

Hannover International Worship (HIW)
 November 16, 2014
 Pastor Bernd Wrede

1. Cor. 5, 1-10

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,



there is this picture,
 which you all found in
 your bulletin. Did you
 have a look at it?

I must have had this
 picture in the back of my
 mind, when I read these
 words of Paul from
 chapter 5 of his Second
 Letter to the Corinthians.

What made me remember
 the picture?
 I had seen it in a book on
 the Great War, 1914 to
 1918.

Paul writes about that earthly tent we live in - our body.
 About its destruction.

The picture shows a German soldier mortally wounded.

Paul writes: For in this tent - our body - we groan,
 longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling.

The picture shows a dead soldier. He quite likely died
 groaning terribly. And he is led upwards by a friendly,
 smiling angel.

Himmelan!

That is the caption on the bottom of the picture.

On to heaven!

The picture is on a postcard which found distribution in
 Germany during the Great War.

Could this postcard have been handed out then at a
 church service, too? On Memorial Day, like today?

100 years ago, in November 1914, more than three
 months into the war, tens of thousands of German
 soldiers had been killed already. The same with French,
 British, and Belgian soldiers.

The church on a November Sunday in 1914 would have
 been filled with widows, with children, who lost their
 father, with wounded soldiers on home leave, with
 parents, whose sons had perished in the fields of

Flanders, on the river Marne in France or in the hills surrounding Verdun.

There was no hope anymore in November 2014 for a quick end of the war at Christmas.

Instead, the war had bogged down in devastating trench warfare, destroying the cities and villages along its line. If you look at the picture, at the bottom it shows houses ghostly burning at night.

The postcard was printed and distributed for a single purpose: to lend a specific Christian understanding to all the sorrow the war had brought, to put the human, the moral catastrophe of this war in the light of - well, what? - in the light of what is expressed also by Paul: For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling.

The clear and simple purpose of this postcard was to lend Christian support for the ongoing war effort.

Grieving mother, your son has been killed in battle, but he is being led to a heavenly dwelling by an angel!

Suggesting: Isn't that a wonderful consolation, and isn't it worth to keep on fighting, if all those killed can expect such a miraculous encounter with an angel? Himmelan!

Brothers and sisters in Christ,
are you thinking of those, too, in a not so distant war, those who go to an open market or a mosque to blow themselves up and also try to kill as many others, those, who are told that virgins are waiting for them in heaven, because the cause is good and just?
Onwards to heaven! Himmelan!

In 1914, there was not supposed to be any doubt about the righteousness of the Great War on either side nor is there any doubt today with the suicide bombers...,

However, Paul, we can be sure, did not fall into that trap of supporting a war effort with religious propaganda.

With his letter Paul was teaching the members of a small, new congregation. He was considering their lives and his own. There was no temptation to cheaply bend his message in order to help sustain the morale for a terrible war.

And yet:

In verse 8 - you see the words on the other side of the picture - in verse 8 Paul writes:

„... we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

Is this Paul's way of proclaiming „Himmelan?“
Onwards to Heaven?

Where is the big difference to the longing of a soldier or of a terrorist to die for the good cause and be rewarded with a great place in heaven?

There clearly is a tendency in Paul's thinking here and in Christian thinking in general, that our existence on earth, that life in our body, is nothing compared to the glory awaiting us in heaven.

We can find many examples in hymns or Christian writings that give support to the idea, that our life on earth is poor, with lots of pain and misery.

However, can that be a reason to glorify mass slaughter or the bombing of innocents?

Paul admonishes us that we walk by faith, that God has given us the spirit to guide us.

And he reminds us of that, which we confess at every service with the Apostles' Creed:

That Jesus Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead.

It is in the last 5 verses - at the end of our text for today - that we can find more of a safe ground when we are weighing the benefits of life on earth and existence in heaven.

We have started by dwelling on an understanding, which turned the Christian desire to be close to God into a blatant political instrument of support for war and terrorism.

Yes, Paul, too, wants to be close to God.

Yes, Paul, too looks at life on earth as suffering.

But he finds the right balance between these two realms, heaven and earth.

He knows he will have to die like every human being. But he also considers what God wants him to do in this life on earth.

God wants him to be of good courage to do his job proclaiming the Good News, spreading the gospel throughout the lands, admonishing, strengthening, keeping the faith.

Paul sets himself up in these words as a wise man, a sage, someone who definitely is aware of the limits of human life, but who nevertheless wants to lead his life as faithful apostle, using all his human strength.

And so, where do we go from here to the soldiers and the battlefields of today?

What role does faith have for those fighting? What importance is there for the understanding of life after death?

I imagine, living and preaching and visiting congregations today, Paul maybe would be a pacifist. Maybe, maybe not.

I assume, he rather would put most of his emphasis on: we always make it our aim to please God!

We always are considerate of his commandments. And we always lead our lives in awareness of judgement day.

Unlike soldiers in the Great War or suicide bombers of today, we cannot and we should not claim to have God on our side.

We cannot and we should not be sure to be forgiven and to be accepted by God in all we do!

The angel leading us „Himmelan!“

No! Such certainty was and is misunderstood and still leads to great horrors.

Our understanding is more humble.

Following Gods commandments and trusting that he wants our best, we submit ourselves to his judgment.

From Paul we can learn, that such faith, such an

understanding, gives courage, strength, and a firm commitment for life on earth, whatever it may bring.

For the Christian churches in the different European countries and in the United States the Great War, and the Second World War, were catastrophic events. The churches nearly all submitted themselves to the support of nationalism, to the glorification of the military and of sacrifice.

I think, today we know better. But do we really?

Memorial Day, Volkstrauertag, gives as reason to be vigilant about the ways the gospel can also be misused.

The peace of God, which surpasses all our understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in our Lord, Jesus Christ. AMEN.