Unreliable Impressions. Some thoughts on a hot week in Dortmund

To begin -
before I got into theology, I did a degree in German, which involved living in Mainz for a year in the early eighties. My German does get a bit rusty, and can be taken off guard, not least by the way German borrows words and then uses them in its own way. So a ‘Handy’ is a mobile phone, a ‘Beamer’ is a digital projector. Most of the current environmental jargon has developed or come into use since I was regularly immersed in German, so visiting the Kirchentag, which offers a huge variety, from really heavy theology to trivia, via lectures, workshops, worship, and arena-size events does help keep this part of my brain - and my personal identity - alive. And we start with a whistle, and someone waving to the driver. Sand and water on the locomotive. Very C19

Since it’s possible (but expensive) to do so, I travelled from Edinburgh to Dortmund by train.

I discovered that the Caledonian Sleeper has now changed from being only just affordable to completely beyond the budget of an outing like this one. The Amtrak “rolling hotel” model, rather than the European railways “couchette”. With some trepidation, I booked a ‘seated’ sleeper, only to have the journey cancelled, so I had to set out earlier and put the refund towards basic overnight accommodation in London. This “development” is regrettable at a time when we need to bring an end to domestic UK mainland flights. The chance to offer a viable alternative and accessibly affordable alternative seems to have been missed, and trains were cancelled both ends of my journey. I have written to the Scottish govt transport minister. You never know.....

From the Facebook micro-blog:
What an awful place LONDON is. Rubbish and discarded people everywhere.............
Back to the Kirchentag...

The effect of scale on theological thinking was one of the themes that was strengthened by this visit. Small communities can be more responsive, large ones can shift bigger obstacles. The grass looks greener wherever you stand. But something like humility (not the Uriah Heep variety) is essential. God, not me, nor even my church, saves the world. Once that's acknowledged, we find our place and purpose. Being reconciled, as church, to your own powerlessness is probably the best starting point to exercise whatever power God might place in our hands. The federation of the EKD (Protestant churches of Germany) does suffer somewhat from the ‘national church’ syndrome, of feeling that hands may be tied by the responsibilities of scale.

Kirchentag themes, based on a chosen verse, become something that events hang everything on. This one, which I eventually found quite useful was “Was für ein Vertrauen” inadequately translated as “What a confidence”. It referred to the amazement of the invading forces at the confidence/faith/trust of God’s people, and King Hezekiah against impossible odds [2 Kgs 18/19].

There is, I think, also quite a disconnect between extremely rigorous and systematic theology (linguistically, theology is a ‘Wissenschaft’ - a ‘science’) and a sincere, evident, and huge commitment to justice issues.

Let’s put it this way: environmental dimensions of theology are still suffering from the same sort of syndrome as the central doctrine of Christianity, namely that God is Trinity.

A British churches’ tradition is that a minster will try to get some hapless student in for Trinity Sunday, so they don’t have to, and make much of it being mysterious and impenetrable, and something ordinary worshippers needn’t bother their heads with.

It isn’t. Though the idea of a coequal collaborative community is a dangerous challenge to hierarchical societies. Small children can grasp mystery. It takes training and institutional power to overlay this with impenetrability. The power of Trinity as a life-giving model for collaboration rather than domination, hit me in the middle of my theological training, but, I hasten to add, this was not at all just because I was studying.

Eco theology likewise, is very basic, goes all the way through, is nourishing and essential to the faith, but it is made complicated, as if only specialists have the right to do it. Yes, theological training ought to assist local church leaders in empowering and informing churches, but you should not be able imprison the ‘greening power’ (cf Hildegard von Bingen, ‘viriditas’) in an ivory tower.
The EKD definitely wants to be seen to be in solidarity with refugees and migrants, and shows huge alarm at the resurgence of right wing extremism in Germany and elsewhere. Brexit comes up in prayers as a source of chaos, and as such, as threat to an orderly view of the world.

At the same time there is a very conscientious practical commitment to environmental matters. Every state church has an ‘Umweltschutzbeauftragte’ (environmental protection officer) and a ‘climate correspondent’ is available to every congregation in some states. The involvement of experts is also encouraged, so that, for instance flower-meadow projects really work!

There is the additional benefit, particularly vital to my work as environmental chaplain, of reviewing scripture and tradition through a different but particular linguistic and cultural lens.

“Taste and see how good the Lord is” comes through as “Schmecket und sehet, wie freundlich der Herr ist”. (Yes “freundlich” is “friendly”)

And again “Herrlichkeit” (used frequently where English would use ‘glory’), though the word refers back to the Lordship (Herrschaft) of God, also conjures up the sort of feeling appropriate to a warm fragrant bath at the end of a long day.

From the Facebook micro-blog:
A wee bit of Bible study as I begin to look at the ‘Heft’ - the list of everything going on in the week. They have 3 very different translations of the readings for the day. Noting, as this is a fresh reading : 1) The extreme extent of the empathy and sympathetic action of ‘Job’s comforters’. 2) As noted before - the ambivalence about what Job’s wife tells him to do: bless God or curse God. 3) 2 Corinthians 8:1: ‘Not hiding’ from the church the gravity of the situation the missionaries are in. How much do we hide, and is it our of concern for the people, or to make it easier for ourselves?

Overall, with the background of Pentecost, and especially in my current role, I feel it’s right to take a very positive view of the ‘added value’ of the nuances of translation of Biblical texts. Some things, yes, are lost in translation, whereas others are found, or come to light in translation. I’m quite happy to blame the Holy Spirit for that. I’ve also become more aware over the past year, how distant from their Biblical starting points many fondly held theological or traditional attitudes and beliefs are, with the somewhat ironical exception of the Trinity and the coequality of the persons of God, to deny and evade which, seems to be a major project of much church culture. I feel at ease with this inspired habit of the churches, though one could wish they were more upfront about it.

From the Facebook micro-blog:
17 June at 19:37’
It looks as if there is a session on disinvestment etc. I really have had enough of that, so will likely give that one a miss!

The legacy of the German Reformation is an amazing insistence on intimacy with God, accompanied by what was, at the time, the revolutionary choice to address God as ‘Du’, the familiar form, appropriate to members of the family, and not the aristocracy or ruling class, who
had to be addressed with the formal plural, and who served the right to address the plebs in the third person.

My days began with the “Evangelische Messe” (Protestant Mass) offered by the German ‘religious communities’. A bit monastic in feel, but probably good as a reminder that this ‘study leave’ is also something of a pilgrimage.

Hymns by Paul Gerhard, and my favourite German hymn “Auf, Seele, Gott zu loben” (Get up, my soul, and praise God). I’ll see if I can write some words to this lovely tune. The preaching was a bit pedestrian and masochist, praising the virtues of suffering, but the overall result of attendance was a good spiritual breakfast.

These services took place in the Marienkirche, one of four huge churches in the city centre which were all but destroyed by Allied bombing, but reconstructed according to detailed plans, and some of their treasures had been kept safe in a vault some distance away.

On the first day, considering Job 2: 7-13, the sermon did bring up, (but not resolve) for me, the oppressiveness of an inappropriate view of your own insignificance. The indisputable innocence of Job was irrelevant to the agenda of Creation as a whole: our self-obsession, as individuals, and as church, is oppressive, and ties our hands. Not ruling the world is nothing to be ashamed about. It is, on the contrary, an inspiring and empowering freedom.

A number of times, people talked of the need for Germany to give the lead, having the wealth and the economic leverage to do that. A sort of eco-economic jingoism, one might scurrilously comment. Outside the hall, leaflets were being handed out to encourage attendance at a huge secular protest close to the open-cast coal mines that are the biggest source of CO2 in Europe. I regret not having taken time out to see this.

...Which brings us to the theological poverty, throughout everything I saw, of the treatment of scripture and environment. The problems of the “Herrschaftsanspruch” (claim to sovereignty) implied by Genesis 1:26 was pretty well the limit of theological discussion. The chair of the central council of the EKD, bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strom was wheeled in as the straight man in an evening on environmental matters which began with what was actually some deep and significant reflection on morality and eschatology by a ‘doctor and kabarettist’.

“Hands up- how many of you, on a regular basis, crap in the middle of your living room? - That’s what we’re doing with the planet right now”
The bishop then provided facts and figures, urged awareness of urgency, and directed the huge audience in the arena of the Westfallenhalle towards “tilling and keeping” rather than “dominion”.

Was there an irony, that the warm-up man had the more profound message, the preacher the cold facts?

It was good that this space and other huge gatherings were devoted to this sort of reflection, less so that it didn’t seem to open up the vast environmental prairies of Christian Scripture and tradition. I probably heard the odd mention of Romans 8 now and then.

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**From the Facebook micro-blog:**
20 June at 10:31 ·
Professor from Potsdam... net zero by 2030 possible with existing tech, but not being taken seriously by any of the Paris signatories. Contradicting, for example, the ideas of CofS trustees that Paris did not envisage dramatic change

20 June at 11:00 ·
Professor: we need DEEP VALUE SHIFTS: So work with churches etc is basic and essential. If Germany says zero by 2050 that is good but not Climate Justice = 2030 or at latest 2040. (The “we’re big, so we can make everyone do it argument”). Germany as 4th biggest economy. Does this work even for a big beast like Germany?
From the Facebook micro-blog:

20 June at 11:09 ·
"I believe in renewable energy—and that’s why I come to [church/Kirchentag]

20 June at 11:18 ·
Speaker appealing to the idea of being a fellow creature with other creatures and referring back to Martin Luther. Amazed at how “modern” Luther was in his thinking. [where modern = pre-enlightenment]

20 June at 11:21 ·
It will actually go against all current British stereotypes, but we have to learn for the Germans here, I think is to stop holding sessions at general assemblies and similar gatherings as if we were

From the Facebook micro-blog:

20 June at 11:59 ·
Another good and possibly obvious idea is putting together ecumenism mission and responsibility of the world in one council. Pretty vibrant!

From the Facebook micro-blog:

20 June at 13:35 ·
Whilst waiting for a concert to start.... the importance of presentation. Thinking back to a media training session I had some years ago when certain folks in very significant roles in the church were also there it appeared, with a view to rehearsing how to break the news that under certain very circumscribed circumstances, an approach to Christian marriage in which gender becomes irrelevant might soon have been adopted by the denomination. Without fail, they were preparing to announce these good tidings as if it were a death in the family, rather than an action, in faith, of the church. Likewise with the changes we approach due to climate crisis. They are good news, rather than just additional costings regrettably incurred. One I’ve seen here is the ability of speakers to motivate and encourage a very very large audience, with humour and with poetry. Yes getting a lesson in humour from the Germans. It can be done
Very consciously, I have titled this piece ‘unreliable reflections’, so I could be wrong, and I hope I am, but despite huge resources (some from the EU) being invested, with much creativity and ingenuity, in “Umweltmanagement” (environmental “Management”) in churches and their land and property holdings, the connection between faith and the crisis is not hugely evident. It’s always good to do nice and encouraging things. Faith needs feeding.

A more interesting observation was how, in the use of graveyards for biodiversity projects, the previous version of “hope for resurrection” had morphed into the desire to become one with Nature. The transformation and enrichment of spaces set aside for burial as attitudes changed, encouraged by things like the high cost of mowing lawns, was highlighted. This came in a workshop which also concluded with an encouragement to “get on with good stuff and tell everyone”

Thus, there are some fabulous resources, hints, tips, etc which should be stolen wholesale on the use of church premises, graveyards, towers, gardens, and anything where churches have a responsibility for the external environment. It was great to hear stories of best practice in creation of wildflower meadows etc. There was endearing delight in how this happened, the discovery that planting and taking care of things - like orchards and meadows - takes time. But of course it was telling that in these testimonies, only once did anyone say “we even had a service”. The integration of climate concern into the everyday and every Sunday life of the church is everywhere a struggle.

I am told that there is more going on in the spiritual integration than this, but it was not particularly upfront, and such printed material as was available as ‘worship resources’ etc seemed dated.

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As in our own context, it’s good to do, but more challenging to be. Environment is big in German churches, and took up a very prominent place in the Kirchentag, but how big can something be and still be a mere “issue” rather than a defining factor of the nature of church. This too seemed to be the impression given by theology students/ordinands at one of the workshops I attended.

They were finding inspiration, not in official or organised parts of the church, but in “Fridays for Future” a Greta Thunberg inspired moment which has leapt up from the grassroots. Child climate strikers were to be found on the steps down to the Station, and chalk messages appeared on the pavements of the city, during the week. Every speaker in the environmental themed sessions earned a round of applause for mentioning FFF.

There was a workshop on ‘Climate change and churches’ which asked participants “What should NOT happen because of climate protection measures?”

Some answers from the flipchart:

- Not abandoning rural areas...
- Not making regional injustices worse
- It should not be abandoned for financial reasons
- Continuing use of old devices...
- No more intercontinental travel.
- Loss of home for congregations
- Climate protection becomes big business
- Greenwashing
- Growing inequality
- Social divisiveness
- A massive restriction of human and labour rights
- Climate protection ends up backed into a corner
- Climate protection makes everything dearer

The biggest anxiety and concern (and I’m going by feel here) was “The loss of the credibility of the church because of too little involvement in climate protection”.

On the other flipchart:

**Secret tips for Climate protection**

- Flights dearer, trains better value.
- Pullover instead of heating
- Completely free public transport possible in Europe if everyone contributed €60
- Change of attitude
- Reduce flying to the absolute most necessary
- Lower the temperature in church on Sundays
- Grow vegetables in the church garden
- Carbon offset church outings
- Carbon tax
- Make cycling more attractive
- Car sharing
Make a “cargo bike” available to each community
[NB large capacity cargo bikes could regularly be seen around the streets of Dortmund]
Leave comfort zone
Shop locally
Create a post-growth society.
Be conscious of the exemplary function of the church
Transform “motorway churches” to “bike churches”

Again, I felt, the underlying ambition was to exercise “climate power” as church. And I would add, I felt the need to be present-focussed, rather than future-focussed.

**From the Facebook micro-blog:**
21 June at 04:53 ·
When I get up, I’m already thinking in German.
This took too long! There are still two days left.

Best-Practice testimonies from local churches, presented with passion and humour: the experience of developing a community wild-flower meadow in church-administered land.

Good basic advice for every would-be eco-friendly congregation: “Do good stuff and talk about it!”
Another workshop: “If we don't act, it will be too late: Ecology and theology”

I chose not to add: ‘It probably is too late, so how should we act?’

One speaker from ‘Brot für die Welt’ (let’s say, the German Christian Aid), who mentioned Scotland with great respect, gave a bit more depth than otherwise: Christian faith is not essentially anthropocentric, but colonialism is. Those in development situations have discovered the colonialist flaw in presenting Christianity as a faith where location makes no difference. ‘Newer’ churches have things to learn, even from the relationship with the earth of such as the Armenian Orthodox. The theme of Sabbath (the world needs a sabbath from fossil fuels) and fasting - which is effectively refraining from animal products for about a third of the year, in aggregate, understood as “lived faith”, not “book-faith” was brought up. As was, I felt, very helpfully, that Christianity has much to offer: you don’t only have to head out and find indigenous wisdom. It’s there within our own faith if we look for it.

Do we need one of those “Ecumenical Decades” that the World Council of Churches indulges in: a “Decade of peace with the Earth”?

But in this, we need also to learn vulnerability, which has been lost, for instance, in the consciousness of superpowers and great nations. Memento Mori (again, the consciousness of limitedness, of mortality, moves us on to readiness to deal with climate crisis).

Suggestions at the end of the workshop:

“Why do churches serve meat at church events?”

“We need to make sure we take the message out to the population in general”

I added: “we need to make sure it gets into the prayers and hymns and sermons of the church.”
Kirchentag seems always to be a highly demanding pilgrimage physically. My phone tells me I put in 116000 steps, and I bought a new pair of shoes in the middle of the week. It involves queueing in hot sunshine, and dealing with the immature officiousness of scouts who have been told to hold back crowds desperate to get into prayer meetings. It involved being abushed by tears when attending a performance by a drama group of mixed ability players, and stewing on the underground as you travel from one event to the next. There is worship, big and small, and this year, one evening, the chance to attend, for free, the Philip Glass Opera “Akhenaton”, reflecting on the fate of the first known monotheistic regime. It’s a joy and a wonder, to see things well-done and well-organised, as well as a challenge, to hear, under the guise of “Vertrauen” what seems to be a naive hope that the climate can be sorted out, rather than worked with. Its a challenge, both to worship in a crowd and not to be intimidated and oppressed by crowds.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to attend once more, irrespective of being the Scottish representative of the non-functional Scottish Ecumenical Body.