



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

The Archbishop gave the sermon at today's [Evensong at York Minster](#) marking the 100th anniversary of the first Malines Conversations.

“Turn to me and be saved” – Isaiah 45.22

A hundred years ago today, as the Malines conversations began, a window of great hopefulness was opened in the heart of the Church and the fresh wind of the Spirit has been blowing in ever since, even though we sometimes find ourselves complaining about the draught, anxious where this wind might blow us. But these conversations continue, as continue they must, for the cause of our unity is the cause of Christ himself and is of the utmost importance to the world he loves and came to save.

As we have just heard, Paul begins what is probably his earliest letter (and therefore probably the earliest book of the New Testament), by reminding those who follow Jesus that their home and destiny is not just the church in Thessalonica, a city on the northwest corner of the Aegean Sea, but the Church that is “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 1.1) - or to borrow a phrase from John’s Gospel that the theologian David Ford often reflects on: the Church that is the company of the beloved disciples who reside close to the heart of Jesus, who himself resides close to the Father’s heart.

What does this say to the Church today, our various separations and divisions, our continuing conversations and our quest for visible unity?

First, despite the necessary endeavours of theological inquiry and debate, unity will be revealed and unity will grow as we grow closer to Jesus and closer to the Father’s heart. As we come close to Jesus, so we will come close to each other.

This is why our theological explorations can never be separated from the work of prayer.

As my dear Brother in Christ, Bishop Jean reminded us earlier, it is why unity will grow and be revealed, not merely agreed upon.

Moreover, in this time of such uncertainty for our world and in the Church, we may find ourselves led towards this growth, or find it accelerated, not so much at a steady, sensible, worldly pace, but sudden and surprising, like spring rain bringing dormant seeds to life in dark forests, and in unexpected ways.

The passage we heard from Isaiah earlier, follows the declaration that the Persian King Cyrus will be the unforeseen and surprising instrument by which God’s people are restored.

Of such unexpected sources for renewed faithfulness, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the Papal Household, spoke to the General Synod of the Church of England in 2015. His text was Haggai 1:1-8; his theme: ‘Rebuild my House.’ Calling the Church to unity, the sermon was particularly memorable for his observation that in those “parts of the world where Christians are killed and churches torched, it’s not because they are Catholic or Anglican or Pentecostal, but because they are Christians...In our persecutors eyes,” he said, “we are already one. ~~Let us,~~

(therefore) be one... in our own eyes and in the eyes of God.”

In his gospel, John says that on the cross not one bone of Jesus’ body was broken (see John 19. 36).

Since then, we’ve succeeded in breaking just about every bone of Jesus’ body his Church, and rather arrogantly underestimate the further damage this does to the credibility of our witness, for we are supposed to be ministers of reconciliation.

How, then, shall we see the unity that is already ours because of our baptism revealed? How can it grow and bring healing to the Church and hope to the world? How can we start to be that Church of ‘reconciled diversities’ as Pope Francis has put it?

By coming to Jesus. By coming to Jesus together. Despite our separations.

Sisters and brothers, let us on this centenary, commit ourselves to finding new approaches and new opportunities to pray with and alongside each other. To visit each other’s churches and shrines. To honour one another. As I look back on my fifteen or sixteen months as the 98th Archbishop of York, I sometimes find myself thinking that perhaps the most important thing I have done in my time in office was in the first ten minutes when with my dear brother, the Bishop of Middlesbrough we sat and prayed in silence at the shrine of St Margaret Clitherow just around the corner from here. And I believe that our cause for unity and our hope to be one will be strengthened, will be revealed, if I can put it bluntly, we did a bit more of that.

And also, by increasing our spirit of thankfulness for what we see God doing in and through each other. And by seeing ourselves as others see us - both the incredulity of the world, which cannot fathom how those who follow Jesus could be so dismissive of each other; but also by the ‘indifference to difference’ of those who persecute us.

And by turning to the Lord, and turning again to the Lord, and crying out for God’s salvation so that we can learn again that “in the Lord alone are deliverance and strength.” (Isaiah 45. 24).

Put us to shame, Lord, for our divisions. Make us one.

York Minster hosted a public lecture and Choral Evensong to mark the centenary of the first session of the Malines Conversations in 1921.



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