

Gospel: Matthew 13:31-33

20th Anniversary of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

Geneva, Cathedral St. Pierre, June 16, 2019

We are gathered here in this Cathedral to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between Lutherans and Catholics, a declaration which was subsequently joined by Methodists, Reformed, Anglicans...

All of this seems very technical and of interest only to a few specialists in Ecumenical matters. It appears to remain far from the deep, fundamental, existential questions that we ask ourselves; that you ask yourselves daily. But I would like to show you that the signing of this Declaration has a greater significance than one may think.

We must begin by reminding ourselves that it was precisely out of this question of understanding salvation that the schism of the Reformation was born in the 16th century. Throughout the centuries, this question has remained a point of contention between Protestants and Catholics. Undoubtedly, the world has changed; hell appears less frightening, and the questions of our salvation are no longer as pervasively present as they were at the time of the Reformation. Nonetheless, reaching an agreement on such a historically divisive question is a source of hope. If the religious dignitaries eventually reached an agreement on this question, why would such a rapprochement, such a “differentiated consensus” (to use the technical term), not be feasible, in time, on the issues that continue to divide us, such as those of the ministry or of the supper? To reach an agreement on these issues may seem as unlikely today as an agreement on Justification appeared to be 50 years ago...

This way of doing things, this differentiated consensus, is very interesting because, in fact, it does not attempt to eliminate the nuances between the Churches, perhaps the differences, but rather to assert that our different understandings are not important enough to divide us. It is therefore a constructive way of finding a path of unity.

Even if for many of us the division between Christian Churches is disgraceful and we grieve as we see the points of contention persist, the fact is that, once we take a step back, the rapprochement of the Churches will remain as one of the decisive elements of Western history in recent decades.

Ecumenism, I am convinced, is not meant to please. It is not only a call from the Lord, it is also a duty of the Churches in the face of dechristianization and given the major challenges that await all our Churches.

This question of the Justification may not ultimately be as technical as it may seem, since if we translate it into today's language, it concerns the possibilities for the human being to be happy, free and joyful, despite his/her limitations and failures.

It is no longer a question of whether to enforce the letter of the law as it was at the time of the Pharisees, nor is it a question of purchasing indulgences to guarantee one's place in paradise the way it was in Luther's time, but it is still as much a question of what oppresses the human being, of what burdens us. Today, we are still sinking under the weight of condemnation or judgment. We struggle to free ourselves from the eyes of others. We try to conform to what the world expects from us, a world of competition and efficiency, of results, and woe to one who cannot rise to the occasion. Today, it is about achievement. It is about "succeeding in life", of rising to the occasion. Together, Christians of all denominations, we must remind ourselves with strength and conviction that God loves us and that He loves everyone, each one of us, unconditionally; and that it is on the strength of this love, despite our limitations, our failings, that we can take risks in this life, because we know that we are loved and we are not judged. In Christ, God loves me as I am and that is what gives me the confidence, the strength, the tenacity and the peace to face the world and all its challenges. And that is a truly liberating word, the Good News for today.

The Good News of which we must all be the bearers. Of course, today's Church is not what it used to be, at least in the West. And we must learn to be a minority. Our Protestant Church in Geneva accepted this minority status a long time ago.

Minority. It sounds good to me. Or to put it in Biblical terms: "to be yeast in the dough". But for the dough to rise, to still have the ability to question, to prod, to witness, we nevertheless need sufficient yeast! Or, if we do nothing, if we remain divided, we risk not even having the opportunity to be yeast in the dough and we will be nothing more than an anecdotal presence or a memory of the past. The double trap to absolutely avoid is, on the one hand, that of the citadel (where we retreat from the world), and on the other hand, that of the museum (where we belong only to the past)!

I believe that the situation is all the more delicate as in this movement of dechristianization we must be wary of two false friends. They are false friends because they appear to give us support and encouragement, but in fact we risk being trapped further and accelerating our downfall if we rely on them for our own

testimony. I would like to mention, on the one hand, what I would describe as Christianity without the Gospel and, on the other hand, as spirituality without Christ.

Today, in Europe, we are witnessing a resurgence of certain discourses on the values of Christianity, on the defence of Christian identity or culture. These discourses could make us rejoice; however, they are often adopted by movements that claim the Christian identity not to defend the values of the Gospel but as a reflex of identity, of withdrawal and of exclusion. We must differentiate ourselves and remind ourselves that Christianity cannot assert itself without the values of the Gospel that go with it.

The other false friend is more subtle since today we can actually rejoice in seeing many people who have distanced themselves from the Church expressing a form of spiritual seeking; however, the latter often refuse to see in the Gospel a possible path for meaning in their quest.

This is not new. Paul himself used to say that it is difficult to announce a crucified Messiah; that it is a form of insanity! And yet, we must not give up. We should not blur the message or dilute the Gospel in order to please or to appear more accessible. On the contrary, the place of our testimony must be strengthened and centered on the figure of Christ. Despite all difficulties! If we do not do it, we have nothing left but to stay silent...

We therefore have no choice but to carry this prophetic mission together, that is to say: to proclaim the Gospel, to witness our faith, to translate, to make accessible in today's language this Good News through words and deeds. A mission of paying attention to others and in particular to all of those of weakened existence, availability and ability to listen, in order to offer in the name of the love of Christ a word of joy, of peace, of grace, of relief.

Our challenges are common, and our divisions are a counter-witness. Nourished by our respective rich traditions, we can no longer afford not to face together the challenges that the whole of Christianity is faced with. To be concerned with Ecumenism (both for us with Catholicism, Orthodoxy, as well as with the Evangelical world) is to recognize that we miss each other. That we need each other for the fulfilment of our common mission and that the Theological Truth needs to be shared. And that is the reason why our Protestant Church of Geneva is especially happy to welcome all of you this morning, in this Cathedral steeped in history, but above all – it is our belief –, full of promises in this common will of ours of, together, witnessing the Gospel, which remains this unique Word, this liberating Word for all our contemporaries.

Amen

Pastor Emmanuel Fuchs
President, Protestant Church of Geneva

June 16th, 2019