

**"The fruit of righteousness will be peace" (Isaiah 32:17)
Living together at the heart of Europe**

Antje Heider-Rottwilm - Sermon during closing worship
11 October 2015

Dear Friends,

It's a Saturday in Hamburg, the city I live in:

12 September 2015, 10 o'clock in the morning, there's an ecumenical service going on at St Peter's, the big main church. We listen to a couple of verses from Solomon's book of proverbs (Proverbs 31:8-9):

“Speak up for people who cannot speak for themselves. Protect the rights of all who are helpless. Speak for them and be a righteous judge. Protect the rights of the poor and needy.”

We are praying and singing together with Catholic, Eritrean, Syrian Orthodox, Lutheran, and Mennonite pastors, and people from many other churches. We pray for the huge numbers of people who are suffering violence and injustice, who are fleeing their home countries, and who are arriving in Hamburg in their hundreds every day. And we pray for ourselves, that we may do what is right, so that injustice is no longer allowed to flourish and people can get justice.

Afterwards we go to the Rathausmarkt, the market square in front of the city hall, where a huge crowd has gathered. Their message is: Hamburg is multi-cultural and refugees are welcome. An invitation was sent out by a broad coalition of churches, Jewish congregations, Muslim associations and mosque communities, trade unions, and societies; the mayor gives a wise and committed speech; and at 12 noon John Lennon's song "Imagine" is played on all the local and regional radio stations and everyone joins in:

Imagine there's no Heaven

It's easy if you try

No Hell below us

Above us only sky

Imagine all the people

Living for today

Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion too

Imagine all the people

Living life in peace ... (*yuhuuuuuhh*)

You may say I am a dreamer

But I'm not the only one.

I hope someday you'll join us

And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions

I wonder if you can

No need for greed or hunger

A brotherhood of man

Imagine all the people

Sharing all the world ... (*yuhuuuh*)

You may say I am a dreamer
But I'm not the only one.
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one.

I must admit that I didn't know the lyrics very well, so when I got back home I read once again the words of the song which everyone had sung with such great enthusiasm. It was clear to me that here we have a description of the age-old vision of peace which Isaiah promised people several thousand years ago and which is behind both Solomon's appeal and Jesus' beatitudes: the vision of a world in which all the people share with each other, a world of justice, of sister- and brotherhood.

But, according to John Lennon singing in the 1970s and those singing in the Rathausmarkt in Hamburg in 2015, this also means a world without religion. These same words were also sung by Shakira in New York a couple of weeks ago, straight after a speech by Pope Francis at the adoption of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

20,000 people in the Rathausmarkt are reassuring each other that there are a great many of us striving to make Hamburg a welcoming city and Germany an open country. But, at the same time, clashes at the railway station between violent right-wing extremists and left-wing anarchists are stopping the trains from running.

Lots of people in Europe and around the world think the abolition of religion is a precondition for peace. This is a challenge to us! We can't blame people for thinking that. Those of us who belong to churches and faith communities - we all share responsibility.

Because, when we look at the past, people have so often misused religion, including our own Christian faith, to justify violence and injustice as ordained by God. We all know this; I don't have to spell it out; Leonardo Emberti Gialloreti reminded us of it in his opening lecture; and this misuse of religion is still going on today. It is a betrayal of religion and of the world's religions.

And yet there are people in every religion who are touched by the spirit of peace and peacemaking. They have worked in the past for justice and nonviolence and continue to do so today. They believe that inner peace and the experience of God's mercy and compassion are inseparable from practising mercy and compassion towards other people and struggling for peace between individuals and between religions, peoples, nations, and ethnic groups.

We've come together here in Pristina with the biblical promise as our theme: "The fruit of righteousness (or justice) will be peace."

We've witnessed to each other about the trails of destruction left by injustice in our world.

We've shared our experiences of dealing with this constructively and trying to live out justice in small ways here and now.

"The potential of faith for peacemaking in political conflict"; "Economy for life"; "The 'Believers for Peace' initiative"; "The place of dialogue and structural change in conflict transformation"; "Identity and identities"; "Women working for peace and justice" - these have been the subjects of our discussions.

But the encounters, conversations, and visits with people from various religions here in this country yesterday have also been a step on the global ecumenical "Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace".

Is our faith strong enough? Or, to put it another way: Are we open and humble enough to experience the peacemaking power of our faith, to live it out and let it become powerfully effective?

"The fruit of righteousness will be peace." - Let's look a little more closely at the promise of Isaiah, which has been the basis of our discussions, and at its historical context.

“9 You women who live an easy life, free from worries, listen to what I am saying.

10 You may be satisfied now, but this time next year you will be in despair because there will be no grapes for you to gather.

- 11 You have been living an easy life, free from worries; but now, tremble with fear! Strip off your clothes and tie rags round your waist.
- 12 Beat your breasts in grief because the fertile fields and the vineyards have been destroyed,
- 13 and thorn-bushes and briars are growing on my people's land. Weep for all the houses where people were happy and for the city that was full of life.
- 14 Even the palace will be abandoned and the capital city totally deserted. Homes and the forts that guarded them will be in ruins forever. Wild donkeys will roam there, and sheep will find pasture there.
- 15 But once more God will send us his spirit. The waste land will become fertile, and fields will produce rich crops.
- 16 Everywhere in the land righteousness and justice will be done.
- 17 The fruit of righteousness will be peace and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever.
- 18 God's people will be free from worries, and their homes peaceful and safe."

Firstly, it is noticeable how often Isaiah uses feminine images to bring to life the relationships between God and individual people and between individuals.

"9 You women who live an easy life, free from worries, listen to what I am saying."

In the culture of the western Semitic region there's the image of a city which has feminine characteristics often represented by city goddesses. On the one hand, safety was to be found within the city walls, the city provided nourishment for everyone who lived there or found refuge there, and there was the architectural beauty of symbolic buildings. But on the other hand, there was the danger of being attacked and raped by one's enemies. The (daughter) city of Zion is at one and the same time a place where one may be abandoned by God and also a place which one longs for, a metaphor for Israel - God's people, people who fail but are also full of promise and potential.

No doubt Isaiah is also addressing women directly here. Upper class women have always, then and now, participated in injustice. They are accomplices or even actors in the patriarchal system of violence. They profit from the fruits of oppression. Even though they may, today or one day in the future, feel the effects of this system themselves: as a result of domestic violence, human trafficking, rape as a tool for humiliating the enemy, etc.

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Isaiah doesn't begin with a vision of peace. No, he describes a nightmare scenario. And the pictures which he paints are reminiscent for me of images which I see day-in day-out in the news and also a whole lot of images which haven't appeared in the news for a long time: images of drought, destruction, and chaos. They are real - these pictures of terrified people, and the ruins of hopes for a better life - here in this part of Europe and in other parts of the world.

Here's just one example, from an article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* in September 2015 on the theme of "Devastation - How climate change aggravates conflict?" (by Agnes Sinai).

Between 2006 and 2011 Syria suffered the longest drought and the greatest loss of harvests since the earliest civilisations in the Fertile Crescent, the region of winter rains which stretches from Israel into southwest Iran, where several thousand years ago people first began to plant crops and raise livestock. Between 2000 and 2008 reserves of groundwater shrank by 50%. A range of factors was responsible for the collapse of Syrian agriculture, from climate change through mismanagement of natural resources to population growth. The author points

out that both the collapse of the Assad regime and the rise of ISIS are in part due to the consequences of the long period of drought.

Poor harvests due to lack of rain in eastern China in 2010 and 2011 led to huge imports of wheat, and the resulting price rises aggravated social unrest in Egypt, the biggest importer of wheat, and were one of the reasons for the uprising. Research has revealed the connections between climate change, violent conflict, the growth of radical terrorist groups, and the huge flow of refugees.

I am impressed again and again by the concrete reality described by the biblical visions. They speak of fruitfulness and fruitful land in contrast with dry and devastated land. They speak of the fruits of justice, fruits which are tangible, nourishing, and tasty. This summer I grew tomatoes on my balcony again. A dear friend brought me the plants from Bosnia. A lot of patience, nurturing, sun, nurturing, and more patience were needed until the plants yielded ripe and delicious fruit. The plants need their own particular conditions. Every person, every child, every woman, every man should have his or her own particular needs met. That would be justice.

This promise of justice - and its realisation - is a golden thread running through all the books of the Bible and is at the heart of our faith. During the times when the Hebrew Bible was written, war seemed to be a basic fact of human existence. The God of Israel opposes this way of thinking. Justice, peace, the protection of refugees, compassion for widows and orphans, shalom for the land, shalom for the cities - these challenges too are woven throughout all the books of the Bible. In the Hebrew Bible, justice means God taking sides and putting things right for those who cannot obtain justice.

“Zdakah”, as justice is called in Hebrew, describes a relationship between God and individuals, between individuals, and between people and the whole of creation - a relationship, not a state of affairs. People, lands, and nations experience justice when their needs, i.e. the necessities of life, are met in a balanced way in relation to those of others, others who in the past have lived off the backs of people who are disadvantaged and marginalised.

Justice happens. People experience that Jesus is sensitive to their needs, that he responds to their needs, that he heals their inward and outward suffering. They have enough to eat; they become healthy; they have a renewed experience of community with God and with each other. Their bodies and spirits are rejuvenated.

Paul rejoices: “When someone is in Christ, behold, a new creation! The old has passed away. Look! All is new.” This is exciting - and unsettling! For Paul, the incarnation of God in Christ means that the global structure of death has been broken just as the power of death over each individual person has been overcome. Christ reconciles the world in his body, and in his life, death, and resurrection. It is not soldiers who secure peace by force of arms as in the *pax romana*, but rather Christ is the first of those who live peace. The power of oppression is overcome; love of one’s neighbour becomes love of one’s enemies. The people who follow Jesus become a community of equals.

The whole world becomes part of the history of God’s relationship with God’s people. Ethnicity, gender, and nationality can no longer justify the exercise of power over others. It is clear from Paul’s letters that proclamation of the new reality in Christ led to dangerous tensions even in the first congregations. There was a lack of peace even there. It was necessary to struggle for justice, whether it was a question of communal meals, or the distribution of goods, or whether differing spiritual gifts justified differences in power. “Here there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither man nor woman, neither slave nor free. You are all one in Christ.” These were revolutionary declarations in a society in which nationality, gender and class determined who had power. They are still revolutionary today.

People who try to live this out in their lives create conflict. They have to struggle against the structures of sin within themselves. They must struggle as a community - as a community of Jesus Christ - to live justice. In doing so, they challenge the society in which they live and those who are in power. And in this way they are provocative and put themselves at risk.

The history of Christian communities shows that the church of Jesus Christ has responded to this challenge in very different ways. Some communities close themselves off, believing that Jesus commands us to live an inward life as disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. These communities are always in danger of looking down on the sinful world with disdain and perhaps pity. Or they may become radical and want to use every means of rooting out sin from the evil world.

And then there are other communities which conform to cultural and social norms, even when it comes to ethnic exclusion, patriarchal structures and class conflict. And they imagine that they are nevertheless living out the love of Jesus.

And there are those who - rooted in faith in the transforming power of the love of God - face the challenges together. They know their own need for forgiveness and that makes them humble. And they know that they cannot go back to the way of violence, injustice and patriarchy, if they want to live as disciples of Jesus.

How does this transformation come about?

Isaiah proclaims:

“15 But once more God will send us his spirit.

The waste land will become fertile, and fields will produce rich crops.

16 Everywhere in the land righteousness and justice will be done.

17 The fruit of righteousness will be peace and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever.

18 God’s people will be free from worries, and their homes peaceful and safe.”

This is the revolutionary change where the new begins – embryonic, provocative, cautious, irritating. This living stream from above, this nourishing, stimulating change makes it possible for the seed of justice to produce fruit: respect, dignity, peace, security, calm...

Once more God will send us *ruach*, the power of God’s spirit which was brooding over creation at the beginning, which will give us a living heart instead of a heart of stone, as Jeremiah prophesied, and which carries the vision of a world without sin and death.

Through Jesus’ baptism, the spirit from above comes alive within him. At Pentecost we celebrate the great outpouring of the spirit into people from many different cultures, into men and women, into young and old, and in this way into the newly forming church of Jesus Christ. And through baptism we each become a member of the body of Christ, filled with this spirit of love and justice.

“Imagine there’s no heaven.

It’s easy if you try...

Imagine there’s no countries.

It isn’t hard to do,

Nothing to kill or die for,

And no religion too.”

Much as I like John Lennon’s music, I have to contradict him. Without heaven or the Kingdom of God and without religion, we will never live in peace.

Whatever images we use to describe what supports and sustains us - heaven or the Kingdom of God, spirit from above, ground of our being and source of hope:

I pray that we may be filled with the spirit of justice and peace descending on us from above.

I pray that we may become witnesses to the life-giving power of God for this world.

And I pray that, through us, justice and peace may grow in our non-peaceful world.

Amen.