

Provisional Translation from French

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"I will be with you."

Sermon on Matthew 28: 18-20

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"I will be with you always, to the end of time." (Matthew 28: 20)

There are three major themes in the risen Christ's final words to his disciples. They form an indivisible, organic whole. Firstly, a statement of universal significance: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Secondly, a final commandment: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And thirdly, the promise which follows on from what precedes it and vouchsafes it: "Behold, I am with you will always." The conjunctions "therefore" and "and" reinforce this cohesion. The three themes are interdependent just as the three systems of our bodies, muscular, circulatory and nervous, are interdependent.

1. The event of universal significance, which seals Matthew's gospel, is that, after the crucifixion and resurrection, Christ is granted "all authority" over the whole universe. From now on the master, the prophet, the Messiah, is declared to be "Lord". This development changes the rhythm and the meaning of human history. The substance of what has happened is different from what it seems to be. True power is no longer in the hands of the emperor and of the Roman administrative machine, the world does not depend upon the knowledge of the erudite and the intelligent. Authority has been granted by the Almighty Father, the God of love, to his Son, love incarnate in its utmost form, who accepted even the cross. This truth constitutes the central axis of Christian faith. The stability of the Christian world depends upon the extent to which this truth is received. The real strength and influence of Christians depends upon the extent to which they live out and proclaim this reality.

The Church, which is the eucharistic community of the resurrection, continues to proclaim the mystery of God as Trinity and the divine plan of salvation through Christ by the Holy Spirit. "The mystical body of Christ", the Church, from which shines forth the glory of the living Lord for the whole universe. It lives throughout the ages with the intense eschatological hope that "the mystery of God's will" is "to be put into effect when the time is ripe: namely that the universe, everything in heaven and on earth, might be brought into unity in Christ." (Ephesians 1: 10)

As we proceed into the 21st century, with the multitudes of studies and proclamations made by the ecumenical movement, and more especially by the Faith and Order commission on the delicate subject of Christian unity and authentic Christian witness in today's world, we will once again have to emphasise the original and essential foundation of the church, which ensures our cohesion. Put simply it is to trust in Him to whom "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given", as well as maintaining our firm faith that the church is "his body, the fullness of him who is filling the universe in all its parts." (Eph 1.23)

2. The resulting statement of the Lord springs forth from this - as is emphasised by the conjunction "therefore" - and is the commandment "Go therefore to all nations and make them my disciples." (v 19)

The risen Lord is the first to speak of universality. However this universal dimension is in no way linked to the current globalisation of economic markets. The term globalisation, which we speak of so often nowadays, brings with it the danger that human beings will return to a jungle

lacking any moral sense. At the same time that humans seek to become superhuman they risk in the end being reduced to a less than human state. The purpose of the missionary commission of Christ's disciples to all nations is the universality of love which raises humanity towards God in human form and makes of us a new creation. The purpose of the eucharistic community, which Christ's faithful constitute through the Holy Spirit in every place, is the creation of a society of solidarity, a society of free human beings who love one another.

In the past many Europeans and Americans understood this last commandment of the Lord in geographical terms: go unto the ends of Africa and Asia, there where the gospel has not yet been proclaimed. And yet it is obvious today that the most dangerous form of alienation - more dangerous still than religious ignorance - is the indifference which reigns in many traditionally Christian countries. Thus in the 21st century the commandment of the risen Christ acquires a far wider range. "Go therefore to all nations and make them my disciples"; to those nations which only know little of Christ, but also to the nations of Europe and America, some of which in the 20th century have persecuted Christ for decades. Also to those nations which, through arrogance or indifference, have pushed Christ to the margins and have replaced him with false gods such as money, sex or material well-being.

There are two parts to the dynamic mission of Christ's apostles. One is sacramental, "baptising them", the other is didactic, "teach them". The sacramental aspect as defined by the conscience of the early church, acquires its perfect form in the Trinitarian formula "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." This sums up the inaccessible mystery of divinity and underlines that learning is completed by the power of God's grace. Whereas in the didactic part, the accent is not only on knowledge but also on observance of *all* the commandments: "teach them to observe all that I have commanded you." (v 20)

We are often tempted in our local churches, citing a variety of excuses, to put the most demanding of the commandments to one side, for example: the love of enemies, purity, humility, forgiveness, temperance, self-denial. The Christian life is a single whole and the insistence on observing all the commandments is not the same kind of moralising with which only conservatives can agree. It is actually the most fundamental of freedoms in the face of all forms of convention. In any case the observance of the commandments is intimately linked to love and "life in Christ". "Anyone who has received my commandments and obeys them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my father and I will love him and disclose myself to him" John 14.21

It will be important to give renewed attention to the area of linking theological thought and daily life in agreement with Christ's commandments. We must not lose ourselves in abstract theology which has no relation to church life, nor in a morality lacking in theological truth.

In this century of surprises which we have already begun, it will be necessary to move into new areas, but also to distance ourselves from the established order, systems of organisation and ways of thinking. The commandment to "go" contains the implicit message that we must leave behind the place where we are and to which we are attached. Any journey to a foreign country is dangerous. It is only natural then that the journey to "all the nations" will a fortiori be strewn with all kinds of tests and diversions.

In the current situation, (with a new distribution of technical knowledge, political power and wealth, but also with new forms of poverty, destitution, injustice, violence and not only the known violence of terrorism but all forms of violence linked in recent times to religious ideas), as Christians we are called to study together a whole host of problems, to look again at our duty and our potential to bring about Christian unity and to be a creative force in the world.

We are called to go beyond the boundaries of our closed communities, to transcend prejudices, hesitations and fears and to bear witness together to the risen Christ as much as we can, in order to meet contemporary humanity and its burning questions. It is not a case of being "of the world",

but a question of helping it find its way, through the sacramental grace of the Church and its dynamic of truth, at the same time respecting the particular identity of every people and every culture and civilisation, in order to allow every human being to attain freedom and dignity, making clear our love for the whole person.

It is sometimes proposed that theology's and the Church's spheres of activity should be reduced to include only that which is exclusively religious. However the Church's horizons include the whole of humanity and the whole of creation. There is a characteristic term in the words of the Lord, the word "all". "All authority has been given to me... All the nations... All that I have commanded you... All time"

3. "I will be with you always." I, the word, the Logos, the wisdom of the Father, the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. "I will be with you always", on cloudless days when all is well, just as on cloudy days when the mists of uncertainty surround you, and in days of doubt and weakness when the storms rage. I am with you in times of hesitation when you lack courage; and I repeat to you as to Peter: "Oh you of little faith why did you doubt?" I am with you at the moment of unintentional betrayal to lead you back to repentance, at times of witness or martyrdom which you suffer for love me, at times when the demonic powers of hatred and injustice attack you.

Awareness of the presence of the "Beloved Son", who is the fullness of love, constitutes the most essential part of Christian experience. This awareness gives strength to our existence even at the most painful moments. "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Rom 8:31) Feeling His presence consoles and calms our existence "when the destructive torrents overtook me and the bonds of Sheol tightened about me." (Psalm 18: 5-6). It particularly inspires us at times of creative endeavour. This presence fills us with long-lasting joy and a calming light.

It is not simply a mental process but it is the illumination of our whole existence by the radiating grace of the Holy Spirit. It's about life in Christ. Awareness and the profound feeling of his presence can be felt at times of prayer and when meditating the word of God, but particularly in worship. It is in the mysterious sacraments of the divine Eucharist that we experience mystical union with the risen Lord. Progress in the spiritual life consists in continually deepening this personal experience, but also in continuing the divine "liturgy after the liturgy" at every moment of our lives. The more we are aware of the presence of the risen Christ in our lives, the more each of our days will be filled with peace, with strength and with creativity.

What set alight the hearts of the founders of Faith and Order was an enthusiasm with which they struggled in order to overcome enmity and incomprehension inherited from the past, which still divides our churches and Christian communities. There is no doubt that real steps forward have been made, and we give thanks for the excellent theologians who for these 75 years have contributed to these advances by the study of what unites Christians, but also of what is holding them back from unity. They have unfailingly facilitated coexistence and acceptance of that which is other or different. Events have shown that opposition to the dream of unity is strong and difficult to overcome. Those of us who today continue this work are also confronted, among other things, with a wide variety of criticisms from within our own communities. What is important is that whatever happens we continue our dialogue, reflecting together, meeting together, in faith, love and hope. No one is ready to compromise on matters of faith. However in no way do we have the right to return to the fortress of our past isolation. We cannot ignore our responsibility towards the whole world, nor the fervent prayer of Christ to his Father "May they all be one... that the world may believe that you sent me". (John 17: 20).

While preserving what is most precious in our tradition, let us continue to work for our coming together and common witness, without simplifications or embellishments, "Our eyes fixed on Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of faith." (He 12.2) Let us continue to struggle "until the end of time" whatever situation humanity finds itself in, whatever its state of scientific or technological development, its discoveries or its achievements.

4. Let me end with a personal experience. It took place twelve years ago in August in Uganda. It was already dark when we arrived in Kampala the capital, on our way back from a missionary camp in the centre of the country. In the complete darkness our old car violently hit an obstacle. The windscreen broke into 1000 pieces and fell on me. Many of the pieces of glass fell into my eyes and I could no longer open them. In the abandoned African hospital where we went our despair mounted. There were neither doctor nor nurse, neither distilled water nor simply water. It seemed inevitable that I would lose my sight. I could see nothing. At this tragic moment a vital question, one with which I had begun my missionary service came to me: is God enough for you? An inexplicable peace entered my soul. I felt the presence of He who promised his disciples: "I will be with you always". It was midnight when finally a young Ugandan optician appeared, whom we had helped to study in Athens. By the light of a special lamp he struggled to remove the pieces of glass that had gone into my eyes. He took out 24. The next day we returned to Nairobi and then on to Europe for follow-up medical examinations and to start the healing process. My healing was accompanied by the radiating certainty "I will be with you always". It could have seemed that that would cut short all missionary endeavours. But on the contrary it gave birth to a new *diakonia*, a new service with renewed faith in an even more demanding mission field, Albania.

I'm sure that many people here today have had similar experiences at critical moments in their lives and perhaps my little story contributes to helping them remember these times. The promises of the risen Christ are repeated in the life of every generation thousands of times over. It is not only on days of mist and storm that the presence of the risen Christ enlivens our soul with his mystical warmth, but more habitually on the most fruitful days of our lives, the most creative ones, when the presence of the "Beloved Son" is felt most. It is He who, just as the sun ensures life on earth, remains present on our journey, day and night, Summer and Winter. We persevere then with hope in our efforts for the unity and common witness of Christians, we do not base this on our own capacities, knowledge or intelligence, but on the certainty that we are not alone in this endeavour, but that we obey Christ's will. We have total trust in Him to whom "all authority has been given in heaven as on earth" and the joyous certainty that his promise gives us: "I will be with you always, to the end of time."