

By Heart

“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Jeremiah 31:31–37)

A lifelong covenant – a dream in white. To love one another and to be there for each other. More than 60 years ago, *The Beatles* painted an idyllic picture of growing old together when they asked in their song “Will you still need me, will you still feed me when I’m sixty-four?” It was the 1960s, a time when I was singing in the church choir in my home-village. This turned out to be not enough for my desire to get it all and right now. I wanted to get away from the narrow world I was forced to live in. I wanted to go away. Far away. Today the goal might be New Zealand or Danish Greenland. For me the small town of Tübingen was far enough. Seven hours train travel. I couldn’t imagine going much further.

Many people search in vain for a recipe for lasting happiness. Success and failure in life and in relationships lie very close together. And often we ourselves contribute to the failure of a relationship that once began happily. We make resolutions, we promise, we make an effort, and we firmly believe that everything will turn out well. And in the end, it becomes clear that we expected and promised too much.

Our parents’ generation regarded *The Beatles* as the devil’s work. That was, of course, a compliment we the young generation gladly accepted. When I tell my grandchildren today that I am on Facebook, they say: Facebook is outdated - something for old people. Nevertheless, I dare to describe a very old biblical text from the sixth century BC as somehow timeless and actual.

In the 6th century BC, troops of the Babylonian ruler *Nebuchadnezzar* conquered the state of Judah. The city and the temple of Jerusalem were destroyed. The leading class of society was deported to Babylon—into enemy territory. Jeremiah had foreseen the catastrophe and had been attacked by his own people for it. But now, in exile, he encourages his fellow countrymen and gives them new hope. He speaks of God wanting to establish a new covenant with his people.

Even before this God had made promises to his people and several covenants. For example with *Noah*. However, all these covenants had failed because people were unable or unwilling to keep them. Therefore it needed a new, different one.

This new covenant is meant to remove everything that separates us from God. Regardless of whether we are happy and content or sad and burdened. Regardless of whether we are preoccupied with ourselves, paralyzed by fear, or tormented by guilt: God’s new covenant will unite us with God. We may feel just as young children can feel when being loved and protected by their parents. Anyhow, this is how it should be.

This new covenant, *Jeremia* is proclaiming is supposed to also fail in the end. However, in this very moment in exile it promises to be a counter-program to depression and just giving up. The new covenant *Jeremia is talking about creates a relationship with God, the source of all life. A relationship that* is not tied to performance pressure, the compulsion to succeed or self-optimization. A relationship that is not tied to any conditions except that we honor God and respect and value our fellow human beings as we ourselves wish and need.

According to the prophet Jeremiah, this new covenant is not written on paper or carved in stone, but written in our hearts. A covenant embodied and perceived with the heart and soul. There is the beautiful expression “learning by heart.” In German, it is often translated as “Auswendiglernen,” but it actually means “learning inwardly.” It is about understanding—with heart and mind. Emotional as

well as rational comprehension. To continue with Linguistics: The German word “Begreifen” refers to the early, childhood way of grasping the world. It is about understanding with our entire life story. A story which we share with others. Stories of unfulfilled dreams and longings, of deep disappointments and personal failure, as well as moments of happiness when heaven and earth seemed to touch. Stories about what is found and about that which transcends all comprehension and understanding.

In Jewish history from the beginning on, the relationship between God and His people has been understood as a covenant whose conditions are set by God. According to Jewish understanding, this covenant is the law of the *Torah*—the first five books of the Bible. Summarized in the *Ten Commandments*, it is about more than moral behavior. It is about fundamental values that shape life and community. It is about life before God. And about the “double commandment of love”: to love God and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. It is about justice and righteousness, guilt and forgiveness, reconciliation and peace, and mercy. About preserving creation. Ultimately, it is about one goal: How can we live a good life.

Therefore, we Christians and our church must not remain silent when, in a country that calls itself “God’s own country,” fundamental Christian convictions are systematically disregarded and violated. When the foundations of democracy are undermined, and peaceful coexistence among nations is massively threatened by instigated wars, threats, defamation, breaches of treaties, and economic chaos. When the legal system is shaken and an increasingly delusional, destructive, and completely unpredictable political conduct spreads fear and terror throughout the world—and when other tyrants of our time feel encouraged to act in similar ways.

In current public debates, the old question is being discussed again: How political may or should the church be? This is, of course, not about local political issues such as street lighting or sidewalk repairs, nor about party politics. It is about something else: The Church does not have any longer the sole authority to define the answers to social and moral issues. When it comes to social and ethical questions many other secular actors are present—trade unions, associations, organizations, action platforms, and of course social media.

Yet our open, secular, and pluralistic society is searching for orientation and for answers to the question of the good life. Where does orientation come from in the dynamic of a global public sphere shaped by the digital media revolution of the last twenty years? Where does orientation come from in a world that has become increasingly complex? And what contribution can the Church make? It would be a declaration of spiritual bankruptcy if the churches remained silent and retreat into personal piety and spirituality.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Theologian and resistance fighter against the totalitarian Nazi regime made it clear in the 1930s that the church cannot withdraw from public discourse. I quote from one of his writings: “*In fleeing from public confrontation (and retreating to mere) virtuousness... (someone might believe they can stay out of it). He does not steal, he does not murder, he does not commit adultery, and does good as best he can. Thus he can close his eyes and ears to the injustice around him...*” Bonhoeffer makes it clear: there is no apolitical church. Not only protest against injustice, but also silence about it, is a political position. The task of the church is to stand up—with expertise and passion—for the oppressed and the suffering and to call injustice by its name.

According to Bonhoeffer, there are not two realities—a secular and a Christian one. From a Christian perspective, there is only the reality of God in this world. And to be close to reality, from a Christian point of view, means looking at reality “from below.”

With regard to migration and deportation, this means that the church cannot be satisfied with mere numbers and procedures but must keep in view the fate of each individual person, of families and

children. In the light of the Gospel and the commandment of love, this means not limiting the horizon of responsible action to Bavarian, German, or European borders, but understanding it globally.

Bonhoeffer said in one of his sermons in 1934: “*Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power, and with its defense of the weak... (But) Christianity has adapted far too easily to the worship of power.*” Before my eyes I see the many evangelical supporters of Trump. Above all, they are the ones who made him great. Many others see in him an Antichrist. There is no apolitical church. Silence in the face of injustice is itself a political stance. Christian faith does not recognize two separate realities—a worldly and a spiritual one—but one reality: God’s reality in this world. To see reality from a Christian perspective means to adopt a “view from below,” especially in matters such as migration and social justice. The church must speak with competence, reason, courage, and hope—grounded in its biblical tradition. Above all, it must not lose hope, because it carries a powerful story of hope: the story of a people in exile who find new life through God.

In political debates and talk shows, the Church could also encourage making visible and discussing the political attitudes and value systems hidden behind mere numbers. For example, the question: What is the benchmark for economic success? Is it profit and added value or should the consequences for the weakest in society also be taken into account? Instead of narrowing the focus to cuts in social benefits, there should be the courage to address the taboo of inheritance tax and fair taxation of the few richest people in our society. It may be politically clever that to mess with richest and most powerful persons and lobby-group because their anger is feared more than the public’s fury. But then one should stop speaking of “painful but necessary decisions”.

Or take the issue of war and peace. On social media you may get the impression that it’s more about closing the defense gap and become ready for war rather than to become ready for peace. The message of the Gospel is quite clear: *Blessed are the peacemakers!* It is a lasting challenge to even the most rationally persuasive arguments for achieving peace through a massive readiness and ability for defense.

The speech of the Church must be grounded in the biblical and theological traditions of the Christian faith, and it must be reasonable, appropriate, critically constructive, and practical. But the Church’s speech should also be courageous, as the biblical prophets were, and should not limit itself to a form of political consultancy.

Above all, the perspective of hope must not be lost, because the church has a powerful story of hope—for example, the story of a people in exile, on the verge of despair or of losing their identity, who then experience being led out by God from captivity and self-doubt, strengthened and confident to enter a new life.

This ancient biblical story stands, I believe, in stark contrast to what we are currently witnessing on the political stage, where alliances are treated like marbles in the sand. In ancient Greek thought, evil was personified as the “diabolos,” who exercises power by throwing everything into confusion and thus destroying it. In the Lord’s Prayer, it is therefore not without reason that we pray: “Deliver us from evil.” The history of humanity shows that no rulers of this world, nor we ourselves, can redeem us.

God, on his part reconciles, heals, loves, comforts and gives hope in times of misery and depression. It is up to us to trust in God’s love and to act in accordance with it.

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