



Address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the Christianity 2000 Festival at Thingvellir
2 July 2000

Honourable Members of the Althing
Fellow Icelanders at Thingvellir
and at home

A thousand years ago the Althingi made Christianity the law of the land, a law of hope and certainty about the grace of God and eternal life, a law about our deeds and thoughts, right conduct and wrong.

Such was the covenant that the Althingi swore on that momentous occasion. An oath of tolerance. A message of love and compassion for all humankind.

The Christian faith is not only prayer and benediction. It is an appeal to the ethics of good deeds, love and solidarity towards all those who go lacking at the table of plenty.

Our national celebration of Christianity is truly an act of thanksgiving to the good people who lived their lives guided by Christ's teachings. It is a eulogy to the generations who, in the face of the harsh elements, preserved the gospel within them and made the faith in each person's heart the core of Christendom.

The festival of our national Church at Thingvellir is an opportunity to pause and reflect upon the value of faith in the lives of us all, not least the fortune of the state which has made Christ's teachings the foundation of its constitution.

In ancient times the Althingi chose to make the ethics of the Christian faith into the guiding principle for Icelanders. The Althingi has now reconvened at Thingvellir to reiterate that oath which remains forever valid.

This is the reason that the Althingi is here – not only as a legislature but also as an assembly which, at Iceland’s most sacred shrine and witnessed by the entire nation, has decided to continue to promote Christian conduct.

But Christ’s teachings can be demanding, and have proved difficult for those in authority to act by.

Let us not forget that, in his day, Christ was a figure of rebellion and dissent, the companion of the poor and the forsaken.

It was Jesus who overturned the merchants’ tables and drove them out of the temple with the words: “It is written, My house is the house of prayer: but ye have made it a den of thieves.”

The fishermen and common people followed Christ but the rulers of the land led him to the cross.

Christianity is not only a precept that parliament and high-ranking officials should attend religious services on solemn occasions. Christianity is also a commitment towards proper conduct, a yardstick for measuring whether we are really people of truth and integrity.

What is the teaching that the Althingi and the nation have adopted as their own? What is the precept about what is to be done? What are Christ’s words?

Let us hear his exhortation to tolerance:

“But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.”

“Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven: Give, and it shall be given unto you.”

Let us hear Christ’s exhortation to help the poor, his judgement upon those who give precedence to wealth and property:

“Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.”

“Go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven.”

“Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

Let us hear Christ’s judgement upon authority and humility:

“Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.”

These are Christ’s own words, the law to which we have committed ourselves. A thousand years ago, and again now. The law about love, moderation and tolerance, sympathy for the smallest among our brothers and sisters.

Can our own works measure up to this yardstick, this light?

Are our legislation and government consistent with the spirit of Christianity? Or do we believe that Christ’s law is only for solemn occasions?

Will we be guided by Christ’s teachings when the Althingi departs and we all return home?

Is this celebration of Christianity a pledge or merely one day in a thousand years?

The celebration of Christianity is a reminder to us all about the essence of faith, about the covenant which was made here on this sacred site; it is a challenge to the Icelandic Church and to all of us to show the courage and determination to follow the way led by Christ, and not to yield in the face of adversity.

A thousand years hence, these questions will be asked about the determination and intention of all.

Let us not forget that all people have the same rights and that the nations of the world now constitute a single whole, though their religions and customs differ. Let us respect not only the Lutheran faith but also the Church which was originally here and remained for half a millennium; all congregations which worship God in their own separate ways.

In the covenant which was agreed here at the Law Rock, the word became superior to the sword. May that vision guide us Icelanders and all humankind.

On Friday the following presidential decree was signed adjourning the meetings of the Althingi:

“The President of Iceland declares:

I have with the consent of the Althingi adjourned the session of the Althingi, the 125th session, from 2nd of July to the end of September.

Done at Bessastaðir, 30th of June 2000

Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson

/Davíð Oddsson

Presidential Decree
on the adjournment of the Althingi”

According to this decree and with the Althingi’s consent I declare the session adjourned. May the work and the vision of the Althingi in the future be guided by Christ and serve the fortune of our people. I ask the members of the Althingi and others to rise from their seats and salute our country Iceland.