

Sermon for King's College Chapel, 9 October 2011

Reading: *And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God. Luke 13:29*

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Just over 100 years ago, in May 1908, a minor sensation occurred in this very chapel. A party of representatives of the churches of Germany was visiting England: some 120 pastors, priests, bishops, professors of divinity, court chaplains and the like. They spent a day in Cambridge and of course were brought to see King's. Standing here in the choir they were so entranced by what they saw around them and above them that quite spontaneously and with one voice they burst into song: a lusty rendering of the hymn *Grosser Gott, wir loben dich!*, 'Great God, we praise thee'. Quite what the dean or chapel clerk made of this behaviour is not known, but in the official records it was accounted one of the great highlights of the whole week the Germans spent in England, summing up the spirit of friendship which the visit was intended to foster. It was the first of a series of exchanges between the British and German churches during that time of growing rivalry and tension between the two nations, as each competed for the final imperial carve-up of Africa, as each tried to outdo the other in building ever bigger battleships, and as the jingoistic press on both sides of the North Sea fanned the flames of hostility. But on both sides there were people who saw the need to counter this bellicosity. In 1909 a return visit was made by the British churches to Germany. Soon there was formed a joint council of the churches of both countries, and within a short time there grew a still larger movement drawing in the churches of other European countries and North America; and in 1914, on the very eve of the outbreak of the 'Great War', there was formed the 'World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship Through the Churches'.

No, it did not stop the war, but despite all the hatred and bitterness that ensued, the war did not stop *it*. When the four years of carnage were over the World Alliance set up meetings when Christians and others from the formerly belligerent countries could encounter each other and seek reconciliation. It grew in strength, drawing in participants from around the globe including Asia and the Far East. In 1931 the World Alliance held one of its largest international conferences here in Cambridge. It was a tributary into that ecumenical stream which, after the next war, issued in the formation of the World Council of Churches, still with us, still growing today.

This story is significant if only because in some quarters today religion is virtually equated with conflict. But in the Christian churches, as in all the great world faiths, for all the blots on our histories there is another story: the prophetic call to seek peace, peace being of the essence of faith in the one God who is God for all people. For Christians this stems from Jesus himself who says. ' . . . People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will sit down to eat in the kingdom of God.' In our reading from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has been asked how many will get into God's kingdom, that glorious fulfilment of life in union with himself which God promises. He brushes that question aside because he has something more important to say: 'Don't presume that you will be admitted to the feast of the kingdom just because of your race, your nationality or your religious affiliation. Don't even count on an entry ticket because you claim to come where I'm from, that we were at school together in Nazareth. And if you do find yourself seated at the banquet, don't assume that everyone there will be like you, from your place, your culture, your religious tradition. People will come not just from Judea and Galilee, but from far away, east and west, north and south, and will feast together in the kingdom of God.' The open reach of God's kingdom subverts every tribalism.

For that reason, paradoxically, peacemakers are often troublemakers. They challenge the assumed claims to loyalty made by the powers of this world, by state and nation, race and sect, especially when these usurp the claim that can truly be made only by God. Among the Germans who came to Cambridge for the World Alliance conference in 1931 was a young Lutheran pastor and theologian, at that time almost unknown but whose name today is honoured throughout the world, not just as one of the foremost Christian thinkers of his generation but as a martyr for truth and righteousness: Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Cambridge 1931 marked his entry into the ecumenical peace movement, and a journey which eventually led him into the resistance and conspiracy against Hitler, and finally to a barbarically cruel death at Flossenbürg barely a month before the Second World War ended. In that fearfully grim situation, he knew what it means to be one who, as the prophet says in our first lesson, 'walks in the darkness and has no light', yet dares to 'trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.'

To believe in a Christian fellowship transcending all national and racial boundaries for the sake of the universal family of mankind, was dangerous during the Third Reich. It's challenging to declare for now, in a globalized world with growing competition for the earth's diminishing resources. Do we really believe that people from east and west, north and south, are equally welcome at the table? The Arab writer Amin Malouf puts it starkly: 'What has had its day and now must end is the tribal phase of human history . . . the

prehistory of mankind . . . made up of all our identity-based tensions, all our blinding ethnocentricity, and a selfishness which is held to be sacred, whether based on country, community, culture, ideology.' That is a mighty challenge; it requires a leap of faith to believe that another world is possible. But to faith it is a possibility because God is there already, preparing his banquet for all peoples. It's the kind of faith Bonhoeffer himself called for, when he declared: 'There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared. It is the great venture.'

Bonhoeffer undertook many kinds of risky ventures on his fateful journey. In wartime Nazi Germany, it was a seriously punishable offence if caught by the Gestapo listening in to foreign broadcasts. But Bonhoeffer habitually did so. Moreover as I heard his friend Eberhard Bethge once say, during the three wartime years before he was imprisoned, each Christmas Eve he would ensure he was within reach of a wireless that could tune in to the BBC Overseas Service, to hear what, for reasons of security, was coyly announced as 'A Service of Lessons and Carols from an English college chapel.' No doubt he appreciated the music, for he was himself an accomplished musician. But perhaps even more, there was the assurance that even in war, and from the other side of the battle lines, there could still be heard singing about peace on earth and mercy mild, and a voice reciting the promise that 'the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.' Here was an antidote to the tribalism that had led to war and was fed by war. So it is with all worship. Whether it is a spontaneous outburst of singing *Grosser Gott, wir loben dich*, or a carefully prepared choral service, or any act of worship in which the one God of all-embracing love is praised, we are challenging and subverting the world as it is on behalf of the world that God wills and promises. We are conspiring for that great day when from east and west, north and south, people will come and sit and eat in the kingdom of God. To that one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in all languages, be praise and honour and glory, now and for ever. Amen.