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OPENING SERMON

"Behold, I make all things New".

Then he who sat on the throne said, "Behold! I am making all things new!" And he said to me, "Write this down; for these words are trustworthy and true. Indeed", he said, "they are already fulfilled. For I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end".

(Rev. 21:5-6)

THE DIVINE PROMISE

The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches has had the courage and the faith to rest this Assembly on one of the divine promises, a promise which points to the future and to the end of time, and yet is a promise in the present continuous tense. For that which is promised (Rev. 21:3-4) is the complete and final fulfilment of what is already available as present experience. We do know the New Jerusalem which is never man's achievement. God's presence with men became history in the Word become flesh. The fact of God's comfort and victory in the midst of sorrow, pain and death is known fact.

"I am making all things new". - "Indeed, they are already fulfilled". Both parts of our text truly belong together. For the end event is not an "It" but a "He": He who is the Alpha and the Omega and every letter of the alphabet in between. Therefore, are we always surrounded by the signs to be seen now of what God will accomplish hereafter.

St. Luke reports our Lord as calling attention, in His opening sermon at Nazareth, to two people - a widow of Zarepath in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian - both Gentiles, and outside the promises to Israel, who were chosen by God to carry the Sign of His unfettered mercy. (Lk.4:25-27) So, in every generation, God chooses whom He wills as His sign-bearers to carry convincing testimony to some aspect of His working. At this service we salute the memory of one such sign-bearer, who carried the sign with which he was entrusted in such a way "That he who runs may read." (Hab.2:2) Martin Luther King will be remembered wherever and whenever the cause of human dignity is celebrated, wherever and whenever man's search for community is espoused. The newness that God promises is the newness of the New Man, Jesus Christ, in whom and into whom all grow, each separately and all together, to mature manhood. (Eph.4:3,15)

The song of the movement which Martin Luther King led was, "We shall overcome some day." Yes, we shall because the victory is already promise and potency in Jesus Christ. In Him, and because of Him, all men will find their humanity; both those who deny it to others and those to whom it is at present denied. "Deep in my heart I do believe" that He does make all things new.

We cannot, at this Assembly, evade the actual hour at which we stand. A crisis of faith has overtaken the churches more rigorous perhaps than was ever true before. Structures of church-life and congregational-worship are under serious questioning. The Bible has increasingly ceased to be a book to be listened to. It is asked whether even Jesus points beyond man to God. And all this is happening within and to a Christian community which is once again, and in so many parts of the world, "a people who are not a people." (cf. 1 Pet.2:10) The hour is marked everywhere by the cross of rejection.

Not only so, the hour is also marked everywhere by the accusation that the churches themselves are standing aloof from the actual world in which men live. The judgement is constantly made that the Christian presence is not convincing at the frontiers of human life where the struggles are taking place to push these frontiers back to make life ampler for all. And, in church and world themselves as well as between them, there is that growing impatience and frustration, mistrust and antagonism, which is resulting in persecution and martyrdom, irresponsibility and fanaticism, and the easy resort to personal and social violence.

And yet, just because this is the situation, God's promise to make new must become explosive in our midst. We must become captive to the vision which sees beyond the cross, His and ours and the world's, and discern that which the cross itself makes possible. We must be alert to hear the cry, which rises from the ground, of the blood which has been shed of man by brother-man, whether by reason of rejection or retaliation; and hear the divine response to that cry (Gen. 4:10). He who has eyes to see can see and say, "Behold". He who has ears to hear can hear and whisper, "Listen".

THE BELIEVING COMMUNITY

The main demand of this promise which we have made our own at this Assembly is that we should believe in it. "Write this down", is how the text reads, "for these words are trustworthy and true".

"Of one thing I am certain", says St. Paul writing to the Philippians, "the One who started the good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Christ Jesus". (Phil. 1:6) Present experience is not only a foretaste of the future, it is also the guarantee of it. God does not leave unfinished, He does not give up half-way. Or, to quote St. Paul again, ".... not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful;....." (2 Thess. 3:3) - so that we can believe in Him apart from any belief in ourselves.

And that precisely is what leads to worship; for worship is the truest exercise in and expression of believing. The worship of God is that human activity which, above all else, moves away from the worshipper, beyond the worshipping community, even beyond humanity itself, to Him. Is not formal worship, some ask, an irrelevant waste of time? Perhaps it can be so construed. For candles and flowers are as irrelevant as the song of birds, hymn and chant are as non-utilitarian as a lover's kiss, prayers and litanies are just words - cheap as children's smiles. And yet, that is the whole point of it - that we who are poor bring to God who lacks nothing that which costs us nothing to bring, but which

express to Him our faith and devotion; and, before the world, our dependence. "To be a witness", says one of the secular saints of our time, "is to be a living mystery. It means that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist".

St. Paul spoke of himself and other apostles as being a spectacle. (1 Cor. 4:9) They were accused of doing foolish things. One thing that makes the Christian community a spectacle today, in a world claiming adulthood, is that it is a people given to worship. At this Assembly we shall hear many speeches, pass many resolutions, adopt many reports: but if we shall have established that here we worshipped because here God drew near to us and we to Him, then we shall have given proof that we did hear His promise and believed Him. This service is not just an opening ceremony, it represents the essential posture of this Assembly.

The Christian has to learn to be a good neighbour, the Christian community has to learn serious involvement in the life of the world, the Christian news has to be recognized as good news in the secular culture of our time: but none of these will be authentically Christian if they to whom these belong do not at all times point beyond themselves to Him - certainly not to some private Christian deity who is collecting Christians, but the God of "all things" who is renewing creation whose will and promise is that "all things are made new".

Jesus insisted that men must pass from our good deeds to an awareness of the glory of the Father. (Matt. 5:16) Cannot we see that this will not happen unless we ourselves are empty of our good deeds? And only true worship can accomplish that. Indeed, nothing else is required of us, or of any man, except an emptiness to be filled, a thirst to be slaked. "He gives to the thirsty as His free gift water from the water-springs of life". (Rev. 21:6)

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UNIVERSAL DESIGN

Thus far our attempt has been to listen to the text and to enter the mood in which to listen to it. We must now proceed so to dwell upon it as to find illumination for daily living and guidance into those ways of obedience which God has prepared for us. (Eph.2:10) And, what we find as individuals, we shall pray that we find also as an Assembly; so that by our work and worship here we shall rise to meet His promise, receive a fulfilment of it in our midst, and go from here girded for the tasks that lie ahead.

There is one emphasis we must make at the outset, that only those will believe what the Scriptures say about God and His ways who have known Him in their own lives. The promise which we ponder points to all mankind, but it will carry no conviction until we have allowed it to become promise fulfilled in us.

"The arms of love that compass me
Would all mankind embrace."

The power to which we point is past conceiving, the design of which we speak is beyond imagining, the mercy on which we rely transcends our faith: and yet we must be able to say, "We know Him of whom we speak, we know in whom we have believed". (Acts 17:23, 2 Tim. 1:12)

What will it mean to stake our all on the promise which our text contains, a promise which is universal in scope, eschatological in character, and contemporary in consequence.

Let us look first at this aspect of universality. In the Biblical record, the story told is indeed a story about all things. There is first the story of the nations - the migration of peoples, the rise and fall of empires, the human community in its struggles for peace and justice, societies in their search for power and freedom. - A story stretching from the Sumerian era right down to Roman times. And wedged within this story is the story of Israel through which God makes himself known as the God of all people - as concerned with Cain as with Abel, with Ishmael as with Isaac, with Nineveh as with Jonah; and as open to make Nebuchadnezzar or Cyrus the instruments of His purpose as he was to use Jehu or Hezekiah. (Is. 45:5) "He brought Israel from Egypt, He also brought the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir". (Amos. 9:7)

When the Psalmist declares that the Lord is God (Ps. 100:3), he is testifying to the ways in which Israel had been driven out of every form of tribalism in its belief and worship and brought to the realization that only He must be worshipped who is God of all. When Jesus arrives, the story climbs to its climax in a community in which "there is no question of Greek and Jew, barbarian, Scythian, freeman, slave; but Christ is all and is in all." (Col. 3:11)

Let us recognize that the universality of God's design does not destroy the distinction between His purpose and His method, the scope of His plan and the particulars through whom and through which that plan is brought to fulfilment. Many are called but few are chosen. Victory is for the many, the battle is for the few. Election is for mission and not all are the bearers of history.

As we know, the story does not stop where the Biblical record ends, for the missionary vocation of the Church picks it up and carries it to the ends of the earth along the trade routes of all the empires, and from there on through Churches in every land and through the ecumenical movement, in evangelistic occupation of every area of human life.

But even so, this is not the full scope of the story; for the story includes nature too. The curse in the garden of Eden speaks of man as eating bread by the sweat of his brow. (Gen. 3:19) This same bread is later broken by the Master and given to His disciples saying, "Take, eat, this is my body for you". (1 Cor. 11:24) Curse and blessing are held together in one developing purpose. The apostle hears creation groan in travail waiting for the new to be born (Rom. 8:22), the apocalyptist describes the end as a city where life lived in its full complexity will be lived in God. (Rev. 21:23-26) And, in that city, will be gathered the treasure of every Babylon which has been destroyed, the riches of every phase of human endeavour and community. "There shall never be one lost good;" though, equally certainly, every plant which is not of God's planting will be rooted up". (Matt. 15:13)

The scientist, who is also a mystic, discerns in the evolutionary process a thrusting upward until that process arrives at its origin; the man of faith, who is also a man of affairs, discerns a controlling purpose binding the confusions of human history and guiding it towards its goal.

"What a fathomless wealth lies in the wisdom and knowledge of God! How could a man ever understand His reasons for action or explain His methods of working? Source, Guide, and Goal of all that is - to Him be glory for ever! Amen." (Rom. 11:33-36)

ESCHATOLOGICAL EVENT

"But as for the cowards, the faithless and the corrupt, the murderers, the traffickers in sex and drugs; the worshippers of idols and all liars - their inheritance is the Second Death." (Rev. 21:8)

It is because the promise is universal that it is also eschatological, for otherwise the action would lack the element of judgement. "Before the great white throne and Him who sat on it", says the seer, "Heaven and earth fled and vanished". (Rev. 20:11) Earth was the scene of human rebellion, heaven the reservoir of demonic evil. These now pass away, and are replaced by a new heaven and a new earth. For the promise is not that all things will be renewed but that in the "New" all things are made new.

Thus we see the full force of the announcement that the promise to make new has already been fulfilled: for the New is a person - the Word by whom all things were made, the deed by whom all things were redeemed, the Wisdom and Mercy by whom all things will be judged. There is no automatic progress leading to a utopia, nor an immanent dialectic saving history from itself, nor an indiscriminate forgiveness receiving all into a non-moral beatitude. The promise is, "I make all things new": and for that "I" we wait, crying, "Maranatha", "Come, Lord Jesus". (Rev. 22:20)

The end is the end of a beginning already made, the complete transformation of all that already is, the direct substitution of the old by the new.

"Whate'er we hope, by faith we have,
Future and past subsisting now."

We are they "on whom the end of ages has come". (I Cor. 10:11) The figure often used in the New Testament to set out this truth is that of marriage. Marriage is the fulfilment of an engagement, its expected future; but the married state itself is completely new; nor is that future merely future, for it determines the engagement experience itself. No one denies interest in getting married because she is satisfied with the happiness of being engaged. We may not seek existential relevance as if the "Now" existed in its own right.

Our Lord's parable of the wheat and the tares leads into the very heart of the mystery we are probing. (Matt. 13:24-30) We are told that wheat represents the children of the Kingdom and that tares represent the children of the evil one. But obviously, not only is it impossible to say who are wheat and who are tares, but also we do not know who will be wheat and who will be tares on the day of harvest. The possibility of conversion is the heart of the gospel. Hence the warning that we give up attempting to distinguish between wheat and tares, and simply put all our energies into tending the field.

Also in this parable, which has so many merging perspectives, is the insistence on the simultaneous working of God and of the evil one. When St. Paul cries out at the existence and persistence of his old nature, it is this simultaneity which is the cause of his cry. (Rom. 7:22-23) The new man cries out because the old man is very much alive. And yet, not only has the new man been born, but already the new mercy is at work. We are justified by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8), because in Jesus it is a new question that is addressed to us. The old question was, "Have you obeyed?" The new question is, "Do you believe?" The answer to the old question still is "No", so that we are guilty; but, by the grace of God, the answer to the new question can be "Yes".

When Jesus prayed for Peter, He prayed that his faith fail not. (Lk. 22:32) That prayer was answered. He who was guilty also found mercy in the midst of condemnation. His faith was kept safe in spite of his sin. This mercy sanctifies now, empowering us for greater and more consistent obedience; it will accept us hereafter when we face that great white throne. Before that throne, says the seer, two books will be opened - the book of deeds with the record of our lives and the book of life with the record of His mercy. (Rev. 20:12)

So we remain held by Him who is first and last, who found us in love and called us to obedience; who through grace keeps us at our posts, not dismissing us from His service; and who at the last, will establish the work of our hands by the mighty working of His power.

CONTEMPORARY OBEDIENCE

Then he told me, "Do not seal up the words of prophecy in this book, for the hour of fulfilment is near. Meanwhile, let the evil-doer go on doing evil and the filthy-minded wallow in his filth, but let the good man persevere in his goodness and the dedicated man be true to his dedication". (Rev. 22:10-11)

Here is warning that men put their lives in order while there is still time, for no man knows when he will cross the line beyond which wrong-doing is simply the result of having lost the ability to repent. However, the obediences to which we are called do not lie just in choices we must make between right and wrong; they lie, rather, in the response we must bring to the new which God is constantly effecting in our midst. The book of prophecy is not sealed, the end breaks in from time to time, and again and again eternity lays claim to our lives.

The primary requisite for relevant obedience is that we be watchful to discern the breaking in of the new. We remember how Jesus insisted on watchfulness as an essential quality of the Christian life (Mk. 13:32-37), - an emphasis absent in every other religion. Only as we watch can we serve a living God, can we be prepared to follow where God leads.

Early in the life of the Church three incidents happened. Philip was led to baptize a proselyte who was an Egyptian (Acts 8:38), Peter was made eye-witness of baptism-by-the-Holy-Spirit of a Roman family even before their baptism by water (Acts 10:44), Paul was way-laid on the road to Damascus and shown that obedience to the law had no saving power, and that men were saved by Christ alone. (Acts 9:17) Three separate incidents - each in many ways a private incident - and yet together the cause of a tremendous revolution in the life of the Church and of the world. And why? Because those early Christians saw and obeyed what God was doing in their midst.

Everywhere in our world today events are taking place, big and small, which reveal that God is doing a new thing among us. There is a restlessness abroad in our lands which is challenging us as peoples and as churches to strike our tents and take to the road again. There is an extravagance in the ways in which evil is expressing itself showing that it senses its own predicament. There is a mercilessness in our ideological antagonisms which demands that men and women pay the ultimate price of their convictions, and the willingness of countless men and women to pay it. Through light and darkness, weal and woe, we sense God at work. (Is. 45:7) Oh for the eyes to see what God is doing and how He is doing it! Oh for the courage to move!--- and, let us remember this that we shall not find the way we must take just by arguing with one another here at this Assembly, or in other consultations and conferences. We shall find the way only

as we allow our very selves to be swept into the stream which in God's purpose will be tomorrow's flood. It took Paul three years alone in Arabia before he was engulfed. (Gal. 1:17-18)

One word more, and that is to draw attention to the different roles that will need to be played within the one obedience. In the revolution we have used as our illustration, Paul led the way into the new; James had the responsibility of maintaining the link between the old and the new, for even when God raises Children from stones, they are raised as children to Abraham (Matt. 3:9); Peter had the unenviable task of now supporting James and now supporting Paul, seeking in every way to maintain the unity of the whole mission; and, in the midst of it all, Barnabas fulfilled the role of friend - of Paul when Paul and Peter quarreled. (Gal. 2:11-13) John helped by keeping out of the controversy. The demands of obedience are never the same for all, for even within the same enterprise the responsibility of each will be different.

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In this last vision with which the Bible closes, and which has been the basis of our meditation, there is a final note to which we must listen and with which we shall end. In the eternal city which is man's final abode, there is no temple. (Rev. 21:22) The symbol of the sacred is not needed any more because it has accomplished its mission, and the sign of Abraham when he rendered tithes to Melchizedek is now fulfilled. (Gen. 14:18-20) The eternal city is a secular city.

But just because that is so, how important it is to remember that we have not arrived there yet! Here, the cities of our dwelling are places where God is remembered and forgotten, acknowledged and denied: so that here must be maintained the testimony to God as God which is essential to the health of human living, and the signposts of that testimony. The cry for human neighbourhood, for instance, is a legitimate cry; but it becomes a futile search when men confine themselves to humanity alone. Children belong to one another in freedom, and quarrel with one another without bitterness, because in the home are father and mother to whom they equally belong and whom they equally possess, "Hell is other people." Only God with other people can make heaven.

A man met Jesus and asked His help to get back a piece of land that his brother had stolen from him. (Lk. 12:13) Jesus said, "Is that all I mean to you? Is that all you have to ask of me? You have allowed your pre-occupation to dull your perception." Should Jesus ask us now what we would have Him do for us, what would we ask? Justice among men! Yes. Freedom for all from fear and want! Yes. Peace between peoples and reconciliation between individuals! Yes. The unity of the Church and the renewal of its mission! Yes.

But, above all, would we not ask for that which is the direst need of the human heart, and which He alone can supply?

"Show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied",
(John 14:8)