Sermon for the service in St. Pauls- Warton in the partner church Blackburn on March 14, 2010

LB Prof. Dr. Friedrich Weber
Text: Acts 4,12
"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Dear sisters and brothers!

On their way to the temple Peter and John come across a man crippled from birth. But what means “coming across”? I assume for them it will have been just as it is for us when we are on the way to our temples, our churches and parish halls: so many others are also on the way, so many sit on the sides of the roads, so many sit on the steps, lame, crippled, blind, beaten by life, disappointed by the church and her people. And so many are among us who have no perspective for a life or a living in their own country, in their native place, back at home. People on the run. They line the streets to the church, to the parish hall, they line the ways to our prayers, our devotions, our services. They are many, maybe too many for allowing us to notice each individual within the crowd.

Who actually sees the individual in our society? Who indeed holds the life of each individual in such esteem that he would stopp, lift up his eyes and would allow himself to be addressed by an individual out of the crowd of the many?

Peter and John are on the way to prayer, to petition, praise, thanksgiving, possibly even on the way to lament. And their way – just like ours – will have been lined by the misery and suffering of their world. Particularly as they were on the way to the temple. The temple itself has been the place in which became apparent what the society even then and there liked to ignore: "Who entered the temple exposed himself to the sight of the poor and the distressed, to the laments and stories of sufferers or fighters for their rights. As festive as it often might have been, here one did not encounter a congregation wearing their Sunday masks hiding their day to day face, here no ‘peace’ was found that would allow one to escape the cries of unhappy and distressed fellow men.” (Kurt Marti)

The story does not report anything about what might have occupied Peter and John. Nothing regarding strategic plans concerning the future of the church. Nothing regarding possible perspectives of their own work. Nothing is said about the success or failure of their endeavour for the church, nor is anything private mentioned. The only thing that is recorded quite clearly:
Peter and John were open to be addressed. That means: In the midst of the misery of the many they saw the suffering of an individual. They recognised the sufferer. They listened to his plea.

This might be an essential characteristic for Christians: hearing the individual, seeing the individual, taking serious the individual in the crowd of the many. The cripple asks help for that moment, for a day, for a night.

We too, as Christians, are asked over and over again for our support, for our recipes even in particular social political concerns. And we try to give answers often with words that aren’t ours. We try to act on levels and with aids to which we are not entitled and which do not suit us.

Peter and John can say: “No!” They can say “No” to be fully concentrated on that “Yes!” That “Yes” which is the one word that can not be drowned by all the other words. It is the word that carries the name of Jesus. In His name and not with own words, in His mission and not out of own social responsibility, Jesus’ name alone enables radical help, radical change. The crippled man is healed! He can move himself. He can walk! – And hopefully he will find his way into life from then on.

In this act of transformation it becomes apparent that healing in the name of Jesus is calling people into freedom. In the figurative sense being healed is an act of liberation.

And one more thing becomes apparent on this way which soon will lead the two from the temple to the Sanhedrin.

Hans Joachim Iwand has pointed it out in a sermon to this text delivered in the year 1935 (at a time when the Nazis controlled Germany) by saying that “the miracle serves, but the word rules”. With the actual situation of his time in mind he declares: “It is someone else who prevents and who may continue to prevent that the Confessing Church turns into a faith movement that can be organised, activated, pushed forward, stopped, preached high and sealed off.”

This wants to say: God may prevent us from attempting to reform the church out of our own power and by our own self-given authority. God may prevent us from convincing others with our words – no matter how articulate they are – from something to which we just attach the name of Jesus. In such a way we may still stir things up but the One from whom alone salvation comes, the One in whose name people are being healed, he can not just be inserted into our concepts of church and parish, into our self-made miracles. The miracle remains imputed to the name of Jesus otherwise it turns into a self complacent activity. Or to put it differently: all church work, all engagement in parish and diakonia requires the
interpretation through the name of Jesus. The old sentence, "extra ecclesiam nulla salus", no salvation outside the church, is being passed by the witness of the Holy Scripture: "extra Christum nulla salus". Outside and besides Christ, outside and besides the One Word of God under which we live and which calls us into His discipleship there is no salvation, no freedom, no justice.

Peter and John on their way from the encounter with the cripple come to the magnificent entrance gate of the temple to give testimony to the Sanhedrin.

Again they are being addressed, called upon, asked to task.

And just as in the encounter with the cripple their answer can only be:

"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Sometimes it is easier to organise a miracle than to discern the Word from the many words. Sometimes it is easier to practise a miracle than to speak, confess and live in our daily political and churchly lives the Word which bears His name: Jesus!

As certain as we Christians are called to ministry to and in the world, as certain as we are asked for help and guidance from all directions, as certain it is that we shall not forget in all our activity, that we can give nothing else but what we ourselves constantly receive: the salvation in Christ.

With words of Calvin I like to close:

“Our complete salvation, all that belongs to it is only decided in Christ, therefore we are not permitted to deduce even the smallest piece from anywhere else. If we are searching for salvation, the name Jesus already tells us clearly: (salvation) rests in him!

If we are searching for power – this (too) rests in His dominion, if it is mercy – this is presented to us in His birth through which He became our equal in all means so that He could feel sympathy with us in our weaknesses. If we ask for redemption – this rests in His sufferings, (if we ask) for absolution – this rests in his damnation, (if we ask) for abolition of the curse – this happens on His cross …" (Inst.II,16,19)

Therefore: We are in Germany and Great Britain jointly on a way pressured by many words but presented with the One word which is Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God!

Amen