

Friedrich Weber

**“How do we live the Gospel in a Christian minority context?”**

**Sermon held at the closing of the Meissen Commission Conference  
on 15 September 2013 in Bradford Cathedral**

Dear congregation,

Over the last few days we have looked at the minority situation of Christians / both here and in our churches at home. Although this seems like a modern topic / it is – in truth – an age old question.

Those living in ancient Israel were also painfully aware / of what it meant to have their belief system / and how they lived / put in question or even fought against. In Egypt the Israelites were oppressed by another religion and culture / and hoped for the Promised Land.

The prophets of the Old Testament also raised their voices against the foreign majority. And although Jesus Christ and his disciples were often surrounded by large groups of people, / he frequently avoided the large cities. He certainly did not assume / that the vast majority were his followers who would be baptised and celebrate communion.

Nonetheless, / or perhaps because of this, / he sent his disciples to all the world. In response to the command to evangelize ~~–sometimes with questionable methods–~~ people have brought Christianity to the ends of the earth – sometimes with questionable methods. That is why we speak of the Christian world. We see our Christian faith / wherever we go. And yet our world is filled with great religious diversity, / not to mention atheist belief systems and esoteric ideas and lifestyles.

And still it is important to us to be together in the one faith with our shared traditions and forms of worship / structures. We enjoy celebrating the feast days during the church year. And we are not indifferent about what gives our children hope / or what comforts us in our last days. It is hard to imagine our children or grandchildren not being able to say the Our Father / or not knowing why we celebrate Christmas or Easter.

And yet we have already come to realise that this is not an empty fear. There are many people who know little or nothing of our God. They do not know the Bible stories and they do not feel at home in our churches.

Christians have become – more or less – a minority.

But that is – as I have already said – nothing new.

The first Christians, / those who followed Jesus, / built up communities and passed down his stories. Even though they were a minority, / they focussed on his words / and they trusted that this faith would help them live / and would be convincing to others.

Oddly enough we find that when we are challenged, in a minority – or in especially dramatic cases even resisting oppression – oddly enough we find that in such cases our faith becomes more courageous and hopeful. We find that / when we are confronted with difficulties / we find that what we believe and profess is more convincing. I have just experienced this on a trip to the Czech Republic.

I visited one of our partner churches there / and was freshly impressed by this little church. They have about thirty ministers who serve twenty thousand church members. Additionally there is a Christian social service or diakonia which seeks to respond to the challenges of a post-communist society / and looks for creative solutions for pressing problems. I saw with great joy how Christians / who are a true minority in the former Eastern Bloc / work with great passion to build their congregations and their lives. They take pleasure in going to church and are prepared to have an effect on society and work with their young people. And all that in the face of massive financial worries. How will the minister's salaries be paid in the future following the country's new legal regulations?

Our colleagues there are already on the lower end of the pay scale and without their partners' salaries they could hardly get by.

I had many conversations, visited numerous congregations and Christian diaconal facilities and consulted with church leaders – and I rediscovered the incredible developments that have taken place / very much in contrast to my earlier visits during the Communist period. And I felt the deep trust in God / which helps these people during existentially difficult situations: their strength of faith.

Without that strength nothing is possible / neither alone nor in a group.

This is also an old theme / and it is therefore not a surprise that the people in the Bible, / who could draw on more direct encounters with God than we can, / asked for strength of faith.

In Luke chapter 17, verses 5 and 6 it says:

**„The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”**

This kind of asking shows knowledge of one’s own instability and insecurity.

This kind of asking shows that one’s way of living is not always convincing / and cannot be transported and updated into every life situation, as a correct understanding of discipleship requires.

In times of threatening military posturing and waves of refugees in Syria / we Christians must accept the challenge / to show our convictions and to act. However, little can be seen of this. And it is simply too easy to say / that we can’t be seen because there aren’t enough of us.

It is more honest to admit that we aren’t doing enough / and for that reason we need to pray:

**“Increase our faith!”**

This kind of asking shows, in the end, that we cannot make faith / but are dependent that it be given us.

And finally:

This kind of asking shows that we *do* have faith! This / too / is important. The apostles and all of us who speak this way are – so it seems – not in danger of not believing / or of forgetting who to turn to when the way has been lost.

But apparently we don’t think our faith is big enough, capable enough. We think it is *too small, too weak, too ineffective* / in comparison with all of the many loud and colourful life approaches around us. What can such a few of us do? – But this is why we should understand the disciples’ request. This is why it was easy to say then / as well as now:

**“Increase our faith!”**

What did the disciples hope / would be the answer? A promise? A blessing? Comfort and encouragement?

None of that happened. Jesus understands this expectation and reacts unmistakably:

It does not depend on the size and strength of one's faith. He says:

**“If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”**

In some interpretations Jesus's response is seen as provocative. I don't see that. On the contrary: he takes the request so seriously that he emphasises what an enormous effect just a small bit of faith can have – if it is trusted.

Especially since it is no small thing to uproot a mulberry tree. It has strong roots and nasty prickles. And if they were talking about a sycamore tree, that was seen as being impossible to uproot.

Still it is possible. For within the smallest bit of faith there lies the strength to change the world. Just as the mustard seed has within itself the ability to become a huge tree and bear fruit, it is the same with our faith.

And it is not a coincidence that Jesus Christ picked the image of the mustard seed since the people knew it / as the metaphor for the kingdom of God among us.

Francis of Assisi once said: “First do what is necessary, then what is possible and suddenly you will do the impossible.”

In other words:

Have faith in your faith / and we will start to do what is necessary / and find that the world can change.

It is not important how many there are of us.

I witnessed this in the Czech Republic. Let us also build on the assumption that God has given us enough faith to move trees / and to shape the world the way he would want it.

Amen.