

HANNOVER INTERNATIONAL WORSHIP

June 21, 2020 11.30 Petri Church Hannover

Order of Service

Music

Welcome

Hymn **Sing to God's glory (tune: Lobe den Herren)**

Psalm 19,8-14 + Glory to God

Prayer

Reading NT Mt 5,1-16

Apostles' Creed

Hymn **Will you come and follow me?**

Sermon incl. OT reading Jer 29,1.4-14

Hymn **Brother, sister, let me serve you**

Announcements

Hymn **There is a longing**

Prayer of intercession

Hymn **The Lord bless us and keep us**

Blessing

Music

Music

Welcome

Hymn **Sing to God's glory (tune: Lobe den Herren)**

Psalm 19, 81-4+ Glory to God

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father,

You are watching over us -

from our very first to our last breath on this earth.

We thank you for carrying us through times of hardship and despair.

We thank you for your sustaining mercies.

Grant us your Holy Spirit: open our eyes, ears and hearts for your Word so that we will be there for one another in this time of social distancing.

We ask you in the name of your Son who came,

lived amongst mankind and gave up his life for us

so that we may have hope and an everlasting future. **Amen.**

Reading NT Mt 5,1-16 Jane

Apostles' Creed

Hymn **Will you come and follow me?**

Sermon incl. OT reading Dr. Vera C. Pabst, Hannover

Sermon: Dr. Vera Christina Pabst
 Date: Sermon for 21/06/2020
 Place: Ev.-luth. Petrikirche, Hannover
 Text: Jeremiah 29, 1.4-14
 Theme: A letter from the past to give us hope for our future

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

“Fellow citizens, the coronavirus is changing daily life in our country dramatically at the present. Our idea of normality, of public life, social togetherness – all of this is being put to the test as never before.”

This is how Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel began her TV address on March 18th. By these unusual means she was seeking to explain the many decisions and restrictions implemented by the Federal Government in order to slow down the spread of the new virus: “That is the message an epidemic brings home – how vulnerable we all are, how much we depend on the considerate behaviour of others and, ultimately, how, through joint action, we can protect ourselves and offer one another encouragement and support. Every individual counts. We are not condemned to accept the spread of this virus...”.

She then emphasized: “Every single one of us must understand that, right now, the only way to show we care is by keeping our distance”. She concluded by challenging us: “We all must discover how we can show affection and express friendship. We are staying in touch via Skype, phone, email, and maybe also by writing old-fashioned letters. The post, after all, is being delivered”.
<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/statement-chancellor-1732302>

Some might have smiled at these suggestions, but our postal services got a lot more to do over the next couple of weeks. Not only parcels with all sorts of goods ordered online, but many a postcard or a letter were delivered. The idea of pen pals was revived. Churches called upon their members to write letters to those living in old-peoples’ homes. Primary school classes sat down to craft postcards with greetings for the elderly in their communities who had to stay at home for safety’s sake. I remember listening to a call-in programme on the radio one evening. A man in his 50s shared how surprised he was at himself for responding to such an appeal. He contacted a lonely man, 20 years his senior and confined to a small flat, “Now,” the caller concluded, “I can hardly wait to meet my new friend for a beer at a local Biergarten”.

Others used the weeks in March and April to sort through all the stuff that had piled up in cupboards and wardrobes, attics and cellars. Some worked their way through boxes full of letters and cards with words of affection for a birthday or a wedding, words of consolation and comfort during a time of sickness or at the loss of a family member, words of wisdom and ideas when a decision had to be made. Reading such lines, written by the hand of a person who cared, brings back precious memories. The past become alive again. The joy, the comfort, the encouragement and the thoughtfulness can still be felt – even years or centuries later.

Therefore, I have chosen a letter for today’s sermon. It was written 2,500 years ago in Jerusalem and delivered to an address in Babylon. The sender was the prophet Jeremiah who wrote to those bearing responsibility for Jews who had been deported from Judah.

Indeed, here in Germany, we are living 75 years after the end of the Second World War. Our country is currently not being taken village by village, town by town by a foreign army. Instead of the noise of tanks rolling down the road and artillery firing, sounds which still echo in the ears of those remembering the Spring of 1945, the virus is a silent enemy. Restaurants, villages, cities, religious congregations from all over Germany turn into “hotspots” and make it into the headlines. However, there is a similarity: It doesn’t matter whether it is an army or an epidemic, the reaction of a single person can make all the difference to the fate of another person, a village or a suburb.

Indeed, most of us gathered here today have not directly experienced deportation by military force. This virus only forces us to withdraw into our own homes. However, there is another similarity: It doesn’t matter whether it is the mighty influence of a foreign power or of Covid 19, the challenges remain the same: How can we adapt to living in these new circumstances that nobody really could have imagined before? Which principles should guide us in our day-to-day decision making? How do we adjust to the “new normal” when everything that we took for granted is now being questioned and has to be thought through in ways that now takes Covid19 precautions into consideration?

The new patterns have quickly become pretty standard, e.g. those who attend a supermarket without masks are reprimanded and asked to leave. The lifesaver at the Annabad, the local outdoor pool, said to three youths the other day: “This is a swimming pool, not a standing pool. You either swim or you have to leave the water”. When they protested, he added: “These are new times with new rules!”.

Reading back through the speech of our Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel again this week made me realize how drastic were the steps she tried to explain back then, and how much our everyday life has changed ever since, for a virus rules the world.

Reading her words and following the news from around the globe makes me feel grateful for how much we have been spared and fosters a growing awareness not to take for granted anything that we can appreciate right now. We still depend on the considerate behaviour of others to protect ourselves and these privileges. Every individual counts.

What were the reasons that forced the addressees of Jeremiah’s letter to organize their lives in a foreign country, so that they were given advice for their ‘new normal’?

The dominance of the former world power Egypt over Israel and Judah had been broken by the Babylonian victory over the troops of Pharaoh. The king of Judah had now to pay tribute to the king of Mesopotamia. In a short period of political weakness displayed by the far away ruler, the king of Judah decided to turn to the rival world power Egypt for support. In this difficult situation, caught between two mighty nations it was a fatal diplomatic mistake which soon led to the deportation of the leadership from the capital city of Jerusalem and the surrounding country of Judah. The Babylonian strategy was to deport influential and political figures: the family of the king, the heads of the administration and the military, the priesthood, the leading architects and craftsmen. They were given their own colonies in and around Babylon. Strategically, it was a wise move for it made it difficult for

those left behind to organize resistance. Economically, it was a wise move, for Babylon thus secured the knowledge and experience of the best craftsmen and statesmen. These then, the top ten thousand of Judah, were the recipients of this letter with news from home:

[Reading:

1 This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ...

4 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:]

Just imagine their excitement, in the days without internet and social media, to receive a personal letter all the way from home! What words would you love to read in such a situation? Words of consolation and comfort, of encouragement, so that you can feel the thoughtfulness and care of the person who wrote it?

We don't know whether they felt disappointed or even angry at Jeremiah. At least we know they didn't read the letter and tear it apart in their anger because this very letter has been preserved and has come down through the centuries to us. Instead of words of comfort and encouragement that speak of an end of their deportation, they are told how to adapt to their 'new normal' - straight-forward advice to conduct their new lives responsibly, to build houses, plant gardens, marry and establish families.

[Reading:

5 Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. 7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”]

I had to smile to myself, because Jeremiah's command reminded me of the long queues in front of the hardware stores and nurseries. And I was there, too. When we at the Lektoren- und Prädikantendienst were ordered to work from home, I quickly drove to the nursery and the hardware store to buy new pots and plants for my balcony. I wanted to be able to keep myself entertained outdoors if we were to go into strict lockdown. I longed to have something to watch grow in order to give me hope in the times to come.

Soon I found magazines sporting such headlines as 'how to turn your balcony or your garden into a summer holiday destination' and 'how to grow fruit and vegetables in a small space'. As a result of the Corona precautions urban gardening grew. And the Federal Government soon passed legislation that nobody would lose their flat as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic. The stay-at-home-order quickly revealed that having a home – and especially with a balcony or a garden – is a truly privilege to be thankful for!

Confirmation celebrations, birthday parties, farewells and inductions, and especially weddings had to be cancelled or postponed.

At first by a few weeks or months, often by a year, . . . in some case until the pandemic is over. Others came up with a compromise and celebrated with a very limited number of guests, had Zoom or Facebook live-stream parties. I am sure you all have stories to tell of how you learned to make use of technology to stay in touch without actually touching loved ones! It is a mercy that Covid 19 has struck us at this time in history, with all the advantages of modern communication. Just imagine that, as in the past, you had to wait for a letter to find out how those you care about are doing!

However, many aspects of life that came naturally to us will only be possible again once a vaccine has been found and is available! So it is understandable that many avidly follow the headlines about the latest developments in research and the use of well-known medicines to be tested on Covid 19 patients. It is understandable because it is so hard to live with the uncertainty, not to be able to make plans with a specific date as an aim, not to know when it will be all over and we are again able to meet with those who are far from us now.

Experiencing this uncertainty first-hand, I begin to understand why Jeremiah had to warn against false prophets, against those who offered the (false) hope that they could provide answers for people's burning questions about the future.

[Reading:

8 Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have.

9 They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the Lord.]

His words are a challenging reminder that we are to look closely at who is promising us what, who is making the headlines for what reason, whether it concerns the cause or the cure of the virus or a date for the production of a vaccine. Be aware, do not to fall for the false prophets of our day and age – out of desperation for a prospect of secure hope and a safe future! But Jeremiah's addressees did not receive very encouraging information about the date of their return to Judah.

[Reading:

10 "This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my good promise to bring you back to this place.]

70 years! If you take the average life expectancy of those days into account, it was highly unlikely that anyone listening to the letter would again see the land of their childhood. When relationships between North and South Korea were less volatile, there was a news item about family reunions of siblings in their 90s. The report ended with the remark: Soon there won't be anybody alive who still has a brother or a sister on the other side of the border who can remember a unified Korea". This is how long 70 years can be! 70 years is five years less than we have lived in peace in Europe. 70 years and no immediate end in sight, no quick-fix solution to their plight. So why hang in there, why persevere in times of uncertainty?

The longer the pandemic continues, the more often I hear the question in various interviews with politicians, in discussion panels on TV with leading experts, professors for medicine or economy: How long will it take? How will we make it through this pandemic if everything stays so uncertain?

Jeremiah knows what to hope for and he knows the one who has given him this promise of a hope and a future!

[Reading:

11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

12 Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.

13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

14 I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

Not the complete destruction, the annihilation of his people, but a new beginning for everyone scattered all over the globe is God’s final vision for the world. Thank God who keeps His promises to mankind! It is this relationship that will carry them through their time. His affection for His people provides a future of prosperity. Those words of hope are so important to Jeremiah that he puts the same message across in new phrases over and over again. God’s care for His people, His comforting words, can still be felt today, over 2,500 years later.

And another aspect of this passage still remains the same: The challenge to approach our future, by pursuing our relationship with God and with those around us! Therefore, in conclusion, I want to go back to the most well-known verse from this letter. It is the first of many passages in our Bible that clearly states that we – as those in a relationship with our living God – should also live responsibly and without fear – wherever we are, in that place that we call home (but remembering that is not our eternal home), under the rules and rulers who do not have the ultimate authority over our lives:

“Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” (V.7)

These verses were turned into guidelines by the first Christians to consciously live their lives, regardless of their current circumstances, by caring for the city and her people’s wellbeing.

The outbreak of this pandemic has forced the world to almost a standstill: what most considered our normal, everyday life can no longer be taken for granted. This standstill has starkly highlighted what has gone wrong over the last years, decades, even centuries.

I would even say it has made obvious the nature of mankind: On the one hand, we are created as relational beings and long to be close to one another, protective and supportive especially in difficult times.

On the other hand, we are so selfish – in Martin Luther’s explanation of sinfulness as self-centredness: We are so concerned about ourselves that we constantly turn around ourselves (*incurvatio eo ispo*). Just remember the panic buying at the beginning of March. The pandemic has revealed the structural injustices in our local and in

the global economy that most of us have benefitted from. E.g. cheap food and clothes made at the expense of many working under devastating conditions in production lines stretching around the world, and at the expense of the resources of God's creation.

Looking at it globally, in many countries the spread of the virus has most affected those that had the least anyway. Are we ready to take up our responsibility as God's people to care for those close to us and those afar?

In my understanding this pandemic is an opportunity to spell out Jeremiah's words in a new way, so that we do not just long for the old way of life to be continued, but for a "new normal" that is according to God's will! How can God's appeal to seek the peace and prosperity of 'the city' become our guiding principle for the "new normal"? Who can it help us in our day-to-day decision making?

I cannot spell out the consequences of those guidelines for you in more details, for it depends on your specific circumstance and ability, your willingness and the opportunities you face.

Sometimes it doesn't take much, just a small gesture that makes you feel the greater care and love.

Finally, the second part of Jeremiah's appeal "pray to the Lord for it" can easily be done, keeping the prescribed distance.

How will it work out that we have looked at this letter from Jerusalem promising us hope and a future? How will it affect your thinking as we go into another week of uncertainty?

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

Hymn

Brother, sister, let me serve you

Announcements

Collection for Isiphambano Centre for Biblical Justice

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

Hymn There is a longing

Prayer of intercession

Our Creator,

You have made us in your image.

Therefore, we ask you help us that we become more like you.

Strengthen our relationship with you and with one another.

Help us to see what gifts you have given us so that we can reach out to others.

Almighty God,

you have the best in mind for us.

Therefore, we ask you to trust you and to know what the best is for our city of Hanover and for our global village, the world.

We pray for those in offices of responsibility, as politicians, in our society and in the media that they will make the right decisions seeking the best for all of us.

Grant them times of rest and reflection, so that they can consciously decide when to take action and when to slow down, when to speak out and when to keep quiet.

Strengthen especially those who are involved in politics and society as volunteers and who seek to help the best they can under the current, ever changing circumstances.

Merciful God,

you see those who suffer injustices.

We pray for those who have been disadvantaged by structural racism and injustice. Strengthen those who fight against prejudices, sustain and comfort those who suffer, comfort the traumatized. We bring the people of the United States before you especially at this time of tragedy and unrest.

Make us sensitive in our dealings with others so that we understand better where our words or actions are hurting, when we not intend to.

Comforting God,

You hear the sighs sighed quietly; you see the tears shed privately.

Therefore, we ask you console those who have lost loved ones to the pandemic. Comfort especially the families and friends who did not have an opportunity to bid farewell to those they loved.

Strengthen the doctors and nurses, the staff in hospitals and homes that they may continue in their efforts to care for those in their hands.

Give wisdom to those involved in medical research that vaccines may be developed and made available for all to put an end to sickness and suffering, sorrows and sighing.

Eternal God,

our time is in your hand.

Therefore, we ask you: Strengthen us that we will not give up hope in the midst of these long weeks of the pandemic.

Grant us perseverance and new perspectives on life so that we will be a source of care and encouragement to those who despair.

All this we pray in the name of your Son who taught us to pray

The Lord's prayer

...

Hymn

The Lord bless us and keep us

Blessing

Music