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Europe—Any Dream Will Do?*

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Our purpose this afternoon is to give thanks for the past and to look to the future. Therefore we shall be wise if we turn to our inheritance, the foundations on which we are based, the rock from which we are hewn. Let us start by reflecting on our readings and on other parts of this service.

The biblical witness in our service is from the Psalms and the prophet Isaiah.¹ There are many parts of the Old Testament which are paradoxical, even contradictory. This is particularly true of the psalms and the prophets. Some appear to believe in an adversarial God who is on one side and definitely not on the other. There are other parts, however, which express a rather different faith in God who is God of *all* the peoples and who stands in judgment and mercy above all the nations including Israel. Such passages contain a vivid picture of a world over which God is sovereign, where all the peoples and races and nations bring their gifts and where even the natural order joins in the celebration.

Let us now hold this biblical vision in mind as we look at today's Europe and try to discern our role within it. Three preliminary points may be made.

- (i) The vision is messianic – that is, it is about the 'not yet' – but it is also about the here and now. It does not refuse to dream because of the horrors by which we are surrounded. It provides a guide to where we should try to go while being realistic that we have certainly not got there yet.
- (ii) The poets and prophets hold a wide vision but they retain a passionate love and loyalty for their own country and traditions. There is here a deep belief in the heritage they have received. As Alfred Lord Tennyson said, 'That man's the best cosmopolite who loves his native country best'.
- (iii) These biblical texts come from the scriptures which Christians and Jews share. This is very significant. It is significant, firstly, for what we may call 'religious' reasons – the shared faith in the God of history. There is great spiritual power here as men and women of faith face new tasks and seek their vocation; and this spiritual partnership can be widened to include also that third great monotheistic faith – Islam – with the Muslim community now settled in nearly all the countries of Europe. We should also remember the insights of the great religions of the East whose members are also to be found in many of our cities. We do not deny our own distinctive beliefs by heeding the wisdom of others. It is significant, secondly, for what we may call political or historical reasons. For

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many centuries the Jews did not have a nation of their own, and in modern times they have experienced a deliberate and brutal attempt to destroy them. More recently, Jews have joined others in having their own territory, government, military forces, flag. All of us can learn important lessons from these experiences, especially as we ponder the role of the nation state in the new Europe.

So much for the biblical ingredients. I propose to reflect at rather greater length on George Bell – bishop of Chichester at the time of the Second World War – both on today's reading² and also on other things he said and did during his remarkable ministry.

Bell was a man who may truly be described as a prophet. His love and loyalty to his own country were beyond dispute: but he was always ready to affirm the laws of God under which all the nations stood – including his own. *God Above the Nations* was indeed the title of a distinguished sermon he preached at this university on 18 June 1939. And in the war which broke out less than three months later he demonstrated that prophetic calling in many ways – in deed as well as in word.

It was again in this very church that Peter Walker, then bishop of Ely, preached the sermon for Commemoration Sunday in 1980 when he made Bell – a distinguished son of this university – the subject of his address. With copious quotations from Bell, the bishop underlined the importance of the spiritual recovery of Europe, and he called not only on churches and other faith communities but also on universities to play their part in this process.

Bell made the broadcast from which today's reading comes just after the fall of Nazism; and there is a remarkable parallel between the fall of Nazism and the fall of communism, just as there is between the hot war, the time of Bell's best-remembered ministry, and the cold war during which Keston earned its fame. The end of tyranny – welcome as it is – releases new forces previously held down by force. The parallels are well illustrated by the echoes of the thoughts of Bell that we catch again and again in the circumstances of today. I will offer three examples.

The Need for Repentance

The reading to which we have just listened was, as you know, from a broadcast to Germany at the first Christmas after the end of the War. In the final words of that broadcast Bell declares:

'We all have to recognise that we have fallen short ... and we have to repent. No nation, no church, no individual (should we add no college or institute?) is guiltless. And as we would be forgiven ourselves, we must all be forgiving. Without repentance, without forgiveness, there can be no regeneration.'

Compare this with the message to the churches which came out of the great European Ecumenical Assembly which gathered at Basel at the feast of Pentecost in the pivotal year of 1989³ – not after the fall of Nazism when Bell spoke, but as communism was beginning to totter. I recall our friend John Arnold – the dean of Durham who was then vice-president of the Conference of European Churches and is now its president – patiently but firmly guiding the huge gathering of delegates from all the churches of Europe East and West through that lengthy statement. At its heart was a recognition of the damage we have done to one another and the need for corporate repen-

tance. Indeed, if there is one word which echoes through the message it is ‘metanoia’ – change of heart.

The French Protestant philosopher Paul Ricoeur, writing a few years ago about the ‘unprecedented’ new scene in Europe, provides us with another variant on this theme. He offers us three words to guide us. ‘Translation’: not just literal translation but the attempt to communicate to one another our different ways of thinking, our different stories. ‘Exchange’: taking on board those signals, those stories from sources other than our own. And because those exchanges inevitably carry the memories and scars of hurts and brutalities, the final word has to be ‘Pardon’.⁴

Such are some of the echoes of Bell’s words in 1945.

A Single Continent

The second theme we hear in Bell’s words is a call for the unity of Europe. Even by the time he spoke those words the dynamic was already at work which was to divide the continent into two blocs. Indeed, it was only three months later, almost exactly 50 years ago today, that Churchill coined the phrase ‘the Iron Curtain’ in his speech at Fulton, Missouri; a curtain which was to remain closed until that pivotal year of 1989.

I remember well in that same year the visit Mikhail Gorbachev made to the Council of Europe on 6 July. Judge his place in history as we may, there were many of us who found his speech on that day remarkable and, indeed, moving. He spoke on the theme which he was frequently addressing at that time – the Common European Home. He declared he had no plan for the house in his pocket and could not tell us what it should be built of, still less how it should be furnished. But he outlined some of its features – legal, diverse, collaborative, humanitarian, and peaceful. In particular he surprised us all by his frequent use of the word ‘spiritual’ and his references to values, some different but others held in common. Remember that he came as president of the Supreme Soviet and general secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR. It occurs to me, nevertheless, that, had he known of him, he might almost have quoted Bell.

Many of Gorbachev’s hopes have not materialised; or not yet. But his declaration that the Cold War was over still remains true, and we must hope and pray it may continue to do so. We find ourselves no longer living in a continent inexorably and permanently divided.

Structures are Not Enough

The third and last of Bell’s themes which hold together his vision and ours 50 years later is the sense that structures, essential as they are, are not enough: they need, as he described it, ‘soul and life’. Now the story of Western Europe since the end of the War has been very much a story of building new structures. And, let us not forget, there was a vision – ‘soul and life’ – at the start of this story. The Council of Europe was based on a belief in the rule of law and human rights; and when six of its members – not this country – moved on to found the Coal and Steel Community the preamble to the treaty was almost lyrical in its vision. ‘Resolved to substitute for age-old rivalries the merging of their essential interests ... leading on to a broader and deeper community ... [giving direction] to a destiny henceforward shared’. And then came the Treaty of Rome, the evolution of the EEC, the eventual dropping of the middle ‘E’ to try to affirm that this community was more than economic; and the

Single European Act of 1986, the provisions of which were to be achieved by 31 December 1992. And Maastricht to give the economic union a political structure. And the many enlargements. And the further enlargements now in the pipeline. And now this year – this month, as the intergovernmental conference opens in Turin – the EU faces its most testing decisions and faces what is probably its biggest crisis.

It was as these developments of recent years proceeded that it began to dawn on many people, most importantly the then president of the Commission, that the original vision had by then faded and that in any case it had never been adequately shared at the ground floor. They called on us all to seek – Bell's word was to liberate – the soul of Europe, without which, as Jacques Delors declared, 'the game will be up'. A formal process was inaugurated, with a budget from Parliament and the support of the Commission. This call to seek or to liberate the soul of Europe came first from the West – from the former president of the Commission; and we can see how it essentially emerges from a new edifice, already far advanced in the building, of economic and political union. It would however be wise if the Commission and Parliament of the EU did in fact now recognise that such a programme should not be limited to the current EU member states but, as we have to learn how to live as a single continent, should be extended to the whole of Europe. (It is worth noting that, although his own experience was chiefly in the West, Bell always included Russia and her neighbours when he spoke of Europe.)

Like her neighbours, Russia now at last has a place in the structures. In January 1996 the Council of Europe made the agonisingly difficult, ambiguous and risky decision to admit Russia as a member. It is hardly surprising that opinions vary as to the wisdom of this decision; but it is made, and it only underlines the importance of liberating the soul of the whole of Europe and not only that of the Union. In this task, I believe bodies such as Keston have a significant part to play.

From another country which was formally cut off from us in the West comes another variation on the same theme. By common consent the outstanding speech at the 1993 summit of the Council of Europe in Vienna was that of Václav Havel, president of the Czech Republic and former dissident and political prisoner. He spoke of the erroneous belief that

the great European task before us is purely technical, administrative or systemic, and that all we need to do is to come up with ingenious structures, new institutions and new legal norms and regulations: the belief, in short, that it is enough endlessly to discuss, or ... to argue over technical matters without ever attempting to change anything in ourselves.

'The Europe of today', he went on, 'lacks an ethos, imagination, generosity, the ability to see beyond its own interests.' Once again, we find the very same theme in George Bell more than half a century earlier. In his sermon in this church to which I have already alluded Bishop Peter Walker quoted Bell's comment on a plan back in 1925 to set up an ecumenical body, a plan which is however of more general application: 'Institutions and organisations, laws and decrees, however good and necessary they may be, remain impotent; they are empty shells, dead bodies without soul and life, if they are not animated by a spirit which prays and believes, loves and hopes.' Havel: 'a spirit of imagination and generosity'; Bell: 'a spirit which prays and believes, loves and hopes'.

So far we have been examining our inheritance, in the light of biblical and contemporary sources. Now let us try to discern some signals for the future, bearing in mind that all too often we are confronted with the paradoxical situation that by the time

we know where we ought to be going it's too late to go there. We are all having to readjust our instruments as we try to navigate on a new stream of time since the events of 1989 and the years which followed: the disintegration of the USSR; the rise of new national or ethnic identities, or more accurately, the rediscovery of old ones; the tragic explosions in the Balkans; and, at the very same time, what had seemed to be the predetermined evolution of the EEC towards its ever-closer union encountering its first real opposition. Dramatic changes of scene confront us and challenge us to think afresh about our purposes. This is true equally for politicians (although sadly few of them admit it), for all kinds of political scientists and commentators, for church people, for all who are concerned about what is happening to our continent and its several parts. It is certainly true for Keston. We all need to readjust our instruments. I would like to offer three guidelines for this readjustment. I know how closely they accord with the way Keston is already setting its course and I am therefore confident they will not be too late to be useful.

There is One Europe Now, not Two

Different people and groups have different experiences, different expertise, different relationships. We all need to build on this variety and bring our distinctive gifts into the common task. Russia and its ex-communist neighbours present such an enigma to all of us that the experience of such bodies as Keston over many years is a precious resource.

Oppression of man by man comes in many forms. It is not the monopoly of communists – or fascists. The West as well as the East stands under judgment. *Centesimus annus* shocked some, when it appeared in 1991, by its evenhandedness in recognising the oppression inherent in western systems as well as the oppression inherent in Marxism–Leninism. Now that the commercial values of free Europe are being so assiduously exported to the East we must hold up the totality of our life – including its mercantile life, itself capable of such great good – to the judgment and mercy of the God of creation.

The great new fact of our time is that Europe is no longer two. It is to the task of liberating the soul of one Europe – single now but even more diverse – that we must pool our energies.

We Must Work in Partnership

I have mentioned the Basel Assembly. There is to be a second great gathering of all the churches in 1997. Its theme is to be 'Reconciliation – gift of God and source of new life'. The Assembly is to be the focus of the work of all our churches and other bodies seeking a new Europe, a place where wounds are truly healed and peace and justice may reign as in the vision of the prophets.

A particular responsibility is thus placed on the churches. If the vision of European unity has faded in recent years, so, I fear, has the vision of Christian unity. The ecumenical vision must be rekindled if we are to serve our generation faithfully. Our continuing separation is an even greater scandal in these days than it was when our forebears – including George Bell – first set their hearts on reunion. Remember the stirring last verse of his hymn we have sung this afternoon: 'New lamps be lit, new tasks begun; And the whole church at last be one'.

Moreover, this is the moment also to recall our fellowship with the other faiths of Europe and the world. We have much of our history to hold up to God for his

healing. We have great need for the reciprocal forgiveness for which Bell called 50 years ago. Keston in particular has tried to serve the cause of religious freedom for all, not just for Christians. On such a foundation partnerships can be more firmly built. Keston has also been a means whereby those who are persecuted may know that they are not alone. The fellowship of shared suffering is very strong; and in a very poignant and paradoxical way, it can also be the occasion for joy.

We Must at all Costs Keep the Dream

‘Any dream will do’ goes the song in *Joseph and his Technicolour Dreamcoat*. But it’s not true. We must dream the right dream. And the dream is far more difficult to get right than we may imagine. Hilaire Belloc had a colourful, romantic and hugely attractive dream. It was the rebirth of the Christendom of Charlemagne and of the Middle Ages when, as Belloc put it, ‘the Church was Europe and Europe was the Church’. The dream cannot be so marvellously simple, however. Europe is diverse, plural, multicoloured and multifaith. The dream is something we must share and work out together. That sense of ‘the mystery of things’, that sense of transcendence, indeed that sense of God, of the God of all the nations and peoples and races, can be positively deepened by what we learn from others. We do not deny our own beliefs if we are in fellowship with other faith communities. Europe may indeed be secular, but it is not faithless.

The heart of the matter is, after all, extremely simple. It is to do with human friendship within the embrace of a loving, holy, just and merciful God. This kind of friendship has been Keston’s most precious product over the last 25 years. I think it will be over the next 25 years as well. This was the friendship at the heart of George Bell’s witness, as he kept in touch with his German friends during the War, praying in spirit with Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he prepared for his death at Flossenburg and caring for his Jewish guests who were refugees from the Nazis. This is the friendship which breaks through every barrier of culture or language or politics or religion. I fear we cannot follow Belloc’s view of Europe. But we can wholeheartedly follow him when he declares that the most precious thing of all is ‘laughter and the love of friends’.

Václav Havel once said that we had believed that politics was the art of the possible. No, he said, it is the art of the impossible. And he should know. The pundits do not always get it right. The forecasters do not know it all. It is not determinism that makes the world go round. The God of surprises is with us. We may still hold to the dream of a Common European Home with human friendship – laughter and the love of friends – as its mortar, and each play our own small part in trying to build it.

Notes and References

¹ Psalm 67; Isaiah 60.

² From Bishop Bell’s Christmas broadcast to Germany in 1945.

³ *Final Document* of the European Ecumenical Assembly ‘Peace with Justice’, Basel, 2 June 1989, section IV, paras 41–45.

⁴ Peter Koslowski (ed.), *Imaginer l’Europe: le marché intérieur européen, tâche culturelle et économique* (Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1992), the chapter by Paul Ricoeur, pp. 107–118.