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New Birth into a Living Hope

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'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you.'

Hope is, in the New Testament, a very strong word. It does not denote (as it does in contemporary English) merely a strong desire for something which may or may not happen in the future. It is rather an unshakeable assurance about what the future holds. It is the anchor of the soul, firmly secured in that which is beyond our sight but which is the real future. It therefore furnishes us with the criteria for determining all action in the immediate present.

This absolute confidence about the future is grounded in the fact that Jesus, the living word of God present as a man in the midst of our human history, who had been rejected, humiliated, condemned to the death of an enemy of God, dead, buried and sealed in the tomb, had been raised from the dead victorious over all the powers of death and hell. That fact, that finished work which is now part of history and therefore irreversible, is the pledge that, beyond all the temporary victories of evil, the ultimate future belongs to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And that fact must determine all our thinking and planning and doing in the passing present. All thinking and planning and doing which supposes another future for the human race is folly.

The Europe of which we are a part, and by which we have been so largely shaped, has, for the past two centuries at least, lived by a different vision of the future. It has had another eschatology. The human future was to be the coming world civilization of which Europe was the source and nerve centre. The forms of scientific rationality born in the European 'Age of Reason'

would penetrate the whole world bringing rational forms of human behaviour and organisation into all aspects of society. Europe had a civilising mission to the world. One did not speak, until the present century, of 'culture' in the plural. There were not many 'cultures'; there were more or less civilised peoples. And even in the European churches foreign missions were seen as part of this civilising mission – an idea which continues today in the popular identification of missions with 'world development'.

This confidence has now collapsed. We apologise to the rest of the world for having tried to impose our culture on other peoples. European civilisation is the only one among the many cultures which makes up the kaleidoscope of a 'multi-cultural' world. Diversity and variety among human cultures are to be prized. To make judgements upon them on the basis of some supposedly absolute standard is merely arrogance. The French writer Jean-Francois Lyotard has defined post-modernism as 'incredulity towards all meta-narratives'. The European story of the past three centuries was a meta-narrative. It gave coherence and direction to our individual lives. But now all such pretensions to knowledge of the ultimate in things is to be treated with scepticism. Life is a matter of immediate experience, a moving montage of pictures and sensations, or immediate consumer satisfaction. Claims to know something of ultimate truth, claims to know the meta-narrative which gives coherence to all our personal and sectional stories, are merely exercises in domination.

The Gospel is a meta-narrative. It is the story of the mighty acts of God in creation and redemption, and of his purpose to complete what he has begun by bringing all things in heaven and earth into their true coherence in Jesus Christ. Sadly, during these past centuries, the European churches in general allowed themselves to be seduced by the other meta-narrative, the story of enlightenment and the coming world civilization. They allowed the Gospel to be radically subverted by turning it into the story of the individual soul and its religious experience. They hoped in this way to make the Gospel intelligible to modernity, instead of seeking to demonstrate to modernity that the Gospel is the only narrative that can make the world intelligible. They failed to recognise that modernity was the most dangerous enemy that Christianity had faced since the rise of Islam, and allowed themselves to be domesticated as collaborators in the dominant ideology. And so it is natural that, with the collapse of this ideology, the churches have suffered a catastrophic collapse of confidence. The European churches, as we know in our own experience, give to the general public the impression of a power left over from the past. In the areas of intellectual debate, Christians are timid and deferential, seeking only to show that Christianity is not excluded by modern science, instead of showing how only the redemptive power of the Gospel can save society from the scepticism into which it is falling. In the world of politics Christianity has largely left the debates of the public square to be carried on by others, only intervening to affirm positions which can be defended on secular grounds, not daring to say: 'This is what Almighty God has commanded you. And meanwhile, as the churches in Europe seem to lose ground, Christianity in the rest of the world grows more rapidly than at any time in its 2000 years' history. Statistically speaking Christianity is now primarily an African religion. There are more Anglicans in Nigeria than in the whole of Europe and North America put together. There is now no nation on earth without a living indigenous church, many of them under ruthless persecution and yet growing spontaneously through the witness of ordinary believers. Christianity is still not only much the largest of the world's faith-communities, but also – by a small margin – the one growing most rapidly. Yet in Europe, so long its heartland, it is in decline. And it is reasonable to fear that the acids of modernity (to use Walter Lippman's phrase) which have so devastated the churches of Europe will in due course have the same effect in the churches of Asia and Africa.

There is not a little irony in this situation. These growing churches of the Third World owe their origin to the huge missionary expansion in the 19th century, a movement which has come near to fulfilling its dream of evangelising (not converting) the world - if not in one generation, then in an amazingly brief time. But these missionaries were among the main exporters of 'modernity' to the rest of the world through their vast networks of education, medical and

technical services. But this did not have the effect of producing replicas of the European churches – and for one very good reason. These missionaries also made it their business to translate the Bible into many hundreds of languages which had previously had no writing, no alphabet, no literature. This had two consequences which, perhaps, few missionaries expected. In the first place it has brought about the births of hundreds of vibrant new national cultures as peoples, hitherto illiterate, have made the gigantic culture leap which writing and reading make possible. In the second place, it put into the hands of the young Christian churches criteria for judging the missionaries themselves. The missionaries were typical products of the Enlightenment. The Bible was not. The difference soon became obvious. One result has been the huge development of the African independent churches, pentecostal churches in Latin America and – where the break with the missionaries did not occur – rapidly growing indigenous churches among people not yet seriously touched by modernisation. It is here, among peoples still living in a pre-modern cultural setting, that the huge expansion of Christianity has been taking place. To put it another way, it is taking place among peoples who have accepted the meta-narrative of the Gospel and not (yet) the meta-narrative of the Enlightenment.

But a realistic assessment of present global trends suggests that the time will be short before modernisation catches up with the societies which have so far escaped it. With the collapse of Marxism as a world power, nothing seems to stand in the way of the rapid globalisation of the free market. With the explosive development of instant world-wide communication the whole world is being rapidly locked into a single economic unit. Traditional autonomous economies, that is to say societies which have existed for centuries on the basis of a local subsistence economy, are being invaded and replaced by economies geared to world markets. The type of consumer society developed in the affluent parts of the world during the second half of the present century is being replicated in areas hitherto untouched by it. While Europe still plays a significant part in this global economy, it is now clear that within a few decades Europe will be a very minor player and that the rules will be set by the newly emerging giant economies of East Asia – especially that of China. The world seems, as Jacques Delors has said, to be like an aeroplane which has been locked to an automatic pilot with a locking system which we cannot unfasten and for a destination that we cannot discover. There are, however, two things that we know about the destination of a society which has accepted the free market as its ultimate authority. One is that the gap between rich and poor will grow wider. The other is that the moral guidance traditionally provided by religion is progressively lost. If there is no god except the free market, then, as Nietzsche saw, everything is permissible.

It is here that a new and unexpected factor enters into the story. For a long time Europe has generally accepted the thesis of Max Weber that secularisation is an irreversible process. With the growing role of science-based technology in all aspects of life, with the increasing power of rational organisation in industry and government, religion must necessarily retreat deeper and deeper into the personal and private life of the individual. The disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) of the public life of the world, the removal of all reference to the supernatural as a factor to be reckoned with in public affairs, cannot be reversed. This belief, accepted without question for so long, is now being disproved before our eyes. With the rapid globalisation of the free market in the past half-century has come the equally rapid rise of religious fundamentalism. Religion is now a more important factor in international and national politics than it has been for two centuries. ‘Fundamentalism’ is a term most frequently used pejoratively, which can cover many different things. The Hindu fundamentalism which is threatening the foundations of Indian democracy, the Christian fundamentalism which impacts Europe especially from the United States, and the various forms of Muslim fundamentalism are all significantly different from each other. What their rapid growth in so many different forms does make clear, however, is that the human spirit cannot live forever in a purely secular world, in a world from which the supernatural has been banished. The domestication of European Christianity within the world-view of modernity has been so thorough that Christians have largely accepted the idea of a secular society, regarding it as some sort of neutral space within which the various religions could co-exist in friendly

dialogue. What is here concealed from view is the fact that a secular society is not a neutral space but a society governed by very specific beliefs about human nature and destiny.

It is these beliefs which are now being vigorously challenged especially and most explicitly by Muslims. Muslims see our contemporary European society as a moral and spiritual vacuum, a place where (to quote Nietzsche again) the horizons have been wiped out and there are no more landmarks by which we may guide our steps. In its far-ranging programme for the 'Islamicisation of thought' Muslim intellectuals are bringing a critical perspective to bear on the fundamental assumptions which underlie contemporary European life. Moreover, they are able to appeal powerfully to those who are the victims of the free market, the great body of the marginalised, the unemployed and the unemployable. There is also in Christian fundamentalism a parallel but much less vigorous attempt to rescue the churches from their captivity to modernity, sometimes creating innovative styles of education and, more rarely, developing a Christian critique of the free market. The pentecostal and charismatic movements, by far the most rapidly growing part of contemporary Christendom, provide a powerful challenge to the moral vacuity of the secular society. The witness of Christian fundamentalism, however, is weakened by its continued captivity to modernity in two respects. In the political field it has, with honourable exceptions, surrendered uncritically to the ideology of the free market. In the intellectual field, in a praiseworthy attempt to re-assert the authority of Scripture, it has embraced a concept of verbal inerrancy which is a product of Enlightenment rationalism rather than something learned from Scripture itself.

What, then, is the task of the European churches today? Within the whole global family of churches throughout the world, is there a task which is specifically ours?

Let me begin to answer by asking another – perhaps a childish – question: what is Europe? One look at a map of the world is enough to show that Europe is not a separate continent; it is merely the western end of Asia. A glance into history is enough to confirm this. For countless millennia Europe has been the cul-de-sac into which the surplus population of Asia has drifted and stopped because the sea stopped further advance. To look at the more immediate origins of Europe as we know it, is to confirm this point. For anyone familiar with the thought-world of India, it is obvious that the world of classical antiquity is an extension of that Asian world. Its myths and legends, its gods and goddesses and its philosophical ideas belong to the same family. Why, then, do we speak of Europe as a separate continent, as a society distinct from Asia? The answer must be that, for more than a thousand years, Europe was shaped by story, the story told in that book which was simply called "THE BOOK", the Bible, because it was, for the vast majority, the only one. It was not, could not be, a book in the hands of individuals for private reading. It was the book of the Church, and the story which it tells, told and re-told week by week and year by year in the liturgies, the art, the music, the festivals and the dramas of the Christian year, shaped men's understanding of who we are, where we come from, where we are going and what are the choices available to us.

Asian peoples tell many stories, but they are told to illustrate eternal, trans-historical truths. History is not the sphere in which ultimate reality reveals itself. That which is transient, coming to be and passing away, cannot be the place where eternal truth is found. For this we must press beyond the events of passing history to the eternal realities which may be grasped by the mind, and finally embraced by the soul into consummation where we learn that the soul and the ultimate reality are one, where *atma* and *Brahma* are one.

Europe has, of course, never been completely separated from the Asian way of thinking. Partly through the surviving influence from the classical world in the shaping of the barbarians into a new society, and partly through the massive re-injection of Aristotelian science and philosophy dedicated to Europe by Islam in the late Middle Ages, this way of understanding reality has always had a role in European thought. But what made Europe distinct was the power of the story which the Bible told. The unique faith of Israel, gift of the unique gift of God to Israel for the sake of all the nations, was carried by the message of the Gospel out of its captivity in the Jewish synagogues to become the faith of the Gentiles, and – eventually – of the barbarians who

had swept through the defences of the Roman Empire to become the rulers of this western end of Asia.

In this perspective it is easy to recognise that the movement of thought in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment was a return, in response to the invasion of classical thought carried by the superior civilization of Islam, to the classical view which found ultimate truth not in a story but in that which is trans-historical. The switch is encapsulated in the oft-quoted words of Lessing: 'Accidental happenings of history cannot prove eternal truths of reason'. That removed the Bible from the foundations of thought. The Bible is essentially a story, the story of the cosmos and of the human race interpreted through the story of God's dealing with Israel and of his supreme act of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. The Bible is a record of events in history but it is no longer accepted as the clue to world history. It is relegated to the area of personal religious experience, which in itself is only one small sector of human experience as a whole.

We are familiar with the story which has followed. The critical powers of human reason, unshackled from ancient tradition, would construct a new vision of reality based simply on empirical observation and without recourse to any supernatural explanations. The result is the fast expansion of European thought and European power into the rest of the world. But, inevitably, the critical principal has turned upon itself. Since the use of the critical power of reason depends upon our acceptance of beliefs which are held a-critically for the purpose of the critical act, it is inevitable that the critical activity itself should eventually collapse. And so there follows the collapse into subjectivity which is represented by the movement of deconstruction and the rise of so-called 'post-modernity'. Reality does not have a meaning of its own. Meanings are creations of the subject, and we are free to create our own. Virtual reality becomes the only reality. Words no longer refer to realities beyond the self. Our languages, the means by which we try to think about reality, are games and we can play different games at different times. In place of the reality which modernity saw as something to be understood and therefore mastered, we have a kaleidoscope of ever shifting images. The attempt to impose a pattern, to demand coherence, is simply an assertion of power, an attempt to dominate. For most Europeans today the weekly liturgy of the Church, teaching us that our lives are part of a story which has a beginning and an end, and has its central clue in the events concerning Jesus, has been replaced by the weekly liturgy of the shopping mall, that splendid palace of consumption which has replaced the cathedrals as the central meeting place of society, telling us that reality is what we choose to have.

I have been talking about modernity and post-modernity, and of the collapse of the one into the other, but – of course – this is an over-simplification. Fashions of thought do not exist in clear-cut compartments. Ideas characteristic of modernity, and of post-modernity co-exist in the contemporary European society and within the same mind. And these two ways of thinking pose different problems for the evangelist. Characteristic of modernity, and still immensely powerful, is the idea of neutrality. A good example was provided by a much-praised syllabus for religious studies by one British local authority. It claimed to give an objective and impartial account of the major world faiths and ideologies. What was concealed from the students, and apparently also from the compiler of the syllabus, was the point of view from which this survey was conducted. Apparently it was a point of view above all points of view – a God's eye view of the world's religions. I have referred to the same problem when speaking about the idea of a 'secular' society. The uncritical acceptance of this idea has led to the assumption (perhaps not even consciously acknowledged) that there is an 'objective' way of seeing things by which the Christian (of any other particular) standpoint must be judged. This widespread illusion owes much to our inheritance from Descartes, with its concept of the human mind as a disembodied eye surveying the world without being part of it. In truth, of course, all our knowing of anything arises from our engagement as actual embodied human beings in the affairs of the world. The idea of an objectivity from which all subjectivity has been eliminated is the master illusion which has led to the collapse of the confidence of the Enlightenment into the subjectivity of the post-modern reaction.

This means that in trying to communicate the Gospel to our European contemporaries we are dealing at the same time, and perhaps in the same person, with two different reactions to it. On the one hand those parts of our society where modernity still reigns will object both that the Gospel is not objective truth but only one very subjective way of interpreting human experience. On the other hand, those who are being shaped by the post-modern reaction will tell us that our 'meta-narrative' is simply our attempt to recover the kind of power which Christianity once had in Europe. They will de-construct the biblical narratives and bring out of them meanings remote from those Christians have found there. They will be happy to let us play our games if we want to, so long as we do not try to impose our game on the whole playground.

How do we communicate the Gospel in the Europe of today?

The first requirement is, quite simply, a recovery of confidence in the truth of the Gospel. This may sound naive and childish, but it is not. Note, please, that I am not speaking about Christianity, but about the Gospel. Christianity is a multiform, changing and highly ambivalent movement in history. It is full of darkness as well as of light. It is what we, sinners as we are, have done with the Gospel in our attempts down the centuries to understand it and live by it. The Gospel is a record of facts, in the original sense of the word *factum* – something which has been done, is part of history, and cannot now be undone or altered. Of course I know that what we call facts are only available to us as meaning, as mediated to us through the exercise of our powers of interpretation. But that does not make them merely subjective experiences. The collapse of an illusory ideal of pure objectivity into the total subjectivity of post modernism is at the root of our present loss of confidence. We are entrusted with a record of facts, of things done, of which we are witnesses. We can decline to believe them. That possibility is always open. But if they are true, if that – to put it with extreme concentration – almighty God, the creator of heaven and earth, has done those things of which the Gospel speaks, if indeed the eternal word has been made flesh, made a part of human history accessible to our human knowing, then this must be the controlling factor, the absolute datum, the foundation of all our understanding. As Athanasius said, it can only be a new arche, a new starting point for all our thinking and being. It cannot be one element in a structure of thought founded on other alleged certainties. It is either the cornerstone or the stumbling block. It cannot be just one brick in a building erected on another ground-plan.

That was the issue which the earliest Christian thinkers had to face as they wrestled with many attempts to accommodate the Gospel within the world-view of classical antiquity. We face the same issue now in Europe, complicated by the fact that for a long time European Christians have tried to accommodate the Gospel to the world-view of modernity, instead of demonstrating that it is only the Gospel which can give intelligibility to the whole of human experience.

In one respect our present situation is propitious. The claim of the Age of Reason to build human life on eternal truths of reason rather than to understand human life as part of a story which has not yet reached its end, has been found wanting. We no longer believe in these eternal truths of reason. They are, as the post-modernists are teaching us, products of particular histories. In spite of the hold which is still exercised (perhaps chiefly among older people) by the idea of an 'objective' set of 'facts' which can be invoked to measure any 'subjective' opinions based on the particular experiences of religious and other traditions, there is a growing scepticism about the earlier claims of science to provide us with the guidance we need. The vastly expanding influence of astrology and of New Age' in its many forms is evidence of this. (It is also a reminder that, if Europe loses the Bible, it becomes once again merely a part of Asia). But, insofar as this post-modernist mood reigns, while it is quite acceptable to the most-moderns that we communicate through a story, a claim that this is not merely one among the many stories but in fact the true story, is rejected. It is seen as a claim to dominate, to restore perhaps, the ancient power of the Church over the life of Europe.

Here we come to the heart of the matter, and to the text from the Letter of Peter which was given to me as text for this address. The story entrusted to us is unique among the stories that are told in this: it affirms, because it has at its centre the humiliation and crucifixion of the Incarnate Word of God, that the final victory of truth over the lie is not an event within the history of the

world. And, because God raised Jesus from the dead and the tomb was empty, that this victory is, nevertheless, the ultimate reality, the end to which the whole story moves. It is the humiliated and crucified Jesus who is raised from the dead. Both events are events in history, 'facts' in the original sense. The former, the death of Jesus, is carried out on the public stage. The latter, no less factual, is entrusted to a small company chosen and prepared to be entrusted with it for the sake of the whole world. The humiliation of the Word is not reversed in a public event, because that would bring history to an end and leave no space for repentance. But those to whom the truth has been entrusted are commissioned as witnesses to the world that the humiliated and crucified Jesus is Lord and that his reign is the end to which all history moves.

This is the ground of that 'living hope' which our text affirms. It is a totally realistic hope, not dependent on signs of success. On the contrary, the body to which the secret is entrusted is recognisable by the scars of crucifixion. 'He showed them his hands and his side'. We can therefore be realistic and open-eyed about the present. It may be, for example, that European civilization as we have known it is reaching the end of its life. No civilization lasts for ever. It may be that, like Jeremiah in his prison, we have to contemplate complete disaster. But, like Jeremiah, we who paid out precious silver to buy land under enemy occupation, will take those actions now which are appropriate to the end which has been promised, of which we have the pledge in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and of which we have the foretaste, the first-fruits, in the present gift of the Holy Spirit by whom we are enabled to confess Jesus as Lord.

We are entrusted with a gospel, a story which is not ours but for which we have been called and chosen as witnesses. The authenticating marks of the witness will not be a this-worldly triumphalism but that confidence of victory which goes with the bearing of the wounds of the passion. We tell the story not because we are fit embodiments of it, but because it has been entrusted to us and if we do not tell it, it will not be told.

I think that there is one theological task which we must undertake if we are to recover this kind of confidence in the Gospel for which I am calling. I refer to the urgent need for the development of a coherent and intellectually tenable doctrine of Scriptural authority. I think it is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance of this. I spoke earlier of the determinative role which the Bible placed in the formation of Europe as a distinct society, and of the intellectual conversion which turned Europe back to the ancient view of the classical world and of Asian religion: that reliable truth is to be found not in the events in history, but in the time-transcending truths of reason. It was inevitable that this should result in the marginalisation of the Bible. It continued to be source and guide in the private world of religious experience but could no longer function as an authority in the world of public affairs. During the past two hundred years the Bible has come to be seen as an object of study in the area of the human religions, rather than as an authority to which we must submit. The application of the 'historical-critical method' to the study of the Bible has, of course, thrown much useful light on the ways in which it was formed. But, once again, the critical method must necessarily destroy itself. The critical tools used in the study of the Bible were (not of course exclusively, but predominantly) those based on the unquestioned assumptions of the 'Age of Reason'. As these assumptions are being called into question, the presumptions of the historical critical method are increasingly being questioned by biblical scholars.

During the past century at least, and up to the present time, the common witness of the Church to the Gospel has been greatly damaged by the hostility to each other of those who call each other (and sometimes themselves) 'liberals' and 'fundamentalists'. While these labels have no precision, and are usually used pejoratively, it is easy to see that they represent two responses to the 'Age of Reason' both shaped by the assumptions of that age. In other words they represent two different strategies for the domestication of the Gospel in the world view of 'modernity'. On the one hand the Bible is treated as authoritative only in so far as its teachings are acceptable within the assumptions of modernity. As one example of the vast variety of human religious experience, the Bible can of course be honoured. It cannot, however, provide the criteria by which all world-views have finally to be tested. It no longer provides the new arche. On the other side

the attempt is made to affirm the authority of the Bible on the terms dictated by modernity. From the Enlightenment, perhaps ultimately from Descartes, modernity has inherited an ideal of 'objective' truth from which all subjectivity is eliminated. It has accepted Locke's definition of belief as 'a persuasion which falls short of certainty' and has therefore insisted that, since the Bible is the word of God, all its statements must have that indubitable certainty which the Enlightenment held out as the model of truth. With a doctrine of 'verbal inerrancy' some Christians have thus imposed upon the Bible a model of truth which is not derived from the Bible but from another source. The great shift which set Europe on a course different from the rest of Asia is encapsulated in the famous phrase of St Augustine 'Credo ut intelligam'. I believe in order to know. We do not lay down prior conditions for acknowledging God's address to us. That address is always an act of grace evoking the response of faith. To seek something more certain than this is to lose the possibility of the knowledge of God. We must learn from Scripture itself how God addresses us and therefore what it can mean to speak of the Bible as the word of God. We must also employ all our critical powers in the reading and understanding of Scripture. To do less would be to dishonour God. But, and this is the crucial point, all critical activity depends upon the acceptance of beliefs which are – in the act of criticising – held uncritically. (To attempt to criticise all our beliefs at the same time would be a descent into insanity). The stance for our critical reading of the Bible providing us with the tools for understanding and the criteria for judging, will be the fact that in Christ God has reconciled us to himself and called us to follow Jesus. It is from this standpoint that we will exercise our critical powers in reading the Bible. Our reading must also be historical, in the sense that we read every part of Scripture with an awareness of the historical situation in which it was written, and in the sense that we read it in the context of the whole story which the Bible tells.

Like every other book, the Bible can be read and interpreted through a variety of lenses. We are familiar with such readings through the spectacles of Asian monism, Marxian dialectical materialism and Enlightenment rationalism. So read, it can be no authority for belief and conduct. What is clear is that all of these ways of reading come from assumptions other than those which govern the writings of the Bible itself. There can be no strong recovery of confidence in the Gospel unless we recover the insight that the Bible is to be read as holy scripture, as that through which God addresses us and calls for the response of faith. This is an issue which calls for the most thorough possible re-thinking of the theological tradition of the last two centuries of European thought.

A third matter which must engage our attention as European churches is the matter of unity. The situation now is very different from that of fifty years ago. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches have become fully involved in the ecumenical movement, but have not abandoned their claims to be – in some sense – the sole true embodiment of the Church which Christ founded. The Anglican and Protestant churches of Europe and North America which took the lead in the formation of the World Council of Churches 50 years ago are those which now experience steep decline and loss of confidence. The growing edges of Christianity in Europe at the present time are among the conservative evangelical and pentecostal churches and para-church organisations. These remain outside of and generally hostile to the World Council of Churches which – understandably in view of the present condition of its main member churches in Europe, show little interest in evangelism. This is a worrying situation for anyone who has committed a large part of his energies to the ecumenical movement in the form which it took half a century ago. I think we have to face it realistically. I believe that it is the intention of our Saviour that all who bear his name should be united in one visible community, taking full responsibility for one another as members of one body, and thus bearing witness to the grace and glory of the one good Shepherd who alone is able, being lifted up on the cross, to draw all peoples to himself. I believe that we must never cease to pray and work for the fulfilment of this, his will. We have also to be honest about our present situation. The intransigence of the Roman Catholic Church, its sometimes insensitive triumphalism, and the holy stubbornness of the present Pontiff can often try our patience. And yet I feel bound to confess also a certain gratitude. If this had been

absent, would not Europe have slid still more down the slippery slope into total subjectivity, relativism and moral chaos? The fundamentalist and pentecostal wings of Protestantism have many elements which I find distasteful. I see a great temptation to fall victim to the dominant individualism of our consumer society and to lose the sense of the God-given reality of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. And yet I acknowledge and rejoice in the fact that, through these movements, dying churches are being revived and pagans are being brought to faith. If we reject these movements because of the things we find distasteful, do we not risk making again the mistake which the churches have so often made, the mistake of losing the decisive opportunity and waking up too late to discover that the Spirit has passed them by?

Do we not need urgently to explore new patterns of unity which will enable us to accept one another and to learn from one another? I am more and more sure that the vital dividing lines in the life of the Church today are not those between Catholic and Protestant, or between our denominations. The dividing line is between those who believe that there is a Gospel which has been entrusted to us, and those who have for practical purposes ceased to believe it. We have been given for the theme of our conference this marvellous text from the Letter of Peter reminding us of the victory of Christ and the incorruptible inheritance prepared for us. May we also couple with it the words which St Paul addressed to the Christians in Rome as he looked forward to the extension of missionary labours into the very heart of that proud pagan culture: 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe'. And so it is. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you.

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