

## Anglican-Lutheran Society

### Annual Meeting

9th March, 2024, St Mary's German Church, Thanet Street, London

### Sermon at the closing Eucharist

The Rt Rev Paul Ferguson (Anglican Co-Moderator)

Wisdom 9.13-17; Ephesians 4.1-6; John 17.11-23



It is no ordinary annual meeting when we have been able to celebrate 40 years of our Society, to recognise the vision of those who set it up, and to think about the ways in which the relationships have developed that both make the existence of the Society possible and also that have been strengthened through it. It was good to hear from Tom Bruch how the Society's life has run in parallel with wider aspects of ecumenism and communion-building.

The readings that I chose for this service are something of a commonplace for occasions when Christians of partner traditions get together. We have heard from the Wisdom tradition about the inadequacy of human counsel, and how it is that we can only discern the will of God by divine gift. Unity is a theme that runs through the corpus of letters that bear Paul's name: the young church in Ephesus

is reminded that patience, love and peace are integral to it, and that all Jesus' followers share in a single hope and call which again is the gift of God. And then John's account of the last session that Jesus had with his disciples before his arrest and death includes the prayer not only for the unity of those who were with him in the room, but also for those 'who will believe in [him] through their word'.

Yes, these are familiar texts, and I find myself wondering whether we might have done them a partial disservice by linking them so strongly with what we might call covenant ecumenism: the tentative and then more confident re-establishment of relationships between the settled denominations that has taken place over the last century and more, often thought of as unscrambling the theological and political conflicts of the 1500s, or at least dialling down the hostile rhetoric. Denominations were arguably the unintended consequence of those times! It can be hard through habit not to hear them with the ears of people who are at home in conferences, committees and the writing of reports and statements — and for many of us in this room, here we are.

So I am aware of having said something that might sound like a critique of today. I don't mean that at all, and I'm not taking away for a moment anything from the excitement — my excitement — of looking forward to our Edinburgh conference in six months' time. But I do believe that we have to allow those 'unity texts' to do more for us than provide a foundation for ecumenical endeavour that, because of the background history, can still result in being very much based in the culture of Europe and North America.

In one sense this question isn't new. The famous Edinburgh conference of 1910 is usually cited as the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement: just as significant is the fact that it heard strong calls for the life of the global church not to be defined by divisions exported from Europe. In that it was clearly only partly successful, but perspectives continue to change [see for instance the wide-ranging and different cultural contexts represented in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*.]

For us, then, whoever and wherever we are, I am sure it is vital that we hear the challenge in those texts: they are not congratulating us on what has been our good experience so far, still less for what we think we have achieved. They warn us that individuals and groups can get things wrong: they can so easily lapse into behaviour that erects barriers to a deep unity.

I remember an address decades ago about the ecumenical journey from co-existence, through collaboration, to commitment. The journey is not complete, especially if we think of the deeper-rooted differences of traditions: but what will, what can, mark it as we move into the second quarter of this century? Perhaps it has more to do with the possibility of relationships between Christians — and I do not just mean at inter-denominational scale — maturing from ecclesiastical diplomacy, important though it is, and being understood and worked out more in terms of mutual learning and gift that can be welcomed at every level and that can actively further the mission that we believe God has entrusted to us. This does not mean surrendering principle and the search for truth, but I hope we have glimpsed something of that learning and gift today, and continue to do so in this celebration of the Eucharist, and that later in the year they will be a hallmark of our conference.

And so I hope you will indulge me if I let one of my theological hobby-horses take a short tour around the paddock of this brief address. The section of the gospel that we have heard today is often known as the Farewell Discourses — Jesus speaking to his disciples, and then praying what is sometimes called the High Priestly Prayer. Using the name 'Farewell Discourses' can suggest that this is a long, sad goodbye. No. I want to make the case that these chapters are a call to mission and equipping for it, just as much as the final verses of Matthew or the story of Pentecost in Acts. They do not deserve to be clothed only in the sombre colours of Holy Week, and I wish people could study them when it's warmer and brighter. You might like to give it a try.

Rather than give you concluding remarks of my own, I am going to borrow what Pope Francis wrote, referring to this passage in *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Joy of the Gospel:

'I especially ask Christians in communities throughout the world to offer a radiant and attractive witness of amiable communion. Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how you encourage and accompany one another: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). This was Jesus' heartfelt prayer to the Father: "That they may all be one ... in us ... so that the world may believe" (John 17:21). Beware of the temptation of jealousy! We are all in the same boat and headed to the same port! Let us ask for the grace to rejoice in the gifts of each, which belong to all.' EG 99