

Sermon at the Europe Day service, Methodist Central Hall, 9 May 2016

Very Revd Dr John Arnold (Vice-President of Faith in Europe, Dean Emeritus of Durham and former President of the Conference of European Churches)

The Christianisation of Europe goes back to Saint Paul – a Greek-speaking Jew who was a Roman citizen. ‘During the night Paul had a vision; there stood a man of Macedonia (was it St Luke?) pleading with him and saying: ‘Come over to Macedonia (from Asia) and help us.’ (Acts 15, 9) It was the impact of an originally Asiatic faith, which was to provide an embryonic Europe with a new identity when the political and cultural unity of the Græco-Roman world disintegrated. North Africa and the Asiatic parts of the Roman Empire fell away as a result of the rise of Islam; Ethiopia and the Malabar coast of India were cut off from contact and almost from memory, while Ireland, Scotland, Northern Germany, Scandinavia, the Baltic and the eastern Slav lands, which had not been in the Empire, became part of Europe as a result of missionary expansion. By conversion to Orthodox Christianity in 988, on the eve of the schism between East and West, Russia became European rather than Asiatic with incalculable consequences lasting to the present day. The Mediterranean which had, as its name implies, been at the centre of the Roman world became, like the Adriatic, a boundary with Asia and with Africa, too. The only truly Mediterranean sea in Europe now is the Baltic. If global warming continues, this will become a highly desirable residential area.

The word *Europe* is first used in its modern sense by the chronicler Isidore PACENSIS, who describes as *Europeenses* those who fought with and under the Franks against the Muslims at the Battle of Poitiers in 732AD. Should Europe now be defined as ‘over against Islam’? That is the first question. It has acquired new poignancy today. Still, from then on *Europe* was identified with Christendom, until the rise of secularism in modern times. As J. M. ROBERTS says: “Christianity grew up within the classical world of the Roman Empire, fusing itself in the end with its institutions and spreading through its social and mental structures to become our most important legacy from that civilization. Often disguised and muted, its influence runs through all the great creative processes of the last fifteen hundred years; almost incidentally it defined Europe. We are what we are because a handful of Jews saw their leader crucified and believed that he rose again from the dead.” He does not say that he believes it; it is enough for a post-Enlightenment historian to say that he believes that they believed it. It is not enough for us, who need faith in ‘Christ crucified in weakness, but alive by the power of God’ (2 Cor 13,4), if we are to give a soul to Europe, that Europe which is a heady mixture of the remnants of empire, the vigour of barbarism and the influence of Christianity, the three ingredients which go to make Africa, for example, so full of potential today. This mixture may be seen on the Anglo-Saxon Franks casket in the British Museum, which depicts the Roman myth of Romulus and Remus, the Norse saga of Wieland the Smith and the biblical story of the visit of the Magi: the remnants of empire, the vigour of barbarism and the influence of Christianity.

Europe now comprises the territory of historic Christendom from the Atlantic to the Ural, despite the facts that Islam and Judaism contributed a great deal more to the making of Europe than has generally been acknowledged (there were Jews in Europe before there were Christians or St Paul would have had no synagogues to preach in); many Europeans do not now believe in Christianity; there are many more Christians in other parts of the globe and there are many immigrants and some converts to other world faiths in Europe. Major attempts in the twentieth century, however, to replace Christianity as the spiritual and mental guide of Europe, either by neo-paganism in its Fascist form or by atheism in its Marxist-Leninist form, have failed. We may well be the first continent in history to belong not only to a post-Christian era, but also to a post-atheist one. Boris Pasternak, when questioned by a journalist about his religious beliefs, replied, “I am an atheist who has lost his faith.” There are plenty like him. Still, we should not be complacent, for as G K Chesterton said, “When people cease believing in God, they do not believe in nothing, they believe in anything.”

The great Dutch ecumenist Willem VISSER 'T HOOFT used to say that, while it was true that the Church made Europe, in so doing it unmade itself as a Church, so thoroughly did it become entangled in the worldliness of the world it had made. Christianity did not only define the emergent Europe, and it certainly did not pacify it. It helped to make Europe exceptionally dynamic, innovative, scientific and schismatic. The first whole continent to be converted to Christianity, it has also been the source of many scourges, which have been exported to and have afflicted the world; imperialism and colonialism, the division of the churches, the ideological split between Capitalism and Communism and two world wars, which drew in non-European nations. Can such a continent be saved? How does such a continent relate to others? And how should we in Britain relate to it? By standing aside? Or by coming over to help? That is the second question, which our text invites.

It continues: 'When (Paul) had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia.' It is not for me to offer more than an arrow prayer for those who are trying, even now, to cross over to Macedonia; but it is the time to recall that this is the moment when the subjects of Luke's story change from 'they' to 'we' and the objects from 'them' to 'us'. Is this really the time for the subjects of Queen Elizabeth to change their relationship with their fellow Europeans back from 'we' to 'they', and the objects from 'us' to 'them'? That is the third question. Amen.

Appendix

Particularity and Universality

It is in the letters of St Paul that the complementary nature of the particular and the universal is treated and it is by him that it is expressed most articulately. At different times and for different purposes he emphasises his identity not only as a Jew but more specifically as of the tribe of Benjamin and a Pharisee, not only as a Roman citizen but also as a Greek-speaker from Tarsus. These things, however formative and useful they may be, he accounts as of little worth compared with being 'in Christ', that is to say, reconciled through the Cross of Christ to God and to his fellow human-beings. He it is, so proud of his multiple identities on earth, who also claimed that 'our citizenship is in heaven.' (Phil. 3, 20.) The particularities of nation, race, language, party and citizenship are to be valued not for the ways in which they cut us off from others but for their ability to form personalities and characters which are capable of making mature relationships with others. For Paul human beings are put in a right relationship with God, not by nation or race, language or culture, gender or social status, but by meeting grace with faith, that is to say by responding with trust to love. This does not mean the repudiation of other relationships (except with idols, which are non-entities), nor does it mean the loss of other identities. It does mean their enlargement and transformation.

The implications for contemporary anxieties about identity are clear. No one should be asked to exchange their identity as British or English for an identity as European. We may, however, rightly acquire or retain not an alternative but an additional identity as European, rather like Douglas Hurd putting on a Loden overcoat over a Savile Row suit.

This pattern can be traced to the writings of the Venerable Bede (673-735), which were equally responsible for the development of an English national self-consciousness and for the insistence that the destiny of the English was continental rather than insular. For him the underlying point at issue at the Synod of Whitby (664) was whether the English, by their adherence to the customs of the Celtic Church, would be condemned to languish forever in a provincial backwater, or whether, by becoming part of the wider Western Church, they would be integrated into a potentially universal culture and civilisation. It was not that everything Celtic was wrong and everything Roman right.

On the contrary, he could not hide his admiration for the piety and effectiveness of Aidan, Oswald and Cuthbert in Northumbria compared with the vacillation and tactlessness of Augustine in Kent.

However, if the English were to receive the blessings of belonging to a wider world, they would need, for example, to adopt a common date for Easter, which was the equivalent then of accepting directives from Brussels now. Bede, who lived to see the beginnings of the extraordinary contribution paid (or rather repaid) by the English to the continued conversion of Europe by missionaries and scholars like Willibrord and, a little later, by Boniface and Alcuin. This two-way traffic of influence and enrichment, of values and insights, accompanies trade and commerce and is not less important. That is why the European churches (through the Conference of European Churches and the Council of Catholic Bishops Conferences in Europe) said in the *Charta Ecumenica* (Strasbourg, Easter 2001), ‘The Churches support an integration of the European continent. Without common values, unity cannot endure. We are convinced that the spiritual heritage of Christianity contributes an empowering source of inspiration and enrichment for Europe...’

The pan-European and global perspective

The Churches are clear that the scope of the Community must be pan-European. It cannot and must not be a reincarnation of Western Christendom or the Holy Roman Empire. Eastern Europe is every bit as European as is Western Europe. Indeed the Greeks, whose relationship with the rest of the European Union has been fraught from the start, may claim to have the best title of all. Meanwhile, the underlying problem of the relationship between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Europe remains unsolved; and it is insoluble at the level of politics and economics alone. All the historic Orthodox lands wish to benefit from the financial, social and political advances of the West, but they have not had the experience of the long march through the Renaissance, the Reformation and especially the Enlightenment, which made them possible. The pillars of the European Union – the rule of law, pluralist democracy, human rights and religious freedom – require spiritual and cultural as well as political and economic convergence, or there will only be, as there is with Greece, a dialogue of the deaf. Bede was active well before the disastrous schism between East and West in the eleventh century and he wrote appreciatively of the contribution made by Archbishop Theodore (like St Paul a Greek-speaking citizen of Tarsus) to the establishment in the *Ecclesia Anglicana* of provincial, diocesan and parochial structures which have lasted till today. Bede wanted his fellow countrymen to adopt Roman practices, but he took it for granted that Rome was in communion with Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople. For him, integration into Western Christendom did not mean the acceptance of limitation and narrowed loyalties, but rather a way of being in communion and fellowship also with Eastern Christendom and with churches in Africa and Asia, in a word with the *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited world in so far as it was known in his day. The *Charta Ecumenica* goes on to say, ‘At the same time we must avoid Eurocentricity and heighten Europe’s sense of responsibility for the whole of humanity, particularly for the poor all over the world.’ Britain, which retains special links with the United States of America and with the worldwide Commonwealth, is well placed both to benefit from a whole-hearted commitment to the European project and also to contribute to the development of its vision and values.

John Arnold

Canterbury

9 May 2016