

Ely Cathedral : 4th Sunday of Easter, April 13th 2008

A sermon by Bishop Wartenberg-Potter, from the Northelbian Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Diocese of Holstein-Lubeck

Acts chapter 2: verse 42 - end

Dear sisters and brothers, with joy and gratitude I have accepted the privilege of preaching today in Ely Cathedral - a place which, by its very nature, places one in the middle of the great Tradition of our faith: How many prayers and tears, how much mourning and rejoicing of generations is gathered in this cathedral, brought before God in the Communion of Saints. We stand in the long tradition of faith, handed down to us by our mothers and fathers. As a bishop in the Northelbian Church, I share with you in a great and just tradition.

I bring the greetings from our church, from my colleagues Bishop Dr. Knuth (Bishop of Schleswig) and Bishop Jepsen (Bishop of Hamburg) and my brothers Oberkirchenrat Vogelmann and Oberkirchenrat Thiedemann who are here with me this morning. It is a great privilege and joy to be together, to participate, and to inspire each other for common witness in a secular world. The beauty of Anglican worship inspires me in my witness and service in the name of Christ.

This morning we heard in the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles about the enthusiasm and commitment of the first Christians in Jerusalem after the first Pentecost: They had what we often long for - glad and generous hearts.

They met constantly to hear the apostles teach and to share the common life, to break bread and to pray.....(1st part of reading)

Maybe we remember times in our lives when we had glad and generous hearts, when we believed with such enthusiasm ? Maybe we remember the time of our first, or a new, love ? What abundance was in our hearts ! One dares the impossible, no distance is too great, no task too big, no idea absurd, nothings seems impossible! When one is enthusiastic, one may overcome all obstacles. A young, speechless man begins to write poems, a frightened girl becomes a courageous heroine. The time of enthusiasm creates glad and generous hearts in us; life is different. We tend to exaggerate; we think big, everything is possible. We are indeed “crazy”.

It was such a “crazy” time in Israel, when the first Christian community gathered. These were excited and exciting days, when people did not know whether to laugh or to cry, to hide or to dance

on the streets. The time of insecurity was over since they had seen Jesus after his resurrection. The community understood: 'It's us now who will stand up as a new community, we will show to the world what moves us - the resurrection spirit of Christ. We must be visible, recognizable. The world must see that the kingdom of God began in our hearts - the kingdom, its righteousness and justice. Here and now it creates a new community to which everybody is invited.'

And, indeed, it happened there in the occupied city of Jerusalem and later in many other cities, in the face of the Roman Empire with its military might and its oppression, with its power to execute and its suppression of people, with its severe, paternalistic law which subjugated women, children, slaves, foreign peoples, in the interest of Roman. This was a society deeply divided into aristocracy and "plebs", common people. There, in their very midst, was a new community, a group of women, men, children, slaves, people of Greek, Jewish or Roman origin. "In Christ all are children of God through faith". As they were baptized, they put on Christ like new clothes. There was neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female. They were all one in Christ (Gal. 3, 27, 28). This was the attractiveness of the first Christian communities:

1. There was a basic equality. All ate from the same table. Slave owner and slave shared together.
2. Women were no longer second-class citizens, bound to the backyard rooms and to service.
3. The deep cultural divide between the superior Romans/Greeks and Palestinian people, the religious segregation of Jews, no longer created divisions in the community.

One and all they kept up daily attendance at the temple, and, breaking bread in their homes, they shared their meals with unaffected joy as they praised God.....(2nd. part of reading)

There was a love and care for each other. And the biggest wonder ! They were able to share, they sold what they had and shared it according to the needs – imagine this today !

"And they shared their meals with each other! What a thought in our time, when we are told that even families don't share a common meal any more. Everybody picks something from the fridge by himself and eats alone.

In our world the keyword is not "sharing", as it was in the early church, but "accumulation". This is the driving force in society ! Everyone for himself or herself..... 'and the Devil takes the most', as they say in the Caribbean. This attitude gives birth to different sorts of communities gathered around shareholder values, to violent self affirmation in peer groups, to racially divided communities.

In Jerusalem, and in the other early Christian groups, they experienced and they lived in a different spirit. They were resurrection people and stood up for what they believed. They experienced a new way of life, inspired by the love of Christ, which stirred their hearts to put an end to old ways of living, and to start something new by belonging to a community of hope right in the middle of the rotten structures of the imperial Roman Empire. No wonder people were attracted and came to them day by day! They wanted to participate in this wonderful community of gladness and sharing, which made insignificant slave women pillars of the congregation, which made poor fishermen visionaries of a new future. We cannot imagine that it was otherwise.

But we can see today that the more we become communities of equal sharing and living, including poor and rich, women and men from different cultures and origins, the more we will be given those glad and generous hearts which the first Christians possessed. Joy will come to us, we will be like young lovers, full of ideas and action, hope and laughter, and full of dreams for the Kingdom of God in our times!

I want to tell you a story about one such enthusiastic person, a little ten-year-old black boy in the Caribbean. In order to bring the good news to the people, his Church had decided to raise money, and everyone was asked to think of how they could make a contribution, even if it was small. Because he had a marvellous set of big ears, and a broad and friendly smile, he went to the pier where the American cruise ships used to dock. The white passengers were always looking for interesting things to photograph as they came ashore. He would look at the passengers with his charming smile and hold his hands behind his back. But as soon as people had taken a picture of this friendly boy with the big ears, he would move his hands from behind, and, as he pushed the box forward, ask them for a contribution to the mission of the church. In this way, he collected his share for the work of God's kingdom, with the courage and enthusiasm that he had in his young heart. It so happens that this boy was the man who is now my husband, Dr. Philip Potter, the former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches !

Can we be infected by the active enthusiasm of the early church, and break through the narrow barriers which confine us, to become "resurrection people", filled with love and hope ?

Vaclav Havel, the former Czechoslovakian dissident and later president of Chechen, said, "Hope is not the conviction that things will end well, but the assurance that what I believe and do has it's own sense, no matter how it ends".

We Christians know beyond that: it makes sense, and God promised that it will end well. Amen.