

Dr. Friedrich Weber : Sermon preached in Blackburn Cathedral on 28th May 2006

Text : John 17, 6-19

Grace and peace be with you from Him who is and was and is to come ! Amen

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Last Thursday our churches both here in Blackburn and in Braunschweig celebrated the Feast of the Ascension and next Sunday we shall both be celebrating Pentecost, the festival of the (foundation of) the Church. It was at Pentecost that God gave His faithful people the gift of the Holy Spirit. And we believe that it is this same Spirit that binds us together as brothers and sisters in Christ. In the bond of the Spirit there are no national boundaries and no distances between our Churches. It is the Holy Spirit that binds us together , the Holy Spirit that has led us along the path of partnership, and the Holy Spirit that continues to accompany us along our way. It is the Holy Spirit that has brought together people who were once deadly enemies, the Spirit who has opened our eyes, our ears and our hearts to understand that we are one. I am grateful for this experience.

At Pentecost we also celebrate the coming of the Holy Paraclete, the Comforter, who is there to help and assist us, now that Jesus Himself is no longer in the world among us. Because He has gone before us to the Father and in His stead will send us the Spirit of Truth, which is to be to us as the Breath of Life. As I have said, we shall celebrate this next Sunday.

But what about today, the Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost ? Do we feel bereft, because Jesus who was our brother, has now returned to the Father ? Do we as yet lack the support of the Comforter, who has been promised to us, but for whom we are still waiting ? Are we entirely at the mercy of this world ? It would indeed seem so---at least for these ten days.

For the disciples it must really have been like that. For us, of course, it is something we experience in the course of the Church's year---but let's just stop for a moment and try to feel our way into the situation to which our text refers .It is a period of stillness, a period in which the connection to God seems to have been severed. I can't begin to imagine what that must have been like.

I do not want to envisage what it would mean if we really were alone amid all the catastrophic situations of our world—the famines, wars and other crises--- and had nothing more to hope. And what a terrible burden that would be for us, if there were no-one to help us bear our individual sorrows, to listen to us and be concerned for us. That God could really have turned away from us or simply be unreachable, I do not want to think about...not even for a moment. And I wouldn't be the only one to feel like this. We are all dependent on Him who both sustains and directs us.

Perhaps it is this knowledge, this presentiment which is the reason for the increasing religiosity of people today. They are searching for something to give their lives and experiences of the world some meaning. They want to feel that they are in some sense accountable for what they do. They want to believe that there is a God who directs all things for good and makes all things well.

But the disciples--- between Ascension and Pentecost--- must have felt that they had been left alone. They had no sooner received the words of Jesus as the Word of God, and finally come to understand and believe that Jesus was from God and had been sent by God, when they seemed to have lost Him again. They had been witnesses to his sacrificial death on the Cross and to the miracle of the Resurrection. In all probability they were still trying to come to terms with that, when He is once more taken from them, ascended into Heaven. They had not been able to cling to Him or hold Him, but had now suddenly been thrown back onto their newly-founded faith in Him to see them through. .

There only remained His words and His blessing. There only remained the community He had founded and a period of waiting. A period of waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit, as He had promised, the Spirit who would be among them in His stead and in Whom God's Presence would once again be felt. And we too know and believe that, through the Holy Spirit, God is near to us today. But this time between Ascension and Pentecost, this reliving of the experience of the first Christians teaches us about waiting.. In former times these days were kept as days of fasting and meditation. It was like Advent, a time of spiritual preparation for Him who is to come.

But most people find waiting very difficult--- we get impatient and restless and we feel time slipping by more intensively than usual. We can easily think of it as a waste of time if our expectations are not being fulfilled. And when I remember that, even as I now speak, children are dying of hunger, then I can perhaps have some idea of how cold and empty, how hopeless and degrading, our world would be without Him, Who suffered all this on our behalf even unto the Cross, without Him Who sent Him to us, and without His Holy Spirit.

Our text for today is taken from Jesus's Prayer for His Disciples (at the Last Supper). It is as if He shared their fear and sense of desolation. "I am asking " He says" on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world..... While I was with them I protected them in Your Name..... and not one of them was lost " (v.9

and 12). He knows just how much His Presence means to them, how much strength they derive from it. He knows that protection and blessing come from God and are granted in His Name. Therefore not one of them has been lost.

Jesus Christ is and remains our Advocate. Thus He also prays "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the Evil One.....Sanctify them in the truth; your word is the truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world " (v.15-18). And God heard this prayer. The connection has not been broken. Otherwise we would not be here. On the contrary: He has bound us together, in partnership, through His Spirit of Truth; He has come to dwell among us, to enable us to recognise each other as brothers and sisters, He has sent us out into the world to preach His Word so that none may be lost. This is a cause for celebration. Today and yesterday and at Pentecost. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ Our Lord.
Amen.