

Sermon: Archbishop Bernard Longley

Archbishop of Birmingham

LUTHERAN-CATHOLIC COMMEMORATION OF THE REFORMATION IN 1517

26 MARCH 2017

You are the salt of the earth.

I am very grateful to Archbishop Peter and to the Dean for welcoming us to St George's Cathedral this afternoon and for hosting this joint commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation of 1517. It is a powerful sign of our commitment to continue praying and striving for the unity of the Church and it offers us an opportunity to demonstrate the measure of unity in faith which we believe we already enjoy together.

Too often we allow ourselves to be identified and characterised by those features of our Christian traditions that distinguish us from one another. Many of these features have developed over the centuries as the result of our different histories and some of them have been shaped more by the accidents of culture or politics than by the Christian convictions that arise from the Word of God.

In our own time we have a fresh opportunity to stand together in the presence of the Word of God made flesh, to face him beside each other and to listen attentively and obediently to what he says to us in the Scriptures. Our ecumenical journey has encouraged us to come face to face so as to recognise the presence of Christ in one another and in each other's Christian way of life. Now the Scriptures and our common calling to evangelise bid us trust one another enough to follow the Lord side by side.

The Scriptures are the foundations of the life of faith that has been handed down to us to live and to cherish, to develop and to hand on in turn to the coming generations within each of the traditions that have nourished and formed us.

The Scriptures are central to the common identity in Christ that we seek to rediscover together. They have the power to draw us closer together as we reflect on their message and as we treasure the rich legacy they entrust to us.

At the same time, growing understanding between our traditions and a deepening affection in Christ has enabled us to gather and to remember the events of the Reformation together. Fifty years ago it would have been impossible to imagine Catholics and Lutherans meeting here at St George's Cathedral, on the basis of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification agreed by our two Communion in 1999, and that we should be able to face the challenging story of the Reformation with equanimity as well as gratitude for this moment.

Even twenty years ago nobody could have foreseen that Pope Francis would travel to Lund Cathedral to commemorate the Reformation with Bishop Munib Younan, the

President of the Lutheran World Federation and sign the Joint Statement with its five imperatives:

- We commit ourselves to further growth in communion rooted in Baptism, as we seek to remove the remaining obstacles that hinder us from attaining full unity.
- Renewing our commitment to theological dialogue.
- We pray to God that Catholics and Lutherans will be able to witness together to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, inviting humanity to hear and receive the good news of God's redeeming action.
- That we may stand together in service, upholding human dignity and rights, especially for the poor, working for justice, and rejecting all forms of violence.
- We pray for a change of hearts and minds that leads to a loving and responsible way to care for creation.

Today offers all of us an opportunity to re-commit ourselves to work and pray for Christian unity. The pathway towards that unity is to be found in obedience to the call of Christ, as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount: You are the salt of the earth. Our Lord urges us to become more and more what he tells us we already have the capacity to be. Christian witness is indispensable for the inner health and well-being of the whole of humanity. As the salt of the earth we can enable others to savour more fully the gift and the meaning of life itself.

The work of Christian unity is directly linked with the search for justice and peace that lies at the heart of the Church's mission. The Church is called to demonstrate not uniformity but the kind of unanimity that characterises the Kingdom of God. To be the salt of the earth is to be at the service of the world.

Today we give thanks for the exchange of gifts that has taken place here in the UK between Lutherans and Catholics, especially over the last thirty years. I recall with gratitude the ecumenical heart of Dean Lennart Shöström from the Ulrika Eleonora Swedish Church in Marylebone and his encouragement for the Joint Lutheran-Catholic pilgrimage to the Shrine of St Bridget at Vadstena.

I also remember the steady commitment of the Reverend Tom Bruch at the Lutheran Council of Great Britain in fostering fruitful Lutheran-Catholic relations and the friendships we have enjoyed with Bishop Walter Jagucki and Bishop Jana Jeruma-Grinberga as Bishop Lind's predecessors. These ecumenical friendships, in which we recognise the grace-filled fruitfulness of each other's ministries, are among the gifts already exchanged which enable us to be at home with one another today.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* - The Joy of the Gospel – Pope Francis recognises the unity that comes from our focus on the Word of God and allowing the Holy Spirit to be our guide:

How many important things unite us! If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us...Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness.

By allowing ourselves to be transformed together we can hope to give a more credible witness to Christ who sends us into the world and who assures us again: You are the salt of the earth.