

## Speech by Rev. Manuel Zimmermann Grey on Swiss National Day in London

31<sup>st</sup> July 2025, Crypt on the Green, St James Church, Clerkenwell

Thank you, Margrit, and thank you everybody who made this wonderful event happen. Also, thank you, I think, Margrit, for inviting me to give a speech tonight. If anything I say doesn't land well with you, as ever, please do speak to the organiser...

It's always a risk to speak in public. Particularly when you're from the church. Misunderstandings are almost inevitable. Like the other day when a passerby overheard me saying to someone: "Love your neighbour!". And the passerby responded, "So do I, Isn't she gorgeous!?"



But maybe as Swiss people living in the UK we're all over time getting used to being misunderstood. Charles Dickens once called the Swiss in London 'a curious colony' and why would he call us curious if he understood all our behaviourisms and mannerisms and ways of talking. We are a curious colony. Look at us with our cheese and red shirts and obsession with cleanliness and inability to decide on a common language and strange mix of confidence in our heritage while knowing nothing about our history other than 1291 and 1848. Brits don't get us. And we shouldn't expect them to get us either. We are a bit different – but of course not all of us, because it depends on the canton, and everybody is "self-responsible" for how different they want to be or not – we are free! We just know that we are chuffed to be Swiss, and that it's okay if we seem a bit curious.

In a few moments the Deputy Head of Mission of the Swiss Embassy will speak to us, and I thought the best thing I can do with my little speech is to draw out some of the similarities and differences between the Swiss Embassy in London and the Swiss Church in London. As Ambassadors of any country like to say to their fellows: 'We are all Ambassadors'. We all represent Switzerland in our daily lives, simply by sharing this background and identity. What we do reflects back on Switzerland, and we have the privilege to reflect something of Switzerland into the place where we live.

Now, there is more than one similarity between the Swiss Embassy and the Swiss Church. The first is a purely historical connection: There was a time when there was no Swiss ambassador in London, because there was no modern nation state (1848) and the closest thing there was to an official representation of "Switzerland" in the UK, for a time up to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was the Pfarrer / the Vicar / the Minister of the Swiss Church in London. If you wanted a passport or a stamp or be registered – it needed to happen through my predecessors. Whenever I feel bad about myself I try to remember that deep down I too am a diplomat, just like Alberto Groff!

But there is another similarity between the Embassy and the Church that I'd like to spend a few moments reflecting on, and this one is not historical but symbolic and theological. It's an insight which was popularised by an American guy called Stanley Hauerwas, whom Time Magazine once called 'America's best Theologian'. To which his answer was: "'Best' is not a theological category." If you search his videos on YouTube you'll find that he really does talk like that, and that he does have a strong contrarian edge.

And he thinks that churches should have an edge too, and be contrarian. He's a pacifist, for example. He thinks that churches shouldn't just roll over and fit in, but embody a different way of doing things. Christians should be 'resident aliens' (which is the title of his most famous book) and in this sense, like the Swiss in London, be curious colonies: embassies not of a different country, but of a different world altogether. Embassies of the world as it could be, and as it should be.

This is certainly how Christians in the first century AD, in the first generation after Jesus' crucifixion, understood themselves. They didn't have any grand church buildings or money or political power. They were a simple collection of people spread across the Roman empire who had nothing substantial in common with each other. Some were of Jewish background, some Greek and Latin, some had Roman citizenship, some didn't, some were wealthy, but the majority was poor – and yet they formed little groups and shared meals and rituals and stories about Jesus and actually cared about each other and for each other, as well as for those who didn't belong to their groups – which is what historians take to be the main reason these Jesus-folks spread across the Roman empire so quickly. They formed little colonies. Not because they shared a nationality, or some other identity trait, or political inclination, but because they believed to share something much deeper: the source of life that sustains them, the calling to “love your neighbour” (which I'm sure you do), a shared ultimate origin and destiny, a shared centre of their life: the human person Jesus Christ whom they actually believed to embody God's love on earth.

St Paul, who was a contemporary of Jesus, wrote to one of these colonies [the one in the Greek city of Philippi] **“Our citizenship is in heaven.”** This didn't mean that they thought that one day they would fly to heaven, just having Swiss citizenship doesn't mean that one day we'll end up there again for good. It means that their deeper identity, and the things they wanted to be known for, is shaped by that other place. That they wanted to be ambassadors of that other place to the place they live in. That they want to see the influence of that other place grow around themselves. This is why in church we still pray: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Churches are called to be embassies of heaven to earth, and are called to bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit which are – as St. Paul has it – love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Now anybody is involved in a church, and maybe especially those who aren't — would not think that this is the realised reality on the ground. And boy are they correct!

But at the very least it is an orientation, a necessary utopia, a dream, a hope, an attempt. As average humans we fail to make it happen. If the Spirit shows up and starts creating his good fruits, we may get a foretaste of how it could be. Then the forces of power, profit and performance of this world might here and there give way to the dynamics of healing, meaning, hope and love – in a world which needs these things now more than ever. Because we can't make anything happen ourselves, at church we pray ‘Come Holy Spirit’.

If you look at some of the most recent statistics of how people relate to matters of faith and church, it seems that more and more young people are beginning to discover for themselves the importance of such places of hope and orientation. In the time of the multiple crisis we're living through there seems to be a growing desire to be part of embassies of another world, so as not to lose hope for this one.

This can be a church, a synagogue, a mosque, or even Glastonbury, a no less utopian place. In this sense we are all, whether Christian or not, called to be ambassadors - not only of Switzerland to the UK, but of heaven to earth.

At church we have rituals and practices and celebrations which help us believe that eventually heaven will break through. Churches are experts in celebrating; we do it every Sunday, whether we feel like it or not! Because we know that we continually need to be reminded that God's love is stronger even than death. This is the Gospel. This is the frohe Botschaft.

On this note of “Botschaft” I will now hand over to the chief ambassador — not of heaven but of Switzerland. Though I think today is the one day on which we are allowed to say that the difference between heaven and Switzerland is only marginal.

Thank you for listening and please welcome Mr. Alberto Groff with great deal of heavenly noise.