

Pastor Ulrich Noetzel – Sermon on March 18th 2012

(Laetare / Lent 4 / Mothering Sunday)

Readings: Exodus 2.1-10 and 1 Cor 12.12-31

I. One in the body of Christ:

The first Hannover International Worship

Let me tell you the long forgotten story of a predecessor of Hannover International Worship:

In 1914, shortly after the beginning of the First World War, one of largest prisoner of war camps sprung up on our doorstep in Soltau. Thousands of Prisoners from Belgium, France, Britain and her Empire and from the Russian Empire found themselves behind barbed wire. And the people of Soltau curiously watched these new arrivals in their neighbourhood. And they enjoyed the custom they brought to their shops and businesses. A few church people worried about the spiritual wellbeing of all these people in the prison camp. They felt a responsibility to provide church services and spiritual care. They recognized that it was their duty as a mother church.

One missionary from Hermannsburg became chaplain to the prisoners: Georg Bachimont spoke several languages, including English and French.

As he had the gifts that were needed, he was appointed chaplain to the prisoners and at once he started his mammoth task of ministering to the prisoners. He initiated multi-language – we would now call them “ecumenical” – services in German, French and English in the Luther-Kirche in Soltau.

He had grasped the reality Paul was writing about: *We are one in Christ. We are all baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.* There may be differences in nationality. We may be prisoners or free. We are different, yet we are one.

The German newspaper reporter, who wrote about this event, was clearly impressed. He

had never before experienced anything like this. I think he realized that he was witnessing something really special. Something that was absolutely unique in a time when elsewhere prisoners of war were spat upon and a common greeting was „Gott strafe England“.

Despite those difficult circumstances, Pastor Bachimont made visible that we all – Christians of all nations and all languages – belong to the one body of Christ. And that is a greater truth greater even than war.

Pastor Bachimont made sure that the Protestant prisoners of war got to hear the gospel in their own language and that they could attend a service like at home: in their language, in the liturgy they were used to. And as a special bonus the British prisoners were allowed go to a real church! This small but unique piece of normality and humanity in otherwise very hostile surroundings was very much appreciated.

A Canadian prisoner of war, Ivan Rossiter, wrote about one such service:

It was a beautiful day and we were glad to be out from behind the barbed wires and enjoyed the exercise of marching. A sentry led the procession as we entered the church, and others were so scattered throughout the column that when we were seated there was a sentry at the end of each pew, while others stood on guard at the doors with loaded rifles and fixed bayonets. The service in English, conformed to the liturgy of the Church of England and was reverently followed and appreciated.

The minister preached a sermon on "brotherly love," which seemed appropriate under the circumstances. ...

A service of this kind is held about once a month. It is unique from the fact that it is about the only place in Germany where the boys have an opportunity to attend church in the conventional way.

(Ivan Rossiter, In Kultured Kaptivity, 1918, 204-205)

I think this was probably the first “International Worship” in (the province of) Hannover...

“*Attending church in the conventional way*” clearly was seen as something special under the circumstances. And this slice of normality was a reminder that one was still human.

In the words of Paul: *If one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.*

So the church service at the church became a demonstration of our common humanity, regardless of nationality, or denomination, or language – not only for the prisoners but also for the people of Soltau.

We are all baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

II. The body of Christ as a team effort:

The three mothers

The unity of all believers is one of the recurring themes in Paul’s letters.

In his parable about the body, Paul describes a team effort. All the members of the human body work together. And only as a team a result can be achieved:

we are the body of Christ, and each one of us is a part of it.

We are all different. But we all play our part.

Being the body of Christ, being church is a team effort.

A team effort is also described in the story of the birth and salvation of Moses.

Moses is saved because three women are working together.

In different ways, they are all mothers.

There is Moses’ biological mother. Her name is Jochebed. There is his sister – probably Miriam – who takes on a mother’s role. And there is the adopting mother, the daughter of Pharaoh.

These three women all have their part in the story of mothering Moses.

Jochebed gave birth to Moses, and she refused to have him killed. She protected his life and clung to every possibility – even remote – to save his life. Hiding, actively placing – not waiting till something happens, but entrusting him to the world.

So she put him in the Moses basket.

Then there is his sister: she watched over his life. And she networked and made sure that Moses was not only found but also that he could go back to his Mum, even if only temporarily.

And finally, there is the daughter of Pharaoh. She became Moses new, adoptive mother. Pharaoh's daughter saved Moses. She protected him from certain death. She rose above the law, the conventions of the day, her exalted status: and she did, what was right for a mother, what was right as a human being.

In these three women I can see different expressions of motherhood and mothering. Being pregnant and giving birth, of course.

But also entrusting the child to the world, like Jochebed did.

We don't face the same circumstances but we still have to entrust our children to the world; a world that is often hostile, or at least not very child friendly. Entrusting a child to the world: another great task of a mother.

Then there is the role taken by Moses' sister, who is watching from a distance:

She has to allow somebody else to interact and to take responsibility – it is part of the growing up process. Not only that of child but also that of the mother.

One has to trust that the world is good. One has to let go. Watch from a distance and allow other people to take on responsibility. (That is my experience every time I drop our son off at our childminder's house.)

Motherhood is multi-faceted. It has many aspects.

And you don't even have to have a child to become a mother: Pharaoh's daughter became a mother by being at the right spot at the right time.

She takes her responsibility seriously and she does what is right.

All these mother roles are valuable and necessary. In today's story they are all essential. And they show: Everybody can be a mother.

All mothers – those with children of their own as well as those with their adopted children, or those women (and I suppose men, too) who might find themselves on occasion thrust into a mothering role are doing a great work. They all work together, like Jochebed, Miriam and the nameless daughter of Pharaoh.

And "Mothering Sunday" is a good time to remind ourselves that we should say thank you not only today but every day to all our mothers and those in mothering roles:

"Thank You!"

***III. Our church as "Mother Church":
how to be the body of Christ.***

But "Mothering Sunday" asks for more than a mere reflection on the importance of mothers. The theological theme of this Sunday is how the picture of a mother can be applied to our life as church. How we can be "mother church".

(And – of course – when we talk about the church, we talk about ourselves.)

In my opinion all that can be said about mothers can also be said about the church. And we can take our cues from the story of Moses' birth:

The first thing that Moses' mother does after the birth is seeing "*that he was a fine child*".

Seeing is the beginning of any interaction with other people. Noticing somebody, and then appreciating them: he / she is a fine child of God.

It is not surprising then that seeing is also the first action mentioned of Moses' sister and of Pharaoh's daughter.

Pharaoh's daughter saw Moses crying and she felt sorry for him.

Taking pity with those who are crying. Comforting – that's what mothers do. But it also what we do as church (or should be doing).

Nursing, nurturing: this is the third point. There is a physical as well as a spiritual dimension to nurturing. Some people need food before they can be spiritually nourished. A "mother church" will make sure both is there.

Seeing. Comforting. Nurturing. There may be more.

But let us dwell on these for now.

Seeing – reminds us of our call to the outside world. To see who is there. Here in our services. But also out there.

There might be people who are waiting to be seen. Fine children of God who are waiting to be found like Moses.

People who prefer English to German.

Who might feel a bit lost in the German world.

Seeing is the first step to all action or even interaction.

Keep your eyes open. And see whom God shows you.

Here at Hannover International Worship. And out there.

Comforting – or taking pity. Seeing on its own does not necessarily move us to do anything. We need to be inwardly touched. By pity. By impatience. Or possibly by being outraged at some injustice. By love...

Our emotions help us to do something. They also help us to say the right word at the right

time to comfort someone.

Nurturing with its double dimension. We are good at this at Hannover International Worship: there is always food after the service.

And people contribute to the buffet according to their gifts and skills. I think this is what Paul would have wanted.

But we bring many more things to our services and our times together. We all bring our own gifts and talents to church.

Like Pharaoh's daughter, we need to use them at the right time to do the right thing.

We have so much to offer, so many special gifts, skills and talents to offer to the world.

Every one of us. But also collectively as Hannover International Worship we have special gifts to offer – especially through our language.

We can communicate, we can explain in English where someone might feel lost in German.

We can translate, where communication threatens to fail.

We can offer prayer or counselling in English.

We can explain our world in another language.

These are all great and important gifts. And we have many more. All these gifts are part of our talents, which we received from God.

Seeing – comforting – nurturing. These are building blocks of a “mother church”.

We want to use them so we can follow in the footsteps of Pharaoh's daughter or Pastor Bachimont of Soltau.

In order to build a church where we share a common faith, love and humanity regardless of where we are from. So we can say in confidence: *we are the body of Christ, and each one of us is a part of it.*

Amen.