

Sermon Hannover International Worship 15th September 2013

Text: Ephesians 2, 8 – 22

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Nobody seemed to know where they came from, but there they were in the Forest”...

Did you recognize these lines? It's from a classic – Winnie the Pooh. One morning the three friends, Pooh, Rabbit and Piglet, are confronted with a challenge. All of a sudden, there appears a strange creature amongst them, one they have never heard of before and it has more than one characteristic that strikes them as odd.

So these three friends quickly come up with a plan to get rid of this newcomer and her young as soon as possible. They have known each other for ages and are very familiar with one another. Therefore, their different characteristics become an essential part of the plan that will only work out because everyone is just the way they are: Piglet is tiny, Pooh rather talkative and Rabbit runs quickly. In order to unite against these intruders their difference in character becomes their mutual strength.

In 1926 Alan Alexander Milne created these stories for his son Christopher. For almost a hundred years they have been a delight and an encouragement – not only for children. Maybe it's because there is so much of experience of life in them, told in a humorous and loving way. It is not easy when, all of a sudden, a stranger

intrudes into our lives, a stranger who is so different from us. We feel caught out even without being ridiculed. It seems to be a natural, a totally human reaction to try to get rid of an intruder as soon as possible, to make 100% sure that nothing changes. Only if they expel the stranger from their midst they will be able to stay who they are. For the majority, in this case Rabbit, Piglet and Pooh, there is only one question: “What are we to do about Kanga?” They do not see any other way to handle the challenge of the arrival of the new animal with its odd shape and weird habits. They do not recognize any other way to deal with it!

There was a similar situation in Ephesus, a thriving city in Ancient Greece. There was a lot of trade due to the harbor and two important trade roads that crossed there. Today we would use a term of Greek origin, calling it a cosmopolitan town. Anyhow, the Christians in that city of trade could not see any other way to deal with the differences in their community, but to think of “them and us”. Therefore, they receive a letter. The message of that letter could be summed up by saying: Instead of “them” and “us” it should be HIM and “us”, for: they are reminded that it is Jesus Christ himself who founded their unity. There is nobody who could claim that he or she had earned or deserved it, but it is His gift to them – and us.

This origin of the Christian church, of which the Ephesians are reminded, has fundamental consequences for their community as Christians and for the way they should treat each other in dealing with their differences and conflicts.

When two people from two different nationalities or cultures meet and fall in love, most of the time they find it so interesting to learn about those unknown ways and traditions with which their the beloved grew up. The differences seem to be so fascinating and enriching! However, when they move in together and the newness wears off, everyday chores need to be dealt with. It can then become rather draining and tiring to develop routines that suit both partners, to deal with the differences or to come up with a third way on the foundation of their love.

A friend of mine who married cross-culturally once said: “We are lucky, because we are aware that there are differences and that we have to develop our own third way of doing things. Other couples think that just because they grew up in the same country and culture, speak the same language, they have the same habits and traditions. They forget to consciously discuss and decide how they want to handle things.” I remember how other friends smiled and thought to themselves, let’s see how long you will keep on discussing and inventing your own culture ... Yet, they are happily married to this day, whereas some of the others separated... Because they were aware that their arrangements can only work on the solid basis of mutual trust and can only last until something changes, e.g. a child is born: What are the essential standards? On which basis do we decide on issues and questions when raising our children? What should be the decisive factor when we have differences?

Almost 20 years later, my friend’s comment still makes me think, and helps me in a more general way to become more aware of how many times we have an idea and presume that the other person we talk to should and would have the very same concept just because we have discussed the issue. ... Are we actually as united in our understanding as we thought we were? And on which foundation should we come to a conclusion if we find out that we have completely different ideas because of our different backgrounds and experience?

That takes me back to the letter to the Ephesians: some of them were brought up as Jews, others as Gentiles (to take up the Jewish terminology). They are a mix of people in that congregation and I wonder whether those who are called “Gentiles” in this passage are actually just one group with one interest, or whether they are actually rather diverse within themselves, coming from different walks of life and united only by the fact that they have no Jewish background. However, the author of the letter only addresses these two groups with the Christians of Ephesus because he wants to drive home the message: Not, “them” and “us”, but “Him” and “us”: If we think about the basis and character of the Christian community there is no other starting point but HIM.

Nobody can in all honesty claim that he or she was there first. Nor can anybody say, “It has always been like that”, for God himself has called us into communion with him in Christ. That’s a completely new approach, a unity that nobody but Christ contributed anything to, “For it’s by grace you have been saved,

through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast.”

Furthermore, if this unity in Christ is a new creation, as is again stressed a few lines later (V.15b), it also means that we should not restrict ourselves – and others – to our own past and use it as an excuse not to change – “I can’t help it. That’s just the way I have been brought up.” “Oh, he has always been like that. I remember way back that ...” In the letter to the Ephesians it says: “But now you are in Christ.” It is the beginning of a new era that starts off and is characterized by reconciliation: “His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.”

And as we are rather lazy, forgetful people and tend to fall back into our old habits, we have to be reminded of that foundation of our faith again and again, two thousand years ago in Ephesus– and still today in any place where Christians meet in His name that brought everlasting reconciliation into the world. In order to explain the new order, the letter to the Ephesians uses two illustrations which I find are still fitting in our cosmopolitan world and especially in an international congregation: “¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. ¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members

of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.”

Just imagine if there was a passport control at the church door and the only passport that would count would be the one with a cross on it. No visa that will expire, no work permit needed, just a passport that is made out in your name and that proves that you are part of the body of Christ.

Anyway, the challenge of the passage remains: how are we to live out that new citizenship? How do we see that it does not remain merely a new identity on a piece of passport-paper but that people who walk through these church doors will feel it: “You are welcome, because we are all welcomed by God.”

This is a big and challenging task for any Christian community, and maybe the second illustration will help us to spell out the challenge more clearly. “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household.” If you have ever moved in with other people you might remember the discussions you had. If we are fellow members of his household then we will have to sit down every now and again and discuss how we can ensure that everyone feels at home and can contribute to the community in a way he or she feels happy with, so that the church will increasingly become a home away from home. Sometimes, these discussions will challenge our traditional ways and question our habits. For if we take the letter to the Ephesians seriously, “It has always been like that” will not count as an argument when people come up with new

ideas. Rather, Jesus Christ is the foundation, the way he would have decided an issue is decisive!

I once attended a Christian convention where I was told by the organizers, you have to be aware that there is this lady, she has just become a Christian and she still does not know how to behave appropriately. For this rather well-to-do, traditional Christian Church this artist with her crazy hairstyle, weird clothes and 'inappropriate' language was a challenge. But she was on fire for the Christian faith like none of the others. As she put it, for all her life she had been looking for acceptance and hope that would not fail her, until she found the Christian faith. For her the argument of the letter to the Ephesians had become true: Once you were without hope." ... and today she uses her gift of communication and art to support and encourage Christians in a closed country.

When I receive her newsletters, I am amazed how courageous she is and how she sticks it out – and all because the people in the congregation she first came into stuck it out with her when she was so different from everything they were used to.

May we keep that challenge in mind when we have to make decisions about our church life: What are habits and traditions, what portrays the unity of Christ amongst us, not "them" and "us" but "Him" and therefore "us"? For:

¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. ¹⁹ Consequently, you are no

longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household ..."

When the differences in character become the mutual strength of the church, it enriches a lively unity of the believers.

"So Kanga and Roo stayed in the Forest. And every Tuesday Roo spent the day with his great friend Rabbit, and every Tuesday Kanga spent the day with her great friend Pooh, teaching him to jump, and every Tuesday Piglet spent the day with his great friend Christopher Robin. So they were all happy again."

May the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**