



"Reformation – Eine Welt und Gerechter Friede"

Bible Study "Jesus Christ, Peace of the Whole World"

in der Sitzung der 15. Landessynode am 8. Juli 2016

"Jesus Christ, Peace of the Whole World"

Bible Study on John 14:27: ***"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. So, do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."***

Let us pray: O Lord, you have searched me and known me, you have discerned my thoughts from afar, so may now the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and salvation. AMEN.

A colleague from Germany recently asked me to describe the situation of Christians in the Middle East today. I said the situation of Middle Eastern Christians these days is similar to that of Jesus and his disciples on that Thursday night in the Garden of Gethsemane just before Jesus was betrayed and handed over to be crucified.

There, in the garden, on that awesome night, even Christ himself experienced weakness and abandonment. We are told that on he "threw himself on the ground" and prayed asking that he may be spared the cup of suffering (Matt 26:39ff). That evening, Jesus was grieved "even unto death." He was agitated, sweating fiercely.

Middle Eastern Christians today well understand those words that describe our Lord's state of mind ... indeed they are living them! And just as Jesus anticipated the events ahead of him with gravity and awe, similarly Middle Eastern Christians are anxious and worried about their future during the coming months and years ahead.

Not only Christ, but the disciples as well felt the approaching danger ... exactly as we Christians of the Middle East (among other communities) feel today. This may explain why one of them at least (Simon Peter), was armed ... Yes, he was armed with a sword, and that in accordance with Christ's previous instructions to them that they should take no more than two swords with them (Luke 22:38).

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, herein lies a very serious, deep and hard lesson for us to learn: For even though it is clear from the story that these swords were neither to be used for offensive aggression, nor for protecting Jesus himself (who obviously needed no protection as is clear from Matthew 26:53: "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father and he will at once send me more

than twelve legions of angels?”). Nonetheless, weapons were brought along, and with Christ's permission, for self-defense. Self-defense, therefore, remains, then and now, a legitimate and sanctioned course of action.

At any rate, and in spite of all the precautions the disciples took, they were still unable to bare the heat and tension of the moment, ... so they slept ... (sadly, as some Middle Eastern Christians seem to be doing at this time!). And sleeping in this context is a euphemism for avoiding the problem rather than facing it.

That night, one of the disciples betrayed Jesus, and another denied him (as unfortunately a few Christians in the region may be tempted to do in these difficult times!).

By the end of that frightful evening, all the disciples fled and deserted their master (as so many Christians and other minorities in the Middle East region today are prone to doing).

What do the events of that night teach us about the situation of Middle Eastern Christians?

First, they teach us that there is no such thing as absolute faith. It is impossible for the believer not to doubt, or for our faith not to weaken when we face danger and death. Even if we have the faith that moves mountains, or the faith of Simon Peter, also called “the Rock,” we are still subject to doubt, and our faith may falter and fail us in the hour of fear and danger ... as it failed Simon Peter on that night. We Christians in the Middle East often find ourselves these days repeating the words of that father who said to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: “I believe Lord, help my unbelief” (9:24).

Second: the events of that evening also teach us that, no matter how much faith we Eastern Christians may possess, fear and anxiety are unavoidable when we face danger and persecution. I want you to know that no moderate and peace-loving person in the Middle East, be they Christian or non-Christian, has lived without experiencing fear, turbulence, depression, worry and agitation, during the last five years.

Very often these experiences have lead Christians, or simply *forced them* to desert, to leave their towns and villages and migrate as displaced persons in their own country, or as refugees in another land. Otherwise, how shall we explain the wave after wave of refugees and migrants who have continually been deserting our region in search of security and a better life elsewhere? It strikes me as most tragic and sad that these people are willing to pay any price ... including losing their lives ... just to get out of the Middle East. You in Germany are now very aware of this challenge.

Why are all these things happening? Why is the Middle East so restless and violent? Why aren't the peoples, the leaders and the governments of the Middle East, as well as those of the whole world, not able to bring peace to our region? Are we Christians not praying hard enough for peace? I am not here today to answer all these questions, but let me at least address the last one.

“Jesus Christ is the peace of the whole world” is the title of your esteemed Synod at Württemberg this year. And indeed Christ himself “is our peace who destroyed the dividing wall of partition and hostility” as St. Paul teaches us in his Letter to the Ephesians (2:14). Yet we may well ask: where is peace?

Every Sunday in my church in Beirut we pray for peace ... for peace especially in Lebanon and Syria, for peace in all the countries of the Middle East region, and for peace in the whole world. I am certain that in the various churches here in Würtemberg you also pray for peace ... for peace in your own lands as well as for the peace of the world.

For 30 years now I have been pastor of the National Evangelical Church of Beirut -- and for 30 years I have been praying for peace -- and for 30 years nothing has changed, in fact, the situation is dramatically deteriorating day by day.

History seems to be repeating itself, and in the end no peace has truly lasted in our region. The attainment of peace today seems much farther away than ever before. And yet I, and all of us here, continue to pray for peace! Why? What's the point of praying for peace!! And anyway, what kind of peace are we praying for, or expecting?

I ask this because it is quite clear from the words of Christ that he distinguishes between two kinds of peace. As we heard from John 14:27 Jesus says: "Peace I leave with you; **my peace** I give to you. I **do not give to you as the world gives.**"

It is clear from this text that there are two types of peace that Christ has in mind. There is *His* peace, the peace he gave to his disciples (**my peace** I give to you); and then there is another kind ... a peace given to us by the world. So here is the question for us today: for which of the two "peaces" do we pray every Sunday ... the peace of Christ, or the peace of the world?

Let me be quick to answer: We pray for both types of peace.

First, we pray for a worldly and temporary peace that world leaders talk about daily ... a peace that they **may** succeed in bringing about from time to time. Yes, we *do* and we *must* pray for worldly peace. That is, we ought to pray for the type of peace that ends violence and death somewhere in the world ... the peace that is protected and guaranteed by peace agreements and treaties, and even by *arm-carrying peace keeping forces* (such as the UNIFIL force in South Lebanon).

So yes, we do pray for the peace that the world gives.

But this peace is **not** the peace that Christ promised his disciples according to John 14:27. Thus we must also pray for that peace which Christ had in mind when he said "**my** peace I give to you" knowing that this peace is not the same as worldly peace. We pray for worldly peace **and** for Christ's peace.

What is the difference between the two?

In Arabic we have two words for peace. We have the word "*Salam*" (equivalent to the Hebrew "*Shalom*" so often used here in Germany and by Christians in general); and then there is the word "*Silm*," that carries a different nuance. And even though the two words have the same Semitic 3-letter root (*sa-li-ma*), "*Salam*" (or "*shalom*") refers to the peace of God, while "*silm*" refers to the peace of the world.

"*Salam*" is the peace that Christ gives. It is a spiritual and internal type of peace. It is permanent and unshakable because it is built on the "Good News" that the war with the powers of death and evil is over, and that Christ has conquered evil and death by his own death and resurrection, and

has thus granted eternal life to the living and the dead. It is a peace based on faith ... a faith that, as the Letter to the Hebrews explains, is the "**assurance of things hoped for, and conviction of things not seen**" (11:1).

"*Silm*," on the other hand, bears the meaning of a temporary, worldly, tangible and visible peace ... in fact it is a **truce**, rather than a permanent peace. "*Silm*" is a kind of peace that entails putting down arms, cessation of wars and hostilities, and a return to a normal mode of life and living. Praying for "*silm*" therefore, means praying for the *peace of the world ... in the world*.

As I said, however, we do well -- indeed we are called -- to pray for both kinds of peace in our churches. Christ himself neither rejected nor condemned the peace of the world, that is, "*silm*." To the contrary, he called us to effect reconciliation and to spread the culture of peace and to end violence and killing ("Blessed are the peacemakers"). Jesus called upon us to make peace with each other as persons when he said: "if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be **reconciled** to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt 5:23-24). Indeed the entire Bible is filled with passages that call us to look forward to, and to **work** for the day when "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them ... They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:6-9). The prophet Isaiah also envisioned a time when nations and peoples "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; {and when} nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (2:4).

This type of worldly reconciliation and peacemaking is commendable. It should be worked for, hoped for, and certainly prayed for. Saint Paul clearly instructs us saying: "Live in harmony with one another; . . . If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live **peaceably** with all (Rom 12:16,18).

"*Salam*," however, i.e. the peace of God "that passes all understanding" ... the peace for which we should also certainly pray when we pray for peace, is quite different from the peace of the world.

First of all, as I said, it is internal and spiritual. For this reason therefore, we should pray and ask for this kind of peace prior to praying and asking for the peace of the world. Indeed it is necessary to possess this peace, the peace of God, whether we live in state of worldly peace or in a state of war. In fact we should pray for "*salam*," (for the peace of Christ), especially when we are in the midst of war or violence, of death, of evil and hatred, of enmity and persecution.

We need to **ask for** the peace of God ... and, more importantly, we should **possess** that peace, whatever our circumstances are. We should **own** that peace whatever challenges or problems we face, be they political, social, economic, familial, personal or financial. The more the peace of the world is lacking or non-existent, the more we need to pray for and have the peace of Christ. We in the Middle East learn this lesson every day!

In some churches the litany of prayers for the peace of the world often begins with the phrase "in peace let us pray to the Lord." This means that we need to have internal Godly peace, *in order to pray for external peace*. Thus, it is as though we are saying: "***in peace let us pray for peace!***" (In "*salam*" let us pray for "*silm*"). And I dare add here saying: let us *in peace*, work for peace. Let us *live in peace* in the midst of war and violence.

Mind you though ... this is not an easy matter at all! Christians in the Middle East would be the first

to admit this. For we know full well that the wolf remains the enemy of the lamb, and the leopard is the enemy of the kid. The adder poisons, and *may kill* the little child. And sadly, we humans, especially in the Middle East, have become experts at making enemies of one another and killing each other. We continue to make war, to use violence, to commit atrocious crimes against one another; and to corrupt the planet and poison the environment.

However ... the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has put an end to all the enmities that have haunted us since the fall of Adam and Eve, and the fall of the whole creation along side them.

Nonetheless, and in spite of all this, let me end on a hopeful note by recounting a true story:

At the very end of World War II, and after Germany had surrendered, there was a prisoners' of war camp in the north of the country whose guards had not heard the news that the war had ended, because all communications had broken down between them and the central command.

At that prison there was a small contingent of English and Scottish soldiers, one of whom had managed to put together a primitive short wave radio that he secretly kept hid from the guards. On that radio he heard the news of the end of the war and the surrender of Germany. He told his fellow prisoners, but the prison guards had not yet heard, and thus continued with their prison duties as usual.

One of these prisoners, who later became a pastor in Scotland, said that for three days, the prisoners lived in prison in "**perfect internal peace**" and even *with joy*. They treated their guards without resentment, because they knew that the war was over and that their release was forthcoming. He noted that their lives as prisoners of war had in fact *not changed at all*; the suffering they went through remained as it was; and that the prison guards kept the exact same routine of hard work and harsh treatment that was in place during the war.

This pastor wrote later that those three days of his life in that prison, are in some way an exact replica of our lives as Christians on earth: On the face of it, what we experience before the good news of salvation in Christ, is exactly the same as what we experience after hearing the news. It will seem to us that nothing has, or will change. However, knowing and believing that the war with the powers of darkness and death is indeed over, and that we have been set free by Christ's death and resurrection, we live that very same life of suffering and difficulty **in peace**, and with a confident, though unseen hope, that Christ has indeed set us free. Thus we can be joyous, hopeful and at peace, even though the world around us remains full of violence, war, injustice, crimes, misery and suffering.

This is not to say of course that we sit idly and do nothing about the suffering of the world. But it is the **spirit and attitude** with which we do our work that really determines our success. We must always pray and strive for peace, justice, equality and righteousness. But we must always pray and strive for these things **in peace**, and with faith, hope and love. **To pray and work ... in peace ... for peace ... is the whole point!**

Brothers and sisters ... Christ is indeed the peace of the whole world. But the vision of peace is ultimately a vision of heaven, and not a reality on earth. Therefore, in order to heed Christ's words to us in John "**do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid**," we must arm ourselves with the peace ... "*shalom*" ... "*salam*" ... of Christ, here and now, in spite of all the misery and suffering we see around us.

Yes, we must seek peace, work for peace and pray for peace. But we must also **learn to wait in patience** ... and leave the rest to God.

I end with the words of St. Paul from Romans: "For the creation *waits* with eager longing for the manifestation of the children of God ... We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves ... groan inwardly while *we wait* for adoption, the redemption of our bodies; for we are saved by hope. But hope that is seen is not hope: for who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, **we wait for it with patience** ... because all things shall work together for good to those who love God" (8:19-28).

May the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us all. Amen.

Presented by Rev. Dr. Habib Badr
Pastor of the National Evangelical Church of Beirut,
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