

General Synod of the Church of England February 2017

Debate on the Anniversary of the Reformation Opening Speech by the Bishop of Coventry (The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Cocksworth)

[As prepared]

An opportunity for the churches

Dear Friends, let me take you back to the inauguration of this General Synod in November 2015. In his powerful sermon, Father Cantalamesssa, Preacher to the Papal Household, reminded us that ‘The Christian world is preparing to mark the fifth centenary of the Protestant Reformation. It is vital for the whole Church that this opportunity is not wasted’, he said.

The Presidents of Churches Together in England have taken up this challenge, calling the churches in this land to mark the anniversary by *rejoicing* in the gospel that unites us, *remembering* the past that divided us, *reforming* the Church by coming closer to Christ together, *repenting* of the stereotypes that we have formulated of each other and *reconciling* our differences.

Today’s debate is Synod’s chance to join in a movement across Britain and other European nations – indeed, across the world – and actively support those developments and initiatives that serve God’s purposes of

reconciliation, and to do so by deepening our renewal in the grace of God and our readiness to share the gospel of salvation with all the world.

The gospel of salvation

That gospel of salvation, put succinctly in Ephesians, is that ‘God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace we have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus’. These are ‘the immeasurable riches of [God’s] grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus’ (Ephesians 2.4-6).

Solus Christus, through Christ alone: that is the heart of gospel, the cry of the Reformation and the true centre of the Catholic faith of the Church. It is why Father Cantalamessa described Paul’s confession of ‘Christ crucified’ and ‘Jesus Christ as Lord’, as ‘the essence of the Christian faith’. It is why in their call to Christians at the beginning of the week of Christian Unity, our own Archbishops said, ‘This [Anniversary] year is a time to renew our faith in Christ and Him alone’. It is why our Homily on Justification tells us that because of the ‘precious jewels of Christ’s body and blood’, broken on the cross and poured out in death, ‘Christ is now the righteousness of all them that truly believe in him’.¹

¹ 1 ‘A sermon on the Salvation of Mankind’, first part

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

The doctrine of Justification by Faith extolled by the Papal Preacher was once the ground of fierce controversy and furious disagreement that drove the Western Church into division and led Lutherans and Roman Catholics into mutual condemnation of each other. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification signed between the two communions in 1999 expresses ‘a consensus in the basic truths of justification’ which, in the mind of the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, does not ‘fall under the condemnations of the Council of Trent [or] the Lutheran Confessions’.²

It was a momentous event in the story of the Church: a remarkable healing of the wounds of history. As the Anglican Consultative Council recognised, it is one of a series of agreements on the doctrine of salvation – among them the Helsinki Report between Anglicans and Lutherans, and *Salvation and the Church* between Anglicans and Roman Catholics – that have dug deeply together into the well of salvation and discovered a common understanding of the life-giving goodness of its waters. I believe we can say of the coherence of contemporary Anglican, Lutheran and Roman Catholic confessions of the Doctrine of Justification, ‘This is the Lord’s doing: it is marvellous in our eyes’ (Psalm 118.23)! (And that is to say nothing of the World Methodist Council aligning World Methodism with the Declaration.)

² ‘Official Common Statement by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church’, paragraph 1.

By way of method, the Joint Declaration sought to uncover what of the gospel of salvation in Christ each side was seeking to defend and promote in its particular expression of justification, without denying the different emphases of each approach. On this basis, it was able to agree that what each communion feared was being denied by the other is, in fact, today fully affirmed by both:

- that the favour of God reaches us before we have begun to be worthy of it *and* that such mercy renews us;
- that the cause of our justification is God's love for us not ours for God, *and* it is a love that makes us capable of loving;
- that good works are a consequence not a pre-condition of justification *and* that they are, therefore, intrinsic expressions of salvation freely given to those who, in Luther's words, have taken 'hold of Christ our Redeemer' by faith..

'Together we confess', says the Statement, 'By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works'.³

³ Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, Michigan / Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999, paragraph 15.

Freedom from self-justification

We are back to where we began: ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God’ (Ephesians 2.8), says Ephesians. ‘Self-justification’, said the Papal Preacher, is the flawed human instinct. The gospel, says the Homily on Justification, is that ‘Justification is the office of God only’.⁴ God has liberated us from reliance on human capacities. We are free from human assessment of worth. It is not how clever we are, how rich we’ve become, how attractive we feel. It is not our popularity ratings, our physical prowess our economic potential. It is not even our strivings for piety or sanctity. It is God’s view of us that counts – and Jesus proves that God sees us and loves us as we are. And the gospel calls us to believe, to trust that this is – indeed – God’s view of us.

The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, which began with Luther’s courageous insistence that salvation is not for sale, invites every Christian to join with the whole church to be renewed in the grace of God and share the astounding news of God reaching out to the world, running to meet us in Christ and embracing us into his life by the Spirit with an infinity of love that lifts us into the full stature of our humanity and raises us into the joyful responsibility of being human.

⁴ ‘A sermon on the Salvation of Mankind’, second part,