

**Service of Holy Communion on 06/07/2008 (7th Sunday after Trinity)
with guests from the World Council of Churches in Christchurch Kassel.**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Sermon text: Acts 2: 42-47

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.

44 All who believed were together and had all things in common;

45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,

47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

How can we recognize the church, dear brothers and sisters? No, I am not talking about the building which we can point out, because it has an architectural style distinguishing it from all other houses. The question goes deeper. Are there any characteristics or features which indicate to us, here is the Church of Jesus Christ?

In the course of Christian history various different answers have been emphasised. There were good reasons for this, because it was repeatedly necessary to re-define the difference between the church and other forms of community life. And it was obvious that there was more involved than simply listing various external features. One had to be in a position to describe what the church represents.

The Nicene Creed, which we in the Protestant church recite on high feast days, and also today at this service, names four characteristics with regard to the Church: We believe in "one, holy, Christian and apostolic Church." According to Christian tradition, wherever these four attributes apply we may be certain that we are dealing with the Church of Jesus Christ. That sounds very abstract and theological – which is also the case. The difficulties begin when we look at the concrete implications, for example for the unity of the church; the great number of different Christian churches is so conspicuous. In a similar way we may well ponder on the situation of the other three attributes.

The Reformation always held these four basic characteristics of the Church of Jesus Christ in high esteem. The intention was not to form a new church, but

rather to renew the old one! But at the same time the Reformation gave a broader, more open reply to the question of how the church may be recognized. The church is the “assembly of all believers, in which the Gospel is purely preached and the Sacraments are rightly administered according to the Gospel.” That is stated in the Augsburg Confession (Confessio Augustana VII), the basic confession of faith in our church. It is not necessary to know any more, in order to judge what is a church and what is not. Wherever the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed by biblical witness, and baptism and Holy Communion are practised accordingly, there the church is present! As Protestants we have no difficulty at all in acknowledging other believers as *churches* and not merely as “ecclesial communities”, as long as these two criteria are fulfilled. In our understanding, no more is necessary. All of us together comprise, despite our differences, the “one, holy, Christian and apostolic church.”

The reformers did not simply “invent” this perception of the understanding of the church. They were perfectly entitled to refer back to the tradition of the early Christians.

In our sermon text from the Acts of the Apostles we have heard what was typical for the first Christian congregation in Jerusalem: They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. That describes precisely the two basic expressions of Christian faith: the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as passed on by the Apostles, and the celebration of the reality of the risen and exalted Christ in Holy Communion, expressing the new fellowship in Him which overcomes all boundaries. The everyday life of those first Christians consisted entirely of worship and praise. All their activity was concentrated on giving God the glory. That was what made them a church - a most lively church!

That may well seem strange to us today. At least here in Germany not much is left over from this initial enthusiasm. We are much more reserved: our behaviour is more orderly, more settled, in a word – normal. Nowadays you have to look at other parts of the world to see how the power of the Holy Spirit moves and changes people. Our guests here could tell us a lot from their own experience.

Even so, we should not keep complaining about our situation here. For the Church of Jesus Christ is recognizable here, too! If you look closely, you will find not just ashes, but fire as well.

As we have heard, the life which the first Christians led after Pentecost was hugely attractive. They were popular, and the congregation increased. They were growing, not diminishing. That was a consequence of the tangible *vitality* of their faith. But it was also due to their *otherness*. Whoever confessed Jesus Christ as Lord of the world and of his own life proved to be refreshingly different to those around him. Belonging to and living in the church was

something new and unique.

We can connect to that, both here and in other countries. If we do not merely experience the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a piece of cultural heritage from the past, but as a force which determines and permeates our life in the present, transforming us and uniting us with other Christians, then the churches everywhere will gain in attractiveness. Who is to say that things will always go downhill? We should not be accused of having so little faith, dear sisters and brothers! No, even our congregations here can increase. We do not need to leave growth to the charismatic movements alone. There is no reason why the Lord of the Church should not add to our numbers here, too, so that they feel at home and find certainty of salvation with God.

Admittedly, we have to look at ourselves critically and ask whether it was our own thinking and action which helped to obscure the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Gone is the unanimity enjoyed by the Christians in Jerusalem as they fervently celebrated the Lord's Supper every day. After the long history of the church in this world, it is no longer possible for us to emulate them in Jerusalem; we no longer share the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper with each other. It is too closely connected with all that separates us. Many people regret that, and I do, too! But we cannot recreate by force those experiences which were vital for the original fellowship of Christians. Our respect for one another forbids it. But nonetheless we trust in the power of the Holy Spirit, hoping that He will lead us into all truth. And because this is so, we are not prepared to aim at less than this: to break the bread and share the wine "here and there" in our churches – full of joy and across all religious boundaries!

The first Christians upheld one another and were inspired by the idea of mutual support. No one should suffer, nobody should miss out, no one should be overlooked. That was early Christian communism, which unfortunately did not last, as we have to admit – so that the Apostle Paul was later forced to organize a large-scale collection for the Christian community in Jerusalem. But that does not alter the fact that for those Christians it was clear that faith finds its expression in looking after others.

How do we recognize the church, dear sisters and brothers? In the apostolic preaching of the Gospel, in the celebration of the sacraments according to the Gospel – and now we can add in all clarity, in the experience of solidarity with other Christians.

The ecumenical movement is never interested just in matters of belief, even though this is very important, but also in concrete activity born of that faith. The World Council of Churches, to whose guests we extend a hearty welcome in Germany, is the place where both can be fulfilled: the *struggle for unity*, for a common understanding of the Gospel and of worship, and the *solidarity*, mutual support and understanding. In that way we *are* the Church of Jesus Christ! That is our mission and the promise we have.

