

Sermon in Chichester Cathedral

(13th October 2019)

In a video message to the first National Cathedrals Conference in Manchester Cathedral in September 2018 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, said to the participants: „Cathedrals are fun. If you can't have fun in a cathedral, do you really know what fun is? There's just so many things you can do in a cathedral.“ He said that while serving as Dean of Liverpool Cathedral he had organised a Halloween service (whatever that means theologically) which involved one of the canons in the Cathedral being wheeled in in a coffin. That may not seem so funny, especially for the canon in the coffin, but recently some cathedrals have tried to translate this idea of „fun“ in their own manner. Maybe you have heard about the nave of Rochester Cathedral being converted into a nine-hole golf course, each including a model of a different type of bridge. One boy who played on the course is quoted as saying: „I think it's quite a good place for non-religious people to come in and experience what it's all about.“ In Peterborough Cathedral you could practice creative yoga on your back under an artificial globe representing Gaia Earth or Mother Earth and in Norwich Cathedral you might ride on a so called helter skelter slide „to experience the Cathedral in an entirely new way“. We in Bamberg Cathedral last year had an exhibition on modern Guardian Angels in our church, some of which looked like monsters out of a horror film.

Was this the idea, the vision of the cathedral builders of the Middle Ages? In the Middle Ages the cathedrals like other churches were meeting places for the local community. People came there (outside of services) to discuss public events or even to buy and sell things (even though the clergy often grumbled disapprovingly). Other people came to look at the beauty of the architecture, the paintings, the windows and the statues, or to experience stately ceremonies there. The fundamental vision of the builders of the cathedrals, however, (and that is true for any other Christian church) was to create a place where people can come to know Jesus Christ, or in the words attributed to Saint Richard of Chichester: to get to know him more clearly, to love him more dearly, to follow him more nearly. If we Christians preach Jesus Christ, it will be possible to interpret many things in our cathedrals as ways of encountering Jesus Christ; even a rotating globe can then be seen as a sign of the creation of the universe and even a canon in a coffin could make a point. But if we take Jesus Christ *out* of Christianity, then – as

Saint Paul puts it in his Letter to the Romans (Rom 10,9) – we have nothing left, not a religion and not even a plausible ethical program. That was the misunderstanding of the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, and the mistake made by some philosophers (and theologians) in the 19th and 20th centuries.

But if Jesus Christ is in a real sense the Son of God, the Way, the Truth, the Life, the cornerstone of Christianity as a religion – what could this mean for us as Christians today when we think about how to use our church buildings?

In his public sermons Jesus Christ did not mention the Church. In the Gospels you will find only two very short references to the Church, both are found in Matthew. One is about building his church on the rock that is Saint Peter (Mt 16,18). This passage is very controversial and a mystery even for Roman Catholics, when we look at the more troubling epochs of church history. The other is about the church as the final court of appeal when one Christian accuses another (Mt 18,17). The exclusive theme of the preaching of Jesus in the Parables was the Coming of the Kingdom of God, the Basileia (the Greek word in the New Testament), which could also be translated as rule, power or command. This Kingdom of God – we say it every time we pray the Our Father: „Thy Kingdom come...“ – is for Jesus not a defined territory, a clear-cut region, or a clearly defined group of people. The Kingdom of God happens everywhere when God's will is done, where God can – unless we get in the way – inspire men and women to show in and through their lives what is God's plan for us and the universe. It happens when people acknowledge the presence and action of God in their lives and are thankful for both, as in today's Gospel where a Samaritan (a foreigner in the eyes of the Jews) is the only one out of the ten who comes back to give thanks to God. The Kingdom of God is therefore in one sense bigger than the Church and in another sense it is smaller. There are many inside who are actually outside, says Saint Augustine of Hippo in North Africa, and there are many outside who are actually inside. He means to say: There are many in the Church, but only by name. They have nothing to do with the Kingdom of God and do not, therefore, belong to the Church. Then there are many outside the Church who show through their lives that they belong to the Kingdom of God, although they do not know anything about the Church. If, as Jesus says, the Kingdom of God, „the reign of peace“ and love, where „all hatred shall cease“ and „every hurt shall be healed“, is so absolutely God's work and doing, that has, I think, three consequences for us.

1. The Kingdom of God is God's gift to us. It is like a man who scatters seed in his field. He goes to sleep and all the while the seed is growing; the man does not know how. It comes as a surprise. It is like a wanderer who finds – by chance and unexpected – a precious pearl or a hidden treasure. It will grow and cover the whole world. It is like a tiny mustard seed which becomes a tree. That means: Even if in human terms the future looks dreary, miserable, even catastrophic, that is still no reason to panic. The universe, the world, the fate of every individual is in the hands of a loving and merciful God. Who or what, asks Paul, can separate us from the love of God, given to us through Jesus Christ?
2. The Coming of the Kingdom of God is God's doing. What must we – as Christians – then do? The answer is simple: We do not have to do anything. We are not obliged to do anything in order that God shows us his mercy or his love, because he has already shown us both in Jesus Christ. The Coming of the Kingdom of God is an act of God's grace. The great Christian writers of the Middle Ages used to say that „Grace which is not freely given is not grace”. Gratia non gratis data non est gratia. A grace only conditionally given, would not be grace, but a reward, a payment for fulfilled obligations. That is the problem with some sermons telling us to do certain things as Christians: „If you are a good Christian, you ought to do this or that...” That is, I think, one of the differences between Christianity and some other religions. We are not obliged to do certain things, to obey certain commandments so that God will show us his love. We are not obliged to do so, but we can, we may do so. Because God has given you so much, your life, your family, your friends, your job, your well-being, you can give part of it, your time, your money, your kindness, your help, to your neighbours (and even to unsympathetic outsiders) if they are in need. Because God has forgiven so many of your mistakes, your false steps and decisions, your wrongdoing, you can forgive the bad things which people have done to you. Because you have an eternity with God before you, you can dispense with your desire to experience all the possible forms of happiness in this life. That creates a completely different religious outlook on things.
3. In the Christian Church, every saint has a past and every sinner has a future. We Christians will not attain complete perfection in our present lives, but we can hope for divine mercy and forgiveness until the last second of our lives, so long as we turn to God and repent. This is our hope, namely that every person is a possible candidate for heaven. We believe Jesus when he said that the Kingdom of God can appear in very strange places and amidst very

peculiar persons. Understanding this better could lead us to rediscover a very old Christian insight: We can hold very different and even opposing political opinions. In particular situations it may be necessary to flock together to reconfirm our own identity, to meet in special communities, „holy huddles” if you like. The many chapels in a cathedral might symbolise this; but there is in every cathedral always only one High Altar, holding all these chapels and groups all together. It is a mark of our Christian identity that we celebrate together at this High Altar – at least from time to time. As Christians we exist only in the plural. An isolated Christian is a contradiction in terms.