism. There are some sort of overall mega trends that I would just like to remind us of.

One is the movement of world Christianity from the North to the South. I think the turning point was around 1950 and it continues, and the majority of Christian believers now live in the southern hemisphere. And this will continue, and the number of Christians is increasing in the South and decreasing in the North. And the European Churches are ageing Churches with ageing populations and decreasing numbers of members, so that Europe is beginning to look like a pagan continent and I think we must remember this always, that world Christianity will not be determined in the future from here.

Another thing that's re-drawing the ecumenical map is migration. And migration has come to stay. We talk a lot in our country and in the rest of Europe about the flood of refugees from the Middle East, but we all know this is just one dimension of a global migration that started many years ago and from time to time increases and decreases. It is something that we must live with and in Europe it is changing the ecumenical map of Europe considerably.

When I started working in the ecumenical movement more than fifty years ago, we still could define churches as, for example, the Church in Sweden, the Church in Bulgaria, the Church in Tanzania. Today all kinds of Christianity are present everywhere. Of course, those of you who live in places like London know that more than the rest of us. We have to look at this seriously because it really does change the face of the ecumenical movement – the everywhere presence of everyone.

If I take only the example of Sweden today, with all the refugees coming from the Middle East - and we have received more in this country other than Germany in the rest of Europe. We have refugees now in almost every community, from the south to the far north. And what do these people do? A large number join the churches. They go to any local parish in any part of the country today. On any Sunday you find a number of people who are Armenian, Orthodox, whatever, but all kinds of people assemble in the church. They participate fully, they take communion and they try to use the churches as a means of integration in the local community. This is a new situation. We can't tell people they shouldn't come here. They are there!

So all the Agreements we've been talking about for decades are suddenly, in one sense, irrelevant. This ecumenical activity just happens! What this will lead to, we don't know. But it's an entirely new situation.

Now, in this island of Gotland, we've seen these churches from the past integrating cultures and traditions and religions, and also confessions in the sense that we have seen elements of the Eastern Orthodox and of the Latin Church, in the same churches here and we want to worship in forms that

remind us of continuity from the Apostles through the Reformation and into our times and we all of us know, I think, that this continuity is primarily through the Eucharist. Eucharist is a living tradition, Eucharist as the inclusive communion, Eucharist as participation in the community of Christ, and Eucharist as a protest and hope. And this has been so all through Reformation times.

We've actually not spent that much time talking about the Reformation as such, but we are here because of the rise of Lutheran and Anglican and subsequently uncountable expressions of Christianity. Today, as we only know too well, the visible Church is divided to her core as all believers are still not supposed or allowed to share the communion at the Lord's Table. Christians exclude each other. Earlier on in our Conference we heard how churches exclude, and they exclude each other. And the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church is but an unfulfilled dream. And this is not only a Protestant thing. The Roman Catholic Church, as well as the Orthodox Churches, is not spared the divisions of our time. The much needed Reformation of Western Christianity certainly believed in individual freedom, it eventually cleared the Church of some superstition, and it paved the way for the notion of human rights and the cause of democracy. And the Reformation of the Church is, of course, was only symbolically begun at Wittenberg. It had already been going on for centuries before Martin Luther appeared and it was certainly not completed by him. It is a continual process through the Enlightenment which changed the Churches much more than did the actual Reformation. It continued through the Evangelical Awakenings, on into the ecumenical advancements of the last century.

The peak of the Reformation was, I would claim, the Second Vatican Council where it was confirmed that the Reformation had also had profound implications for the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Church now had to move into new times and into a new world. And therefore, when we celebrate the Reformation it is entirely appropriate that the Pope participates because the Reformation has now reached the world Church. And that should be celebrated by us all.

The Reformation also led to fragmentation, to conflict and, after the Enlightenment, to an irresistible secularisation. In short, the Reformation contributed to a severe weakening of the only institution that for centuries had provided intellectual, spiritual, cultural and moral counterweight to the raw and dehumanising violence of political exploitation throughout the whole of Europe. After Wittenberg Christianity has never been healed and with the movement of mission division was exported to every corner of the world. Idealistic modern ecumenism with hundreds of joint theological declarations, agreements, much co-operation, spiritual renewal and fostering of friendship and mutual goodwill – none of this has overcome the fundamental division of the Churches. Around and inside us lies a vast graveyard of failed, faded and buried ecumenical visions. Christianity seems to have lost its unity for good and settled in four different traditions: one of the Orthodox East, one of the Catholic West, one of the Reformation and, most recently, one of Pentecostalism and uncomfortable charismatic truths. But it remains to be seen whether migration will affect this situation and help to open up the doors to each other.

As we have to live with a rather deplorable situation the Churches and Denominations have recognised diversity and even decent competition as a good thing. Denominationalism has been established as a fact. The one Church as an invisible eschatological reality is what we have left. Unity in reconciled diversity has become an ecumenical goal which, for all practical purposes, equals the *status quo*. It is indeed a trying and challenging vocation to remain true and consistent as an ecumenist these days.

And if the Reformation split the Church in Western Europe then the Enlightenment eroded theological confidence, democratisation led to her disestablishment, and secularisation is now completing the process of deconstruction of what we think of when talking 'Church'. The Church

will certainly survive one way or the other but we are well advised not to deceive ourselves by modelling nominal membership with actual commitment or old institutions with spiritual strength. The institutional Church right across Europe, be it Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed or Pentecostal, finds itself in a severe crisis with, as we heard this morning, its epicentre in Eastern Germany, and with Sweden not far behind.

Here and there we find, however, signs of hope. The inspiring example of Exeter, or new communities of various kinds, or liturgical renewal, or media recognition, or visionary church leaders, or creative inter-religious relations – but despite all these signs of hope the destruction of the old order continues. And, honestly, we do not know what the future holds for any of us. What we do know is that we cannot turn clocks back by evangelical revivals or organisational strengthening or what have you. We cannot turn the clocks back. The beautiful ruins of the city of Visby could also symbolise a ruined spiritual heritage and possibly the religious indifference that we talked about this morning.

When in High School my History Teacher, a humble, white-haired Christian humanist, repeatedly told me, 'You must learn to resign yourself while preserving your enthusiasm!' I think this is a profound summary of a Lutheran ethos, and it has guided me through decades of ecumenical work and episcopal ministry.

So, what of the future? What kind of a Church could we possibly hope for and work for, and do that with sober realism? We know that reconstructing the Church is a long-term project, it's a communal project and a life-long humble commitment to *diakonia*. We still talk of the Church of Sweden or the Church of England as if there was a kind of religious monopoly and a national mission to be fulfilled. But in spite of our history and past influence our Churches are reduced to shrinking denominations even if we cling on to certain symbolic functions and inherited privileges. We try to provide bulwarks of national and even ethnic identity but it's all in vain, and our vocation is the opposite. It is to promote European integration, to further ecumenical convergence, to establish peaceful inter-religious relations, and to serve the people regardless of their faith.

And at the heart of every Christian community is the Eucharistic celebration. It brings the created world and all humanity before God in intercession, and the Church becomes an ikon of a just and equal community. And we praise the Triune God who makes his presence known and invites us to share in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world. And I could expand on that, but I won't. We can come back to it in the discussion if you wish.

It seems to me that the past centuries of continued reformation has been a preparation for the Church in Europe to fulfil its most important calling. We have, as I have said, seen a great number of medieval churches in this island, and it has been emphasised that each one of them has been constructed by a very small community of people, of neighbours who did it on their own initiative. Each church told the Biblical story on the walls, by rite and by ritual, and at the centre was the altar, the Holy Eucharist where the harvest and prayers, the illness and poverty, life and death – the totality of life – was brought to God and blessed by Christ. We have seen the past as a preparation for the future, and we also know that in celebrating the Eucharist the future comes to us and creates the present.

So what I would like to say is that with the Eucharist at the centre of all that we are thinking and doing together we are not at the end of the Christian era. We are now at a new beginning; we are now at the time of reformation, discovering again the great gifts of God graciously given to us all in order that we may grow in the likeness of Christ in this time and in this world. And that's where we are! So when you ask me to say something about the future the only thing I can say is that as

possibly minority Eucharistic communities bringing the whole world before God and giving thanks in our daily lives for this world, that's the future of the Church, the future of all our churches. And we are in this terribly difficult transition from having been majority Churches, national Churches, established Churches, resourceful Churches, we are moving into a new paradigm as Eucharistic minorities, serving God and serving people by being authentic Eucharistic Christians.