

Sermon Oxford 21 May 2017

Today I want to take you on a tour through the place of my upbringing, just like Paul who travelled through the city of Athens. I am from a town in the German-speaking part of Switzerland called St.Gallen. Even after having left St.Gallen almost 20 years ago my heart still beats for the place I grew up, my childhood home where I made my first steps, built lasting friendships and discovered the richness of Christian faith.

When I was a teenager, one of the main meeting places to gather with my friends was the statue of Vadian. The statue stood in the midst of the market square. We spent evenings sitting on its plinth and talking about life, love and the troubles with our teachers and parents. Lording over us was Joachim Vadian, discreetly eaves-dropping in on the conversations of the 20th century youth. Vadian was the reformer of St.Gallen. The Swiss humanist and medic was born in 1484. As a young man he went to study in Vienna where he later became a professor of poetry. It was the time when the ideas of Martin Luther spread throughout Europe beginning the reformation movement that would shake Europe to its foundation and change the church profoundly. Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich advanced the reformation in Switzerland, in fact, in a much more radical way than his German counterpart Luther. Vadian, a good friend of Zwingli's, eventually returned to St.Gallen to bring the reformation to his hometown too. Now this was a challenging venture! To understand why, I will take you back even further in history to the very beginning of St.Gallen.

The clue is in the name: St. Gallen or Saint Gall is named after a Saint. Gallus was a monk from the British Isles. According to his main vita, Gallus was born in Ireland in 550. He became one of the companions of Saint Columban who he had met at Bangor Abbey in Northern Ireland. Bangor today is the name of a bus stop in St.Gallen very close to the place where Gallus fell ill on his European pilgrimage. Columban continued his mission alone. According to the legend, a bear helped Gallus back up on his feet. And this is how St.Gallen was founded.

The Abbey of St.Gallen was founded in 719 and became an important religious and cultural centre which still attracts a great number of visitors today, mainly for its unique medieval library and the famous Plan of St.Gallen which became an archetype of monastic architecture and layout.

So let us return to Vadian and the time of the reformation. St.Gallen's identity was of course deeply shaped by its monastic centre, and Vadian's attempt to dissolve the monastery was not successful. This is why St.Gallen to this day is both, Reformed and Catholic. The main Protestant church was built literally next to the Abbey, which at the time was separated by the city wall. Now they stand directly next to each other. When I went to school, about half the class were Protestants, and the other half Catholics. I remember on days when the Catholic kids had to go to a nearby church for

confession, we Protestants kids would help them to come up with things to confess. It was the most natural thing for me and only later when I moved to the very Protestant city of Berne to study theology did I realise that it was quite a unique ecumenical environment to grow up in.

My childhood memories might have taken you back to the places of your childhood. Which statues and monuments, landscapes and churches, towns and cities have shaped your understanding of the world and of church? What did you or do you still take for granted?

If Paul walked through St.Gallen or any other medieval town or city in Europe today he might come to a similar conclusion to back then in Athens. Our churches and statues suggest a lively religious tradition. Paul might say to us: *"I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For I went to the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship."* But what or who do we actually worship? In this reformation year a number of new objects have flooded the market: the Protestant Church in Germany has commissioned a Luther playmobil figure which sold out immediately after its launch. Wine, chocolate, key rings, socks and pretty much every product imaginable carries the head of one of the great reformers of the 16th century. It seems to me that we have become distracted from worshipping God.

When Paul went to Athens to bring the good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ to Athenians, he discovered an altar with the inscription: "to the unknown God". The situation is not dissimilar today. Many people today hardly know who this God is that we worship in our churches. I am not sure whether „Playmobil Luther“ is the best approach to proclaim the unknown God. Paul says: *"The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything. God is not like gold or silver or stone. God is not an image formed by the art or imagination of mortals."*

During the reformation, images and statues were taken down. A great part of our cultural heritage was irreversibly destroyed, and you will find that the reformed churches in Switzerland are still exceptionally barren and empty. Images, so the reformers said, distract us from God. The reformers may have been a bit too radical in their attempt to destroy images, but it seems to me that 500 years later we are now moving in the opposite direction. Using the reformers' faces to celebrate the beginning of the reformation movement - I am not sure how pleased they would be!

I believe that the search for God starts within us. It starts with the unknown God of the Athenians and with our questions and longing for life and love. God is very close to us, always, and has already found us. Yet often we do not even know where to start searching. Maybe we search too hard. Maybe if we searched a bit less it would be easier

to find this unknown God. When I think back to my upbringing in St.Gallen, I fondly remember sitting with my teenage peers on Vadian's plinth without really knowing who this person was or what he represented. We talked about life, searching, longing and hoping. I believe that this is the beginning of our relationship with the unknown God that Paul came to proclaim.

Amen