

## HANNOVER INTERNATIONAL WORSHIP

20 January, 2019 11.30 Petri Church

### Order of Service

Music

Welcome

Viola

Hymn As with gladness men of old

Reading Joshua

Hymn Be still for the presence of the Lord

Reading Matthew 3.13-17

Apostles' Creed

Hymn Christ when for us you were baptized

Sermon Pastor Dr Vera C. Pabst, Hannover

Hymn One more step along the world we go

Announcements

Tony

Hymn O morning star

Prayer of intercession

Tony

Hymn The Lord bless us and keep us

Blessing

**Go in peace: The blessing of God Almighty,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit  
be upon you and remain with you always**

Music

Sermon : Dr. Vera Christina Pabst

Date: Sermon for 20/01/2019

Place: Ev. - luth. Petrikirche, Hannover

Text: Joshua 3.5-11.17

Theme: The next step into the future

**Grace and peace to you from God our Father.** (Col 1.2b).

A father and a daughter are holding each other tightly. She beams with expectation. His face shows a mix of pride and melancholy. In a moment, she is going to leave. The big backpack leaning up against the teenager, the signs in the background... anyone passing by the billboard understands at first glance: This scene is set in an airport. There were no words of goodbye written on the commercial. I don't even remember the slogan nor the name of the company, though I passed the advertisement every morning on my way to work.

What I do remember though, is the heart-warming atmosphere between daughter and father bidding each other farewell at the airport. And, I do clearly remember what I happened to see next to that poster. The advertisement had been placed at the central bus stop in Hildesheim. And sometimes it felt as if it was a bus stop especially for people who were about to take a decisive step in their life: E.g. There was an elderly couple with a small suitcase who stepped onto the bus heading to the hospital: There was a young man in a suit who kept opening and closing the file he held in front of him: Was it a Master's thesis, a job application? A middle-aged woman who carefully held a home-made gift on her lap, neatly wrapped in foil, who was she about to dedicate it to?

Sometimes the thought crossed my mind that this bench was reserved for people who had an important day ahead of them, who needed some encouragement or somebody to accompany them.

How about you? What would have been your thoughts, looking at that advertisement portraying a new step in life? If your child or your grandchild is about to finish school, training or studies... this year, do you know if they have come to a decision about their future? Did you receive, with your Christmas cards, a save-the-date note for a wedding or a special birthday, a retirement party? What are the important days in your diary for 2019?

Such big events need a lot of advance consideration and preparation so that everyone who should be there can plan accordingly. Even in this age of the internet, blogs, fairs and exhibitions, guide books ... the many ways to gather all the relevant information about a gap year, an exchange program, a new job... It is, however, still different to then to take that step: packing your bags, standing at the airport, saying goodbye to your loved ones in order to pursue your new beginning.

Thinking back on those situations in my life, when the great day had finally come after weeks, months or even years of preparation, I remember my excitement and my nervousness, my anticipation and my anxiety. Therefore, I feel for Joshua. I understand why he needed encouragement to be able to take the next step. Especially considering that he did not carry the responsibility for himself alone, but for all those who were trusting him to lead them.

The passage I have chosen for our first Hannover International Worship service in 2019 brings us to the River Jordan. Forty years

after God had led them out of slavery in Egypt, after crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites have reached the river that forms the natural border to the promised land. Fire and cloud have been their signs of God's presence and direction as they travelled through the desert. The hope of their own country, in which they could live in peace and freedom, had carried them through. Now it is right there, before their own eyes. They see the steep, rugged mountain range, the formidable walls of the city of Jericho, the expanse of the valley to their left, and to their right the promise of fertile countryside.

Scouts secretly ventured over and have come back with more details. Apart from Joshua and Caleb, all those who accompanied Moses out of Egypt have passed away. A new generation is gathered there on the banks of the Jordan. They know the miracle of parting of the Red Sea only from the stories told by their parents and grandparents.

And now? The next step is right in front of them. What would have you thought, if you had been in the crowd on the river bank? What would have been your approach? To brave the situation and take the plunge? Or to stare as if hypnotised into the water until someone comes along who will accompany you? What would have helped you in this situation?

Unlike in our day and age, when every single step and motion would be captured on camera, no one stood on the shore at that time and wrote down the exact events. What happened was passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation. Only centuries later, after the Israelites had lost the promised land, was it written down what we read today in the book of Joshua.

What was central to the editors in the compilation of the traditional stories and sources was the following aspects: God himself gives the land because he has promised it, and obedience to him and his commandments guarantees that they can live there in peace and freedom.

From our perspective, these decisive events from salvation history may leave us with searching questions. While we may continue to struggle to understand why God would expel one people in favour of another, and why the region continues to experience unrest and tension, the people of that day could and would not be asking these probing questions. Rather, for them, the miracle is the decisive factor: a new era of the history of their nation can begin, because God himself is keeping his word.

This is vividly demonstrated and shown to the people of God at the Jordan: Firstly, they are tasked to prepare for the transition to the new life. As on Mount Sinai, they are to sanctify themselves by ceremonial ablutions to be ready for the encounter with God. Secondly, the priests are ordered to carry the Ark of the Covenant: this precious box of acacia wood, covered with gold and equipped with cherubim – statues of glorious angels – as guardians of the throne on all four corners of the Ark. It was the visible sign of God's presence among them. It contained the Ten Commandments, the first of which begins with the reminder of the Exodus:

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” (Dt 5.6) The words from the Red Sea are to go through the Jordan. The most valuable thing they have is not to be hidden in their midst and protected – as we so often heard or read of

people doing in stories of their flight and expulsion. No, they are to follow the sign of God's presence with due distance. Only then can the miracle of the open access into the promised land happen.

The presence of God, carried by the priests, will drain the river for the time of their passage. Even in the last century, this natural phenomenon was observed that in spring: The meltwater from the mountains would flow below the steep banks of the Jordan so that they break off and dammed up the water for a short time. For the people who have narrated the story from generation to generation, it was important though that a new phase of Israel's history can begin because God himself is in their midst and keeps his Word.

Centuries later, one came to the river bank on the other side of the Jordan. He was immersed by the stream. When he came up out of the water, heaven was opened and he heard the sound of God's presence, His Father's. On the banks of the river Jordan a new era began in Jesus' life, for this scene marks the beginning of his public ministry – according to all four Gospels.

In and through Him the will and the word of God has been made known. A new era in life began for many who met him, ate and drank with him, listened and talked to him. They were set free from what had burdened them previously. They felt understood in a unique way, and challenged to follow him and to live like him. That was a provocation. The Gospel of John (10:40) tells us that it was for that reason that Jesus withdrew to the banks of the river Jordan, to the place where he had once been baptized. Then he moved on, to take the next steps on his way to the cross. Like the Ark, it was

made of wood, but this time there was no gold, no Cherubim. Yet for us as Christians, that wooden cross turned into the sign of God's presence, even in the greatest hour of need, despair and loneliness.

I would have probably not noticed the little pendant if the old lady had not taken the thin silver chain and pulled it out. The silver cross was placed in her wrinkled hands. One could see that she had held that silver cross many times, had clung to it during those unspeakable, horrific years. Her godmother had given it to her on her confirmation day, back in Silesia. Who would have thought then how much comfort it would bring her?

When I walked into the living room, my eyes caught the small wooden cross on the dining room table. The children of the deceased sat on the chairs and couches around it. During the weeks of their farewell to each other, their mother had taken the wooden cross into her feeble hands and they had been prayed together: Psalm 23, the Lord's Prayer. That's the way she had asked them to bid her farewell. When the dying mother could not utter the words herself, her family continued praying: "What else could we have done?"

The peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**

**Hymn:** One more step along the world we go

## Announcements

Isiphambano Centre for Biblical Justice is a study and training centre dedicated to developing a holistic, theological, and cross-shaped response to racial and economic injustice within the South African context. Isiphambano is an isiZulu word which carries two distinct meanings. Firstly it, carries the meaning of a physical cross, reflecting the centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in our understanding of biblical justice. Secondly it, carries the idea of “crossing paths” reflecting our conviction that the pursuit of cross shaped justice will require us to cross paths with one another, to learn from one another, to listen to one another and to be shaped by one another. Finally, as we “cross paths” in pursuing a theology of “cross-centric” justice it is our conviction that those of us divided by race and economics will begin to find one another again in deep, just and reconciled relationships. The cross sets us free to begin the painful yet beautiful journey of “crossing paths” with one another in restoration and reconciliation. We are a non-profit organization that is fully-funded by individual gifts and ministry partnerships. Your contribution will go directly toward the production of more gospel-centered, church-equipping resources.

Isiphambano provides theological resources and training to assist the church to develop a cross-centred, contextual understanding and

practice of justice in their local church and community. We aim to achieve this by providing online and offline resources:

Online

<https://www.isiphambano.com/>

1. a library of resources promoting a cross-centred, contextual approach to justice. This will encompass theological papers, sermons, seminars, book reviews, a blog, a podcast and various small group material.
2. Podcast: with guests from a variety of backgrounds and theological convictions to explore what Cross-Centred, Contextual Justice looks like in South Africa today. Subscribe to the podcast here.

Offline:

3. We provide seminars, guest preaching, training workshops, experiential learning opportunities and story-telling events. We will also seek to help churches develop healthy ways of doing justice in a contextually appropriate way, making the most of accepted best practices, e.g. story telling e.g. on forced removals.... To this end we will partner with other specialist organisations where appropriate.
4. Study groups will be available for those wanting a more in-depth programme of reflection in understanding and applying cross-centred, contextual justice.

