

Europe and the Christian Conscience

St John the Baptist, 7 November, 2004

I am not going to talk about the myths of bent bananas or straight cucumbers, or even about the euro or the proposed new constitution. My theme is 'reconciliation'.

Indeed, the very idea of the European Union (as we now call it) was born out of a great act of reconciliation: from the determination that the countries of Europe, and particularly France and Germany should never go to war again. What better time to remember it than in Armistice week. With our long uninterrupted history and freedom from invasion, it is easy for us to underestimate the way in which the countries of continental Europe have been scared by war, culminating in the horrors of World War II. It was to ensure that could not happen again that the founding fathers like Adenauer and Schumann planned to link the economies of Europe more closely together. Much of their thinking had roots in their Christian faith. Germany and France have indeed been reconciled: no longer enemies but allies. They are now the leading partners in the European Union. Some would say that they have too dominant a role, but that is partly because this country has been so reluctant to work alongside them. Politicians talk about 'being at the heart of Europe' but the reality is that we joined late and have been halfhearted partners ever since. Indeed, as we know, there is now a political movement that would take us out of Europe altogether. In my view that would be very much against the interests of both Britain and Europe.

In recent years, the European Union has been engaged in a second great task of reconciliation. Again, we need to remember that for over 40 years, Europe was divided by two conflicting ideologies and by an impenetrable wall, with armies and nuclear arsenals massed on either side. With the collapse of communism, and the hold that the former Soviet Union had on the countries of central and Eastern Europe, countries like Poland and Hungary were desperate to throw off the artificial barriers, which the Soviet empire had created. They wanted to strengthen their newly formed democracies, to ensure human rights, so long neglected, and to be part of a peaceful family of nations. The epitome of that desire was to become a part of the European Union. Slowly but inexorably, the EU negotiated the terms on which they could join, and in May of this year they became full members. Running a Union of 25 members will not be easy, but, in conscience, it had to be done. "The enlargement of the EU is a cause for hope. It is an opportunity we should all grasp to add a new layer to the multiple identity we enjoy in the 21st century Europe".

And now there is a third challenge for the EU – the integration of such a wide variety of peoples, cultures and religions. The EU already has over 40 million Muslims, and, if as seems likely, Turkey becomes a member, that will rise to 100 million. There are, of course, many other ethnic groups as well. Throughout Europe there are tensions: anti-semitic attacks in France, attacks against Muslims and Asians in this country. Where minorities find it hard to get jobs, is it any wonder that they turn to crime and extremism? That, in turn, fuels the anti-migrant populism that is so widespread both here and elsewhere. Arresting the downward spiral is, says one commentator, "the single most urgent task of European domestic politics in the next decade. We may already be too late".

Last weekend, Colin and I were at a conference in Salisbury about 'Public Values, Faith Communities and the New Europe'. The theme that struck me most, and it came from Muslim and Jewish as well as Christian speakers, was the story of Abraham and Sarah, offering hospitality to all comers whether they were strangers or not. We need to follow this example, working for a Europe which is open, tolerant

and welcoming, ready to treat all as God's children. As the Imam said, 'no act of kindness is ever wasted'.

So what kind of Europe do we want? You may be wondering by now what this is all about. You thought you came to church this morning to worship and pray, and here you are being treated to a political diatribe. Well, apart from having been asked to give this talk, I do believe profoundly that most political issues have a moral, and therefore a Christian dimension. We may not always agree on the solutions, but it behoves us as Christians to view them, not selfishly, but with an eye to the common good. I take for granted issues of democracy, human rights, social welfare and the rule of law; and speak briefly about three other issues – the environment, the treatment of asylum seekers; and relations with the Third World.

Caring for the environment is part of Christian stewardship. It is not something that can be done by one country or even one continent. Global warming is a global issue and one where the EU has been in the forefront of trying to achieve agreement on international action. Some can be left to national governments. But others, like river pollution, should, and are being tackled at the European level. We need more action, not less, to protect God's creation.

I have already spoken about the troubles of refugees and asylum seekers. Britain is not alone in seeking to limit immigration or worrying about how best to handle asylum seekers. Faced with widespread public anxieties, many of them exaggerated by the media, all European countries have introduced controls. Contrary to popular belief, our controls are among the most draconian. The solution has to be a European one and our task as Christians is to see that prejudice, xenophobia and lack of sympathy do not carry the day.

Thirdly, we need to ask how well the EU exercises its international responsibilities towards developing countries. The answer is a curate's egg. On financial aid, the EU does well. Although still not meeting UN targets, the EU is far and away the largest aid donor in the world, some of it given by the different member states and some of it by the EU itself; not always well administered, but improving. As regards trade, the EU is a strong supporter of the current efforts in the World Trade Organization to improve the conditions of trade for poorer countries and on the whole has done quite well so far. Its Achilles heel is agriculture. I spent a large part of my career in dealing with the Common Agricultural Policy and all my retirement criticizing it. There is no doubt that the large subsidies which the EU gives to its farmers damage the efforts of poorer countries to develop their own production and to improve their lot by exporting commodities which they can grow efficiently. Aid agencies in this country like Christian Aid are rightly critical of the way in which the ED has dragged its feet. Changes are being made to the CAP which will help the poorer countries, but we need to keep up the pressure for more to be done, and quickly.

I want finally to say something about the question of sovereignty, a subject that worries a lot of people in this country. I want to suggest that, for Christians, this should not be a big issue. The New Testament gives us, in Galatians (3.28), a vision of the Kingdom of God which puts down racial, national and class barriers and reminds us that God's ultimate purpose is to draw all nations together in a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 5.9). The nation state must take second place to that. Indeed many theologians would condemn the nation state, and especially nationalism, as inimical to the Gospel. The Second Vatican Council put it this way; "Citizens should cultivate a generous and loyal spirit of patriotism but without narrow-mindedness so that they will always keep in mind the welfare of the whole human family". With so much xenophobia in to-day's press, this is a lesson we all need to remember. Does this legitimize the EU? Not necessarily, but it certainly encourages us to look at it in a new light. Allow me to quote from a recent lecture by John Arnold, former Dean of Durham:

“Human beings are put into a right relationship with God, not by nation or race, by language or culture, and especially not by law, but by responding with trust to the love of God, by meeting grace with faith. This does not mean the repudiation of other relationships or the loss of other identities. It does mean their enlargement and transformation. The implications for contemporary anxieties about loss of identity seem clear. No one should be asked to exchange his or her identity as British or English for an identity as European. We may, however, acquire not an alternative but an additional identity as Europeans”.

And so to conclude. Back in 1967, the then British Council of Churches, endorsing a report on ‘Christians and the Common Market’, as we called it then, said: “A community which counts among its aims the reconciliation of European enmities, the responsible stewardship of European resources and the enrichment of Europe’s contribution to the rest of mankind, is to be welcomed as an opportunity for Christians to work for the achievement of these ends”. That about sums up what I have wanted to say this morning. But, if you would like a more up to date version, let me commend to you an excellent pamphlet just published by a Methodist, Professor Ken Medhurst, and entitled ‘Faith in Europe’. I have put a copy on the book table at the back. I will close with his words: “In the context of contemporary Europe, he writes,the Christian call to ...sacrificial service...suggests a willingness, as far as possible, to work with other faiths, and none, for the building of an outward-looking and more just continent The challenge is huge. But we have the Gospel’s assurance that Gods promises are to be trusted.” Amen