

English Text of: A Sermon preached on 25th October by the Bishop of Coventry at the Ecumenical Service to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the Re-Consecration of Dresden's Frauenkirche

Readings: Isaiah 66.1-2 and Luke 19.1-10

Introduction

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Dear friends, it is always a great honour to preach in Dresden's Frauenkirche. But to preach on the tenth anniversary of the rebuilt Frauenkirche is a very special joy. My predecessor, Bishop Colin, stood in this pulpit ten years ago at the ecumenical service on the Day of the Consecration of the Frauenkirche. I have the order of service and a copy of a page from Bishop's Colin's diary to prove it!

My wife and I have been in Dresden since Friday and it has been wonderful to take part in the 10th Anniversary Celebrations – a brilliant lecture, a beautiful concert and a very special service this morning with a moving sermon and now, this evening, as all the churches gather, a great act of common thanksgiving.

I know that there have been many other celebrations over recent weeks to mark this extraordinary building, and the remarkable story it tells of tragedy and triumph.

God's house – where the humble and contrite hear God's word

So as we rejoice in this great building, constructed and adorned by impressive human skill, it is good to be reminded that – as the prophet Isaiah says – that 'heaven is God's throne and the earth is God's footstool'. God does not need us to build a house for him to dwell in – for God is the creator of all things, visible and invisible.

The prophet goes on to say that although God does not need anywhere to live and even though nothing can contain God, God chooses to look towards and come towards 'the humble and contrite in spirit: those who tremble at his word'.

Zacchaeus – who became humble and contrite in spirit

That takes us to the story of Zacchaeus in our gospel reading. Zacchaeus became 'humble and contrite in spirit'. He was obedient to God's word, but that was not where he began.

Zacchaeus was not a humble man. Luke tells us 'he was the chief tax collector and was rich'. That is a way of saying that Zacchaeus was a proud man, a man who was used to being in charge. A man who told other people what to do. A man who was determined to be rich whatever it cost the poor.

Zacchaeus was not contrite. He had become rich because he had made others poor by a hard and unjust taxation system, which not only gave the Romans what they required, but also gave Zacchaeus what he desired. He was permitted to vary the amount of tax charged so that he could – as we say in English – ‘line his own pocket’, with as big a commission as he wanted.

Zacchaeus did not ‘tremble at God’s word’. ‘This is what the Lord requires of you’, said another prophet: ‘to do justly, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God’ (Micah 6.6). Zacchaeus ignored the word of the Lord. He was unjust and unkind in the way he treated others. And he was arrogant and proud in his attitude to God.

But all this changed – Zacchaeus changed – when he met Jesus. He became just: he promised to pay back four times over anyone he had defrauded. He became kind: he promised to give half of his possessions to the poor. He began to walk humbly with God: he received the salvation that Jesus came to bring all the children of Abraham.

How did this happen? How was this man transformed?

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. Lots of other people wanted to see Jesus as well and that made it difficult for Zacchaeus, because he was not very tall. So he ran ahead of the crowds and climbed a tree so that he could look down on Jesus. That was the way Zacchaeus did things. He liked to be ahead of the crowd. He liked to do what others had not thought of doing. He liked to look down at people. He was trying to see Jesus – to get close to him and perhaps hear him - but he was still a long way from being humble and contrite in spirit, the sort of person who trembles in awe at the word of God.

Zacchaeus’ pride, Zacchaeus’ sin, Zacchaeus’ rejection of God’s word did not stop Jesus stopping at the tree and looking up with kind and merciful eyes to see Zacchaeus, so that he could speak God’s word of grace to him:

‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down: for I must stay at your house today’.

‘Zacchaeus, I have seen you, and I know who you are and what you have done. But I still want you to know that I want to be with you, to eat with you, to come to your house’.

That was enough to soften Zacchaeus’ heart and to turn his life around: Jesus’ look of love and Jesus word of friendship.

Of course, the people did not like it when Jesus went off to Zacchaeus’ house – with this person they all hated.

‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner’, they said. But that is the gospel – that Jesus comes to the house of sinners.

Jesus comes to my life – the life of a sinner to bring salvation to my house.

Jesus comes to your life – the life of a sinner to bring salvation to your house. And he comes to the buildings that sinners gather in, because they know – we know – that we need him to come to us week by week, and to bring us salvation in words of mercy and in sacraments of grace.

The Frauenkirche – a house of prayer for the salvation of the world

The destruction of the Frauenkirche – like the destruction of Coventry Cathedral – was a powerful symbol of the damage, destruction and death that happen when nations are proud, when peoples become caught up in a cycle of sin and when a whole continent fails to tremble at God's word of peace.

The rebuilding of the Frauenkirche – like the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral – is a sign of the salvation that Jesus Christ brings as God's gift to the world.

The salvation that God gives is a gift of life that is stronger than death. It is a gift of life that can only be properly received with humble hearts, and contrite spirits and open ears that tremble at God's word of peace. It is a gift of life that changes lives:

- a gift that remakes us into people who are prepared to reconcile with others, especially those we have offended;
- a gift that transforms us into people who acknowledge our own sins and the sins of our nation, saying together, 'Father, forgive';
- a gift that re-creates us into faithful servants of God's word who believe in and are obedient to God's will of peace for the world;
- a gift of God's grace – the God who stops to look at us with love, and who calls us by name and says that he has great things for us to be and to do.

Dear friends, my prayer for this great church is that it will always be a house of prayer where people from this great city and from all the cities and lands – refugees among them – and churches of the world come to meet with Jesus Christ, crucified by the world's evil and raised from the dead by God's more powerful love. I pray that as they come to this great church named after Jesus' mother that, like her (and Zacchaeus) we will say that God has looked with favour upon us and, with her (and Zacchaeus) we will say:

'Here I am, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word'

Let us be God's servants who go from here to our families and friends in this city and every corner of the world to live in peace, to be reconciled to our enemies and proclaim God's word of peace to a world that is still at war.