

## **Remember what you were in the past! (Eph 2,11)**

Sermon, ev.-luth. St.-Petri-Church in Hannover-Kleefeld, 20  
June 2004, second Sunday past Trinitatis

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God (the Father)  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with you all (2. Kor 13,13).  
Amen.

### **I.**

today's sermon is about fences. To be precise: It is about Jesus, who is breaking down the walls between Jews and Gentiles; it is about Jesus, who opens a way to God for people, who once were outside the covenant with God; it is about Jesus, who opens a way to God for people like us.

I read from the second chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians, verses 11 to 22 in the Good News Version:

“(11) You gentiles by birth - called “the uncircumcised” – remember what you were in the

past. (12) At that time you were apart from Christ. You were foreigners and did not belong to God's chosen people. You had no part in the covenants, which were based on God's promises to his people, and you lived in this world **without hope and without God.**

(13) But now in union with Christ Jesus, you who used to be far away have been brought near by the **sacrificial death of Christ.** (14) For **Christ himself has brought us peace by making Jews and Gentiles one people.** With his own body he broke down the wall that separated them and kept them enemies. (15) He abolished the Jewish Law with its commandments and rules, in order to create out of the two races one new people in union with himself, in this way **making peace.** (16) By his death on the cross Christ destroyed their enmity; by means of the cross he united both races into one body and brought them back to God. (17) So Christ came and preached the **Good News of peace** to all – to you Gentiles, who were far away from God, and to the Jews, who were near to him. (18) It is through Christ that all of us, Jews and Gentiles, are able to come in the **one Spirit into the presence of the Father.**

(19) So then, you Gentiles are **not foreigners or strangers any longer**; you are now fellow-

**citizens** with God's people and members of the family of God. (20) You, too, are built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, the cornerstone being Christ Jesus himself. (21) He is the one who holds the whole building together and makes it grow into a sacred temple dedicated to the Lord. (22) In union with him you too are being built together with all the others into a place where God lives through his Spirit."

## II.

**Peace** is one of the central messages of Christian faith. In the Sermon on the Mount we hear Jesus say: *"Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children!"* (Mt 5,9). Jesus teaches us even to love our enemies. He says: *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the sons of your father in heaven"* (Mt 5,43-44). He urges us: *"Do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you. If anyone slaps you on the right*

*cheek, let him slap your left cheek too"* (Mt 5,39). And he encourages us: *"If one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one kilometre, carry it two kilometres"* (Mt 5,41).

It is Jesus himself, who never left this way of peace, of love and of forgiveness. What it means not to take revenge and to pray for ones enemies, he experienced in his own life. He was betrayed by one of his own disciples; he was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane; he was tortured by Roman soldiers and he was nailed to the cross. Jesus knows what it means to be persecuted, to be forsaken and to have enemies. And he knows what it means to pray for those, who "trespass against us" (Mt 6,12), as we are used to praying in the Lord's Prayer. Just before he died, he prayed: *"Forgive them, Father! They don't know what they are doing"* (Lk 23,34).

Peace and forgiveness is not the only message, Christian faith has in store for the world today. But one thing is clear: We Christians are called to pray and to work for peace wherever we are. It is the faith, that gives us the strength to be peaceful, even if we are confronted by enemies. The example of Christ is not only the Christian way to live in times of peace, prosperity and security. It is not only meant for the good-weather-periods of life. It is just the other way round. Nobody seeks to live in times of war, poverty and problems that are bigger than anything, which seems to be solvable by human beings. But the darker the world gets, the more important it is, that we Christians shine as the light of God in the world, as a light of hope, of peace and of reconciliation. Christ says: *"You are the light of the world"* (Mt 5,14). To follow Christ means that we are ordered, to let the light of God shine in the world.

That doesn't mean, that Christians are perfect. The Bible knows that human beings are deeply open to temptations. In the so called Old Testament we hear that even in paradise it is very easy to lead us into temptation (Gen 3). And in the New Testament we learn, that St. Peter, who is the one, Jesus wants to be the "rock", that means the foundation, he wants to build his church on (Mt 16,18), denies Jesus in a situation, which is dangerous for him (Mt 26,69-75). (By the way: A very important story for our Petri-Church here in Kleefeld!). As Christians we make mistakes. But we believe, that God will forgive us and that he will strengthen us, for he has chosen human beings, who often fail, as co-workers in his creation. God has relied on St. Peter although he failed. And I am sure that he also relies on us today and that he will give us the strength and the power to pray and to work for peace in our lifetime.

### III.

The Letter to the Ephesians is a commentary on the life and work of Jesus. It answers the question, what it means to believe in God as we know him through Jesus Christ, about 70 to 80 years past Good Friday and Easter.

The basic message of the Letter is the message of peace as we know it from Jesus. It's a kind of a summary of the whole Gospel when the author of the Letter to the Ephesians tells us: "*Christ is our peace*" (Eph 2,14).

Now, it is really strange how he understands what the peace, which is brought to us by Jesus Christ, means exactly. But I have to add: For people like us, Christians in Europe, who are not used to defining ourselves in a fundamental relationship to the people of

Israel and the God of Israel this is a point of view we are usually not accustomed to.

The author of the letter to the congregation in Ephesus sees the world fundamentally divided into two groups of people. First there are the Jews, which he calls "*God's chosen people*". They have part in the covenants, which are based on God's promises, we know from the so called Old Testament, which is the Jewish Bibel, which is no other Holy Book than the Bible of Jesus, of St. Paul and of the disciples. Those covenants especially refer to the experiences Noah, Abraham and Moses had with God. In the biblical stories it is God himself, who decided to live in a special relationship with the people he elects. This God is not God in any general terms. He is God in relationship. He does not have the same relationship to all people, he created. There are people, who are especially

bound to this God. There are people, who are elected by this God.

**Election** in the bible doesn't mean, that the elected people are better than the none elected. But they have a special task in the world, which as a whole is creation of God. In the book of Isaiah Israel is called to be "*a light to the nations*" (Jes 49,6). And in the Book Exodus we read just in the chapter before Moses receives the Ten commandments that God want's Israel to be a "*kingdom of priests*" (Ex 19,4-6), in other words: God want's them to obey the commandments.

This really is the background of the message from the Letter to the Ephesians. God has chosen the people of Israel to be his light for the nations. He has chosen them to be a kingdom of priests that means a kingdom of people who obey the commandments. As we know from Psalm 24: "*The earth is the LORD's and the full-*

*ness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein*" (Ps 24,1). But in this world, God has chosen people to shine as a light for all the others. That's the way the author of the letter to the Ephesians understands the world up to the day, Jesus Christ appeared.

Now for us as Christians it is a very important question: What has changed with the coming of Jesus Christ? What is new in the New Testament? What does the new covenant mean to the older covenants with Noah, Abraham and Mose and the people of Israel.

Here the author of the letter to the Ephesians says: You Christians, who are by birth Non-Jews, you are not the first people who had contact to the God of Jesus Christ. "*Remember what you were in the past. At that time you were apart from Christ. You were foreigners and did not belong to God's chosen people.*

*You had no part in the covenants, which were based on God's promises to his people, and you lived in this world without hope and whithout God."* The peace that is brought by Christ means that Christ has made *"Jews and Gentiles one people."* For the author of the letter to the Ephesians this is the central message of Good Friday and Easter and Pentecost. Jesus breaks down the wall that separates Jews and Gentiles. The peace that Jesus brings means that we Gentiles, who once *"were far away from God"* and *"the Jews, who were near to him"* *"are able to come in the one Spirit into the presence of the father."*

It's not easy for us Gentile-Christians today to except this biblical point of view. It's not easy to understand ourselves as God's second choice. But this exactly is the way the letter to the Ephesians characterizes the gentile-christian relationship to God. And that's exactly

the way he describes the fundament of peace between Jews and Gentiles.

We Christians are not called to replace or substitute Israel as God's chosen people. No, we are fellow-citizens. It's us, who had been strangers to the God of Israel before. We are not allowed to declare the first chosen people to be strangers to this God. In union with Jesus Christ we *too* are *"being built together with all the others into a place where God lives through his Spirit."* That's the way the letter to the Ephesians is interpreting the peace, that Jesus brings.

#### IV.

If we compare the long history of Christian-Jewish relations and this vision of peace between Christians and Jews, we must confess, that we failed in a dimension, which is beyond all understanding.

For almost 2000 years Christianity has interpreted the history of Israel without consideration for Jewish self-understanding. Israel was used as the dark foil for the light of Christianity, and it was accused of "murdering the Son of God". All forms of Christianity have been impregnated by this poison, which is only now slowly being drawn out. Nowadays churches all over the world have confessed, that the long Christian antijudaistic tradition is an important part of the disastrous development, that ended up in the concentration-camps of Auschwitz, Majdanec and here in Lower Saxony in Bergen Belsen. The murder of six million Jews was legitimised by our scientists. It was propagated by our media and institutions. It was accepted by the majority of the population and carried out by our industrial sector. And a major part of the churches in Germany did not proceed against this crime.

In the last 30 – 40 years Christians all over the world and especially in Germany have learned more about Judaism than in the 2000 years before. There are a lot of dialogues between Christians and Jews and there is an ecumenical consensus speaking of Israel continuing to be God's chosen people, of the faith in God which we share, of our common mission to work for right, justice and human dignity, and of our common hope and interpretation of history.

The letter to the Ephesians says: Christ is our peace. He reminds the congregation of Ephesus to remember, what they were in the past. It reminds them that they did not substitute the Jews, but that they are fellow-citizens with God's people and in this way "members of the family of God".

In the beginning of the 21. century we have just started to understand ourselves as Christians in a

peaceful relationship to the people of Israel. Slowly we realize, that it is not enough to be interested in ancient Israel and in the Scriptures, we call the Old Testament. Slowly we start to understand, that we are concerned by the way *living* Israel interprets our common holy scriptures today and by the way Israel is living today.

Christ is our peace. This is God's promise for his whole creation. But first of all this promise is a duty for us Christians in our relationship to the people of Israel. 1900 years after the letter to the Ephesians was written, there are more walls between Jews and Gentiles than in biblical times. The letter to the Ephesians invites us to understand Jesus as the one, who does not separate Christians and Jews, as we understood it before, but to understand him, the Jew from Nazareth, as the one who brings peace "*by making Jews and Gentiles one people*".

May God strengthen and encourage us, that we continue on the difficult path of peace, we have just started to go along.

Amen.

And the peace of God,  
Which passes all understanding,  
keep your hearts  
and your minds  
in Christ Jesus (Phil 4,7).  
Amen.

### **Schlusseggen**

*The peace of God,  
which passes all understanding,  
keep your hearts and minds  
in the knowledge and love of God,  
and of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord;  
and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,  
be amongst you, and remain with you always,  
Amen.*