

SERMON

during the Anglican/old-catholic celebration of the Holy Communion
On the occasion of the General Assembly of CEC in Novi Sad,
by Joris Vercammen

First Sunday after Trinity.

Readings : Deuteronomy 5, 12-15 and Mark 2,23-3,6

Dear Sisters and brothers,

One Sabbath, the rabbi asked the people in the synagogue: “where does God live?” People tried to give a correct answer. „In the synagogue?“, they said, or „in Israel?“. But in the eyes of the rabbi, those answers were not adequate. We would presumably add: „actually, we don’t know where God lives and therefore we say: in heaven”. But, I’m sure that in the eyes of the rabbi, always very concrete and down to earth, also that answer would not get through. No, the rabbi responded: “God does not live in a secret place far away from humankind, God lives in history and Gods’ special place in it is the Sabbath!”

The Sabbath is the time people dedicate to God, their creator. That’s the reason why the Sabbath shall remain free from all labour and from all other things that bother us. The Sabbath is there to enjoy life, to enjoy creation, just as God enjoyed it on the seventh day. The Sabbath gives the direction to all the other days of the week, it reveals the true intention of the other days of Creation and of all the work that had to be done. All is aimed at ‘enjoying’, and the act of enjoying is honouring and being with God.

That’s exactly what the apostles are doing in today’s Gospel! They don’t do anything wrong, on the contrary. It is a curious law that would forbid to enjoy creation. The creation is there in order to keep people in good shape, and when there is a problem with that, as in the days of David, it is not the law that must be obeyed but the commandment to defend life. Another thing is asceticism. Sometimes self-discipline is necessary in order to train our capacity to respect creation instead of consuming it. Sometimes enjoying and consuming are mixed up with one another. But it is a misunderstanding that these are synonyms. One of the basic aspects of God is that God never consumes. God is total respect. The story of Moses and the burning bush illustrates this aspect of Gods’ presence and Gods’ existence. The bush is not consumed.

But the problem is that people again and again get caught by slavery in one or another form. Creation gets destroyed by slavery because slavery denies its intention. That intention is restored by God when God calls Gods’ people out of the slavery of Egypt. The exodus out of Egypt is the restoration of the Sabbath. Therefore: to honour the Sabbath is to honour the freedom of the people of God. Free to enjoy life! The exodus was only possible by ‘the mighty hand and the outstretched arm’ of the Lord, as the reading from the Book of Deuteronomy says.

“Look, why are they doing what is not lawful?”, the pharisees confront Jesus. Behind their remark there is a particular concept of law that had more to do with their own need for security than with the intention of the creation, of life as seen by the Lord himself. Jesus explains this with the example of the bread of the presence. This was only to be consumed by the priests. Yet, when people go hungry, satisfying their needs is more important than temple rules. In other words: what is the value of a law that doesn’t serve the intention of creation? What is the value of a law that doesn’t help people to enjoy life? Under the weight of that kind of laws that don’t promote the creation as a way of enjoying life, a lot of people got hurt. And this is not only true for religious or other formal laws - although some of our laws are not promoting life at all - but also for some of the so called

natural laws, such as the right of the most powerful or of the rich, the rights of white people or the rights to bear weapons, etc. This kind of laws hurt people and lead to slavery and disability. For Jesus the intention of a law can only be to redeem, to liberate, to heal.

One can feel it, as in today's Gospel: it is obvious a conflict can't be avoided.

On that Sabbath, when Jesus entered the synagogue, he meets a representative of those who are hurt: the man with the withered hand. He invites him to come forward. Then he asks again the question of the intention of the law. The Sabbath is there to honour God and to enable people to enjoy their lives, thus Jesus will honour God and will heal the arm of this man. His problem with his withered arm contrasts with the outstretched arm of God to liberate the slaves out of Egypt. The invitation of Jesus: "Stretch out your hand", is calling on the deep identity of the man as a human being. People are not condemned to live with withered hands, on the contrary they are meant by the Creator as people with strong arms and hands in order to redeem, to liberate and to heal. In healing this man, Jesus actually restores the dignity of this person as creature, as he is meant by his Creator. We are intended to enjoy the sabbath, we are 'sabbathical people': people who can enjoy the solidarity, the love and the unity in the company of all those who have been liberated, who have been redeemed.

And let's turn now to our gathering here and to the work of CEC, because at this point, we can't avoid the critical question about 'the sabbath of Christian unity' and why this sabbath seems to be still that far away. Would it have something to do with our conception about ecclesial laws? Could it be that we use our laws more to serve our own needs of security and of confessional identity than to reflect the liberating intention of God? We can be sure that the Lord is ready to lead us 'with mighty hand and outstretched arm' out of our slavery of division and disunity, but are we ready to enjoy that perspective?

We really have to look again at our laws, written and unwritten. There are formal laws that are made in order to secure ourselves and our confessional identities and to keep us away from doubting our own reasons of existence. There also the informal ones as the psychological difficulties we experience in accepting one another's contexts. There is the arrogance that offers us the illusion we are better than others, but in fact it is hiding a lot of fear for insecurity. I know and I admit: a lot has changed over the last 70 years. And indeed, as Anglicans and Old Catholics we have even been guides on the way to unity, as our agreement of full communion was one of the first ecumenical agreements ever. But is it enough? Is it enough when we look at today's problems of secularisation and modernism in Europe? I don't think so. I'm sure we need more courage and more creativity. We really have to look again at our slaveries and we all have to admit that we are churches with withered hands! Only then it will be possible for us to hear the call from the Lord: "stretch out your hand"! What is the matter with our withered hands? Why are they withered? We need humbleness in order to acknowledge our paralysis, we need to be humble enough to accept one another and one another's attempt to be sincere Christians.

Let us pray that this gathering may open our ears for the invitation of the Lord: "Churches, stretch out your hands!"

Amen.