

Service 2nd November 2008, Rev Nathalie Dürmüller

Subject: Reformation Sunday, Philippians 2, 1-11

Dear parish members, dear friends

Before I came to London I travelled around in Southeast Asia. If you are backpacking you meet a lot of people from all over the world, and so I did. Therefore I had to explain sometimes what I did at home. Quite often people were confused when they heard that I work as a minister. First of all, they didn't expect a woman to work in this position in a church. So I had to explain that I was part of the Reformed church and that it is common for us that women can become ministers. But this usually confused them even more. Sometimes they asked: What is the Reformed church – is this the same as the Lutheran Church? Even though there are 750 reformed churches spread all over the world, many people still haven't heard about our church domination. This fact makes us aware that we are a minority! So on Reformation Sunday I think it is useful to reflect about our religious identity. I remember that even in our Vikariats group, when I was training to be a minister, we had lively discussion about what it meant to be reformed. The Swiss reformed church doesn't even have its own creed. So what is it that makes our reformed identity? I think the best way to find out more about it is by searching in history. There were Zwingli and Calvin who actually founded the Reformed church. What they wrote and thought about the meaning of church is our religious foundation. Besides them there are many other people who have contributed to the reformed identity over the time. Today I have brought a book with me that is called "Die Reformierten", after the service you might want to have a closer look at it. It includes a lot of portraits of people who have formed our church over the decades.

This book shows very well, that our church is always changing. Many people have contributed to what the Reformed church is today. Often people think of the Reformed church as an “ecclesia semper reformanda est”. So change is part of our identity.

Nonetheless, I would like to ask the question whether change and adaptation to the time is what we need right now for our church? On one side yes we need this. On the other side it seems that we need a clearer identity which comes from a clear message. And if we have a look at what the reformers actually wrote we understand that they had such a message to tell the people. Let us take Jean Calvin as an example. He has recently been very much focused on, because next year we are going to celebrate his 500th anniversary. As you know there will be a few events around this jubilee taking place at the Swiss Church and in other reformed churches in London. Calvin had an image of the church that he was very fond of and this was the Resurrection of the church. In more than one place he says:

"Today again, God has infused new life into his church, as if the bones of a skeleton were once again clothed in flesh".

So Calvin's aim for the Reformed church was - once being separated from the papal Church - that it will be a *resurrected church*. It should be a church that has come to new life again. Overall the Reformation is quite simply the endeavour to assemble the people of God anew under the "banner of Christ". Of course for this aim the reformers were inspired by the words of the scripture. They wanted to go back to the roots, which meant taking the Word of God seriously. In many ways we have to admit that the Reformed church of today resembles more a skeleton than a resurrected church. We all know that we have to take this problem seriously and that we should try to fight against it. As I said earlier in my

opinion one way to overcome these major problems is that we go back to a positive reformed identity. The celebration of Calvin's Jubilee is certainly a good way to rethink of our precious heritage and therefore get a better self-esteem as a church. How Calvin and the other reformers fought for their faith is impressive. They obviously felt a strong need to give something to the world. Calvin once wrote: **"We do this in obedience to our conscience, as our duty in the service of the Word."** Let us ask ourselves today as we are part of the reformed church: What is our duty in the service of the world? The reformers were strongly inspired by the Apostle Paul's letters. If we read his letters as seriously as the reformers did at the time we can get a new feeling for what is our duty in the world. Today the reading of the Scripture was taken from Philippians 2, 1-11. Here again Paul's advice is so concrete and therefore useful for us. I quote:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

Paul encourages us to be like-minded as we Christians are united in the Spirit of Christ. If we don't give the impression of being one big Christian family we look non credible for people from the outside. Therefore, one big test for us as the Reformed Church is not to condemn other Christian dominations. Of course as a matter of fact the whole reformation had as a consequence that we are not one body in Christ any more. We are different and we are separate from each other and I believe it is good how it is. Still we shouldn't forget that it was never the intention of the

reformers to found a new church. They only wanted to reform the Roman-Catholic one. But historically, this wasn't possible. Even in between the different churches of the reformation there wasn't an agreement. Only Bullinger from the church of Zurich and Calvin from Geneva could find an agreement when they both signed the Consensus Tigurinus in 1545. This is when the reformed church was actually founded. Unfortunately, they didn't agree with the Lutherans mainly because of misunderstandings concerning the sacrament. So there was never any unification between these churches.

Looking at the situation of today we are challenged to find ways of how to deal with this tension of being different and still being aware that we are one in Christ. Looking at the Swiss Church in London, I think we are a good example for this attempt. We have many Roman-Catholic people coming to our service and I hope and I am convinced that you feel welcome and comfortable here.

In the letter of Philippians Paul gives us some more ideas of how we can deal with each other with respect. He says that respecting the other person has a lot to do with humility. Calvin as well made a point of how important it was to be humble. He repeatedly said that we have to understand ourselves as humble servants of God. So what is it to be humble? Humility is a word that is not very fashionable any more. In our time children are much more educated to be proud and self-confident and not necessarily humble. So why should it be desirable for us to be humble? Because it is rewarding to be humble as it helps us to deal with each other in love as it is written in the letter of the Philippians. I believe only a person with a strong self-esteem is able to live true humbleness. So being humble doesn't exclude thinking of us and of our church in a proud way. On the contrary: Being humble demands first having a good

self-esteem and as a result we can treat others with respect and humbleness.

It is also pretty obvious that Paul had a high esteem of his faith. This becomes apparent in the last verses of the reading of the Scripture that doesn't only sound humble at all. I quote:

**10that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.**

This is an extremely high aim for a church, isn't it? I think this passage has been written with the conscience that the first Christians knew they had a lot to give to the world and they wanted everybody to know about it. From this I draw the conclusion that for our reformed church it is good to think of our message in a proud way. This doesn't prevent us from serving others with humbleness and modesty. Doing all of this it should always be our aim that we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and that we bring glory to God our heavenly Father.

Amen