

Sermon 15 November 2009
Reopening Event of the Swiss Church at 79 Endell Street
Subject: Luke 9,28-36, "It is good for us to be here"

Dear friends of the Swiss Church

"It is good for us to be here!" preached Minister Antoine Bugnion on Sunday 27th June 1762. This was the moment when the Swiss Church in London was actually inaugurated and Pasteur Bugnion was the very first Minister of the then French speaking Eglise Hélvétique. They met in a room in Leicester Fields, which was not a church building, but just a normal meeting room they had rented. In our archives we still have records of the time, which tell us how happy and grateful these Swiss people were to finally have their very *own* Swiss Church.

Today, nearly 250 years later, we are here together in this newly renovated Swiss Church building in Endell Street that looks stunning with its modern design and all the convenient facilities. And again, we are truly grateful to be here today and to be able to celebrate together. I am personally very thankful for all the work that has been done by an impressive number of people who have given so much, in order to make this special moment today possible.

Therefore I repeat: **"It is good for us to be here!"** This is actually a Bible quotation that forms part of the Reading of the Scripture, which we have just heard. Of course I have chosen this reading because it was used on the date of the inauguration of the Swiss Church in 1762. On the other hand I also selected it is because it contains a strong symbol that speaks to the Swiss Church's situation today and this is the **mountain**. Jesus went up on top of a mountain with three of his disciples to pray and to seek God's presence. So a mountain is a place where people seek to be close to God. It can also signify a great achievement, and finally the chocolate version of a mountain gives us a warm welcome.

Mountains - I think I can say that we Swiss are experts, when it comes to mountains! Many of the Swiss mountains are even quite famous, but there is only one that has given the shape to a chocolate. You probably know which one I am talking about: The Matterhorn and the chocolate with its shape is (the Toblerone) this

chocolate bar. To illustrate a mountain and to activate your imagination I have brought you a large one (show it). – Just think that this is mountain and let your mind wander a bit - try now to think of a mountain experience in your life. Probably many of you first think of hiking and skiing, blue skies and fresh air. It is nice to dwell in wonderful holiday or even childhood memories, isn't it? The beauty of mountain surroundings somehow seem to give something to us, and I am sure you would agree that when you come back from the mountains you feel new energy and somehow full of life.

So there seems to be something special about mountains. What might it be? And why did Jesus go on the mountain to pray and to feel closer to God?

Nowadays it has become fashionable to use the term “Power Places”, which means a place that contains a special positive and powerful atmosphere, where we receive new energy. For as long as the history of human beings can be retraced people always looked out for this kind of place. In our religious traditions we would probably rather use the term “Sacred Places”. This is where people experience something that they describe as “holy”. Being in such an environment we get a sense of the higher dimension to normal every day life. In various religious traditions mountains have been considered as places, where one can feel God's presence particularly strongly, just think for example of the Himalayas in Nepal or of Ayers Rock in Australia. In the Old Testament especially, Mount Sinai plays an important role. Moses received the Ten Commandments on this mountain and prophet Elijah had a special encounter with God on Mount Sinai. That's why Peter says to Jesus in the Bible story that we heard today: **“Master,” he said to him, “it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters. One will be for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”**

By saying this he certainly makes the statement that Jesus is in line with the great prophets of the Old Testament: He deserves a very special place before God. But what does Peter mean when he talks about putting up three shelters? Probably this is considered to be a place where Jesus can be closer to God with reference to the tabernacle as we know it from the Old Testament. But as this Bible text is quite mystical and difficult to understand it leaves a lot of space for our own interpretations.

For me this paragraph raises one important question: Which place would we go to, when we are seeking God's presence? (Obviously there are no mountains here in London and a simple shelter is probably not enough with the unsteady weather here.:)) As Christians in the Reformed tradition we might say that we don't even need a special place to encounter God, as it forms part of our faith tradition that we can experience God wherever we are and that we don't require any special surroundings or an intermediary for this.

Nevertheless churches in our tradition also have the function of being, in a way, a sacred place. Many people say that they get a special feeling when they enter a church building, even those who don't consider themselves as religious might say that there is something about the quietness of a church that is attractive to them and lets them stand in awe. To me this is a very interesting phenomenon. The Swiss Church building during its renovation process, looked at some points, not at all like a Holy Place, but just like a normal building site. I was therefore wondering what makes a church a church? There seem to be different reasons why a church can be experienced as a sacred place. Certainly it is the history of the building, but also some aspects of the building itself and its architecture, as well as interior features, such as the organ and the communion table. But the main factor for me is how people behave and feel when they enter a church space. If we enter a church with awe and silence and if we are seeking a special atmosphere in a church building, then this can be a place where we might experience God's presence. And in the end it is for me the grace of God alone that makes a church a sacred place.

So far I have spoken about the mountain as being a symbol for a sacred place. But this symbol speaks to our situation today for another reason because it also stands for a great achievement. All those of you who have experienced what hard work it is to go hiking and to use your own strength and muscles to get to the top of a mountain, know what I am talking about. With the Swiss Church project reaching its goal we have exactly come to this point. Many of you who are here today have contributed to make it possible to reach the top of the mountain. Together we have climbed all the way up to the top of the Matterhorn! I have to admit that sometimes there were a few clouds and the path was steep, but now we are there – and **it is so good for us to be here!**

There is one last link that I would like to make with the chocolate that you received this morning. It is intended to be a little token, a sign, that we want to be a welcoming church, which people like to return to. Remember that the Swiss Church in London is a space where you are invited to experience closeness to God and where *all* people are welcome!

Amen