

# Emmanuel and St Columba's United Reformed Churches, Cambridge

Easter Day, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018

## Sermon

*Isaiah 25.6-9; Psalm 118; Hebrews 12; Mark 16.1-8*

Well, here we are, together.

Hundreds of years ago our Reformed and Independent forebears found persuasive reasons to be apart from much of the church, and even from each other. So it was that they established separate churches here in Cambridge. For forty-five years after Congregationalists and Presbyterians in these islands combined to form the United Reformed Church, for thirty-seven years after there was a further union of the Re-formed Association of Churches of Christ and the United Reformed Church, and for eighteen years after the United Reformed Church and the Scottish Congregational Church united, we remained unpersuaded that *we* needed to be together as Emmanuel and St Columba's. Never was there that groundswell of conviction that it was what we had to do; never that irresistible surge of harmonious opinion that the time was right - right for taking the separate work and witness of those who went before us that they might become the building blocks of a reimagined way of being a Reformed church in this city centre.

And yet, here we are. Together.

Amongst my favourite pieces of music is Bach's cantata 106: *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*: God's time is the very best time. Known as *Actus Tragicus*, it is for a funeral, and I would not want us to be in that sort of mood this morning. Nevertheless, this piece, which Alfred Dürr says 'belongs to the great musical literature of the world' <sup>1</sup> - says some important things for us. First, its title: God's time is the very best time. It is clear that something has changed in the way we now understand what God is asking of us. Until now, there has been a clear and sincere sense that we best served God in complementary ways, separately. Moreover, by that cloud of witnesses upon whose shoulders we stand, much faithful, fruitful mission has engaged both churches. All the time giving the glory to God, we can review the yesterdays of St Columba's and Emmanuel and be glad for Gospel preached and worship offered, for fellowship encouraged and God's love made real, at home and abroad.

And yet, here we are. Together.

Well, God sets us in time. Of course, some believe that time is fundamental to the ordered functioning of the universe, whilst others regard it as a human structure, to enable us to sequence events – a convenience for our diary management. Either way, we know time is an entirely fluid thing. It never stands still. It relentlessly moves on, and to thrive within it so must we. That is why everything is always changing. Change doesn't have to be criticism of what was, but an embracing of what is, and a commitment to what shall be. Carefully reading the signs of the times, within the churches and in the community we inhabit, we have discerned that though the time was not right for us to unite hitherto, now it is. I know I speak for John, too, when I say how deeply we respect the way that both congregations have entered into this process, which after so many years caution and hesitation, has been at once realistic and gracious, visionary and purposeful.

Insofar as we can know, this is God's time and therefore it is the best time. Isaiah's depiction of God's redemption uses the attractive analogy of a magnificent banquet of rich fare for all peoples. But he emphasises how they have waited for it. They waited for God's time. As they trusted it would be the best time, so have we. And here we are at the banquet; but it's not an indulgent feast for our own gratification. This is the banquet of bread and wine, where we celebrate how we're reconciled to God and to one another, and 'called to be servants of reconciliation and witnesses to the joy of resurrection'. <sup>2</sup> A fitting mission statement for any church, if ever there was one, not least one newly resolved to unite two

So, here we are. Together.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dürr, Alfred 1995, edited and translated Richard D. P., Jones 2005 *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach* New York: OUP page 759

<sup>2</sup> Faith and Order Paper No 111 1982 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* Geneva: WCC pages 14f

Of course, there is a sense in which this *is* about death. And that's is the other reason that *Actus Tragicus* is not entirely inappropriate. We cannot be born to something new unless we die to what was – leave behind things familiar and treasured. And where there is death, there is the mourning that bereavement brings. We do no-one any favours by ignoring that; rather, we do well to acknowledge its inevitability and to bear one another through it with sensitivity, our hallmarks being listening and learning, kindness and compassion, saying sorry and forgiving. And, please God, laughing, too. May God preserve us from a togetherness that is so *laissez-faire* that there is no thoughtfulness, but also from one so earnest that there is no delight. After all, when the fourth gospel is assuring us of God's love and urging us to love one another, it is so that our joy may be complete. (15.11)

That's how we're to be together.

How appropriate that we start to meet together permanently on Easter Day, this festival of new life. This festival which celebrates the God who came in Christ, and remains with us mysteriously, gloriously, but attentively, actively <sup>3</sup> – alive and life-giving. This festival which assures us that God's purposes abide; that our yesterdays define us, but that it's God's tomorrow which must drive us. When Mark records the resurrection – particularly in his shorter version - he's lighter on detail than any of the other writers. Narrative and explanation are scant, but what seems to matter to him is the consequence of the disciples finding this tomb empty. What should their response be? 'Go', they are urged. 'Tell', they are instructed. 'Don't linger here at the empty and redundant tomb. "He is going ahead of you into Galilee"'. There is no attempt to define *how* Jesus lives, just an urgent need to witness that he *does*. And to witness where? In Galilee: the place of their life and work, their homes and families. It's as if it is a word to us, freshly resolved as we are to be the United Reformed Church in the centre of Cambridge – *our* home - in renewed and renewing ways. Go, tell.

That's why we're here. Together.

Mark records that this all overwhelmed them a bit: 'They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.' And how we can identify with that. Here in our own ever so secular Galilee it's so easy to be overwhelmed by the imperatives of mission, of going and telling; and of uniting, too. But it is our vocation. And the living Christ is with us, calling and equipping. 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, in Christ shall all be made alive.'

Alleluia! We're here together, with each other and with the risen Lord!

That is the true relevance of us meeting together permanently for the first time on Easter Day. The God in whom we put our trust, is with us, reliably resurrected, our source, our guide and our goal.

And so I end, where the earlier drama took us: '*With this great cloud of witnesses around us, therefore, we too must throw off every encumbrance and the sin that all too readily restricts us, and run with resolution the race which lies ahead of us, our eyes, fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the sake of the joy that lay ahead of him, he endured the cross, ignoring its disgrace, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*' Hebrews 12.1-2

So be it, and to God alone be the glory in all that we become. Amen

N. P. Uden  
1<sup>st</sup> April 2018

---

<sup>3</sup> For these adverbs associated with God being with us, see Samuel Wells 2015 *A Nazareth Manifesto: being with God* Oxford: Wiley Blackwell pages 125 ff