

## **Evangelism and Ecumenism in the Light of God's New Creation**

### *An Introduction*

We will be working together in a workshop on Evangelism and Ecumenism in the context of the overall theme of this Institute "The New Creation". I will try to show some of the connections and of the tensions between these topics.

*1. To speak about the New Creation means to concentrate on what God will do or has already done.*

It is not by chance that the subject of a new creation which God will create emerges in the Old Testament during the time of the Exile and after it: There is no longer any prospect of Israel achieving anything on its own. God will create a new people in a new exodus (Is 43:19-21), he will establish a new covenant with his people and give an new heart to them (Jer 31:31-34; Ez 11:19; 36:26) and he will make new heavens and a new earth (Is 65:17). Personal renewal and the promise that God will renew all things are seen in the same eschatological perspective.

*2. To evangelise means to tell people what God will do and what God has already done through Jesus Christ.*

Evangelism, i.e. proclamation of the God's coming in Jesus Christ, is the announcement of the Kingdom of God. To evangelise means to proclaim that God's Kingdom, the reign of his love is "at hand", has come near as close as possible to our human needs through the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it means announcing that God's gracious reign will be fulfilled when he makes all things new and wipes every tear (Rev 21:1-5). New Creation is therefore a present reality in which we rejoice: "If any one is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see every thing has become new" (II Cor 5:17). And New Creation is also an eschatological reality which we are hoping and longing for.

*3. To evangelise means also to urge people to accept the new reality which was created by God in Jesus Christ for themselves of their own lives.*

The meaning and importance of this sentence is one of the most crucial issues in current New Testament exegesis and mission theology. The German New Testament scholar Ulrich Melle, who wrote a book on the topic of the New Creation in the Pauline theology translates the *en Christo* in II Cor 5:17: "Since Christ human beings belong to the New Creation!" The reality of the New Creation is not dependent on whether or not people believe it.

It seems to me Paul has another view. He writes in II Cor 5:18f: "All this is from God ... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself ...". But he continues: "So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us: we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God".

*4. To evangelise means to be ambassadors for Christ and to invite people into his discipleship, to become part of the one body of Christ.*

by its nature missionary and evangelistic. Jesus prays for his disciples: "... that they all may be one ... so that the world may believe ..." (John 17:21).

*5. But to evangelise in a religious market place often means, unfortunately, to compete with one another.*

Since we not only entreat people to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour but also urge them to become part of a visible expression of the body of Christ, we cannot but invite them to join our own church. We may try to leave it to them which denomination they want to belong to. But as a matter of fact people from outside tend to prefer those churches which display a clear identity. This has the effect that those churches which are the least ecumenical-minded seem to be the most successful one in their mission. This is especially challenging for the churches in the Wesleyan heritage. They have no denominational identity beyond their missionary call. Where they joined church unions they often failed to bring the missionary momentum to the united church as they should. Where they stay apart they sometimes don't have the nerve to live out their missionary identity. Where they choose a more "sectarian" path they may be rather successful but deny their ecumenical calling as Methodist.

*6. To believe in God's new creation means to live in an ecumenical horizon.*

"*oikumene*" means in the original Greek: the whole inhabited world. Therefore ecumenism cannot be restricted to the relation between Christian churches. It is an expression of our hope for the whole world and of God's promise that he will make all things new. That is not a plea for a naïve "ecumene of the religions". That God is not only the God of the Jews (and the Christians) but also of the Gentiles, i.e. of all human beings, does not mean that all gods or idols which are worshipped by people are equal expressions of the same God. Quetzalcoatl and Vishnu, Venus or Kali, Ahuramazda and even Allah are not just different icons of the same divine reality, although those who worship them search for the true God which for us is revealed in the God who has spoken to the people of Israel and has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

But, however, we define the relationship between different faiths and the revelation of God in the Bible, we will always have a twofold task: (1) We have to share the love of God which is revealed and disclosed in the life and death of Jesus Christ with all people we come in touch with. (2) We uphold that we are not only calling people to belong to the "small flock" and be part of a "chosen people" but proclaim the final fulfilment of God's saving and recreating work when he will be "all in all" (I Cor 15:28).