

Church and Peace, 9 - 11 June 2017

Conference and Annual General Meeting

“Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news.” Luke 2:10

Reformation 2017: Freed from fear, empowered to nonviolence

Saturday 2.30 Uhr, Opening Remarks

Antje Heider-Rottwilm, chair

In this 500th Reformation anniversary year, in which Luther, Melancton, and Erasmus are being remembered, we – Church and Peace – want to put our own slant on things here in this city which, alongside Augsburg, was an important centre of the Anabaptist movement. Strasbourg was a tolerant city and one of the people who took refuge here was Michael Sattler. But he was subsequently expelled in 1527. Theological diversity was tolerated, but civil disobedience – refusing to swear oaths, use weapons, or take up public office – was not.

2017, 500 years of the Lutheran Reformation: This is what the ecumenist Dietrich Werner has to say: “One cannot talk about the Reformation in the singular – only in the plural: We need to be aware of the various key figures in reformations at different times in history and in various contexts. The reformation of Jan Hus (in the 14th century – long before Luther!) and the reformation of the Waldensians are just as important as the reformation which is associated with the names of Martin Luther and John Calvin. The Reformation is also misleadingly and one-sidedly defined from the perspective of the mainstream Protestant churches, the (German) Landeskirchen (regional Protestant churches), for example. From a theological point of view, the term “reformation” is not limited to a particular period in history. It is a dynamic and qualitative concept, a discerning principle of continuous re-formation by the Church, and a characteristic of the Church by virtue of the Church's existence.”

Dietrich Werner also points out that “reforming movements” are processes of reform within the Christian churches throughout the world, which are once again applying the liberating power of the Gospel in new social, cultural, and political circumstances. We need to think of liberation of faith, liberation of people, liberation of the Church, liberation of the world, and liberation of creation all as a single whole, and to develop the concept creatively. (1)

This year a Reformation Decade comes to an end and a Decade of Remembrance and Renewal is beginning. In February 2017 the executive bodies of the Mennonite World Conference met in Augsburg. They enquired into the meaning and significance of the Bible and opened a new Reformation Decade. Each year between 2017 and 2027 will have a particular theme with an opening event on a different continent, beginning in 2017/2018 with the theme “Renewed by the Word”. The emphasis is on the radical Reformation, but all churches will be invited, not only Anabaptist/Mennonite churches.

This is neither the time nor the place – and I'm not the right person – to give an in-depth historical analysis of the history of the Reformations, including the Anabaptist movement and the history of the Quakers and the Brethren.

We come together as members of Church and Peace to meet each other, to reflect, to share, to strengthen one another, and to ground ourselves spiritually. And there is a train of thought closely associated with the Reformation, which we want to follow together. And we've planned workshops for this conference to address the theme, "Do not be afraid!"

In psychology fear is defined as a feeling of being threatened. Fear has an object, which means that it only arises in the face of an actual danger. (2)

The word of encouragement, "Do not be afraid!", appears very frequently in the Bible: 95 times, it is said. We find it in the first book of the Bible (Genesis 15:1) and in the last book of the Bible (Revelation 2:10).

This is an indication that people in every generation have been full of fear – and have experienced God as the One who encourages them to face their fears and express them. And they experienced God as the One who helped them to overcome their fear.

This is clearly what is happening at what we might call the seam where the Hebrew Bible and the Gospel of Jesus Christ meet. At Luke 1:30, to start with. The angel speaks to the young woman, Mary, who has just heard the news that she is pregnant, which is inexplicable, totally unexpected and no doubt a burden to her. "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God."

And in Luke 2:10 the child is born in a shed in Bethlehem, and the shepherds are blinded and frightened by the heavenly light. The angel says to them: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. Good news for all the people!

Jesus stills the storm and then says to his disciples: "'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?' They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'" (Mark 4:40ff) Jesus smooths the waves and creates solid ground, but the disciples are frightened and unable to trust. Why are you so frightened? Don't you have any faith?

Faith can move mountains and smooth the waves. Faith creates solid ground. In today's culture of diffuse anxiety and concrete fears, this is a huge challenge.

In the 14th of his 95 theses Martin Luther wrote: "Imperfect piety or love (for God) necessarily brings with it great fear." And in his commentary on this thesis he narrows it down to the point that fear ultimately arises from a lack of faith, a *defectum fidei*.

The reformer Luther's faith in God and love for God did not lead him to depend on the power of faith, love, dedication, and discipleship. In 1522 he was still warning those who wanted to establish the Reformation through violence: "Non vi sed verbo" (Not by violence, but by the word.)

But in 1526 he wrote in his treatise "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved" (WA 625.626): "Indeed, I might boast here that not since the time of the apostles have the temporal sword and temporal government been so clearly described or so highly praised as by me ... Now slaying and robbing do not seem to be works of love. A simple man therefore does not think it is a Christian thing to do. In truth, however, even this is a work of love." In this way he legitimised violence instead of nonviolence, so that violence became the dark side of the Reformation and of the powers which used it as a means to political ends.

In contrast, the Anabaptists were deemed to be radical. Radical amongst other things because they expected Christ to return soon and wanted to organise their world accordingly – holding property in common, practising nonviolence, building a non-hierarchical church and a non-hierarchical society. They were to suffer severely because of this.

During the Year of Anabaptism in 2007 representatives of the Swiss Reformed Church asked for forgiveness from the descendants of the Anabaptist movement. And in 2010 the Lutheran World Federation at its Assembly in Stuttgart asked the Mennonite World Conference as the descendants of the Anabaptists for forgiveness of the burden of guilt which Lutheran Christians heaped upon themselves during the Reformation.

Do not be afraid! Quakers have been described as “absolutely fearless, immensely happy and always in trouble”. And I hope that those amongst us who are Quakers can feel that this applies to you. And I hope that you will infect the rest of us again and again – ideally with fearlessness and happiness, of course. Dorothee Soelle, the radical, uncompromising, prophetic theologian, also defined herself according to this tradition. “Absolutely fearless, immensely happy and always in trouble”.

Let's take another look at the subject of fearlessness: Is it possible that shrinking back from nonviolence, shrinking back from trusting fully in God's love like those who are vulnerable and threatened, also has something to do with our fear of death, which threatens to overcome me and all of us?

In the final document of the conference at Bienenberg in 2015 on the theme “Using Nonviolence against Violence? Conflict Intervention as a Challenge for Peace Theology, European Symposium, Voices from a peace church perspective”, it says: “Many suspect or believe that non-violence will always be limited in the dimension of intervention (as understood within the concept of R2P). We witness a lack of faith in the power of non-violence even in our own communities. There is a realistic fear of the manifold risks and dangers of a strictly non-violent approach. As above, there are no guarantees that such an intervention would be ‘successful’, and it implies the willingness to pay the price with one’s own life – as in the other options. In addition, we wonder whether and when the non-violence position is in danger of being reduced to a kind of legalism or ideology, no longer able to give priority to the real needs of one’s neighbour and the ‘enemy’?” (p.3)

Johann Christoph Arnold, a member of the Bruderhof community in the USA, a peacemaker, author, New York police chaplain and founder of the violence prevention programme „Breaking the Cycle“, who died on Easter Saturday, wrote a book with the title “Be Not Afraid.” He takes up and develops some of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thoughts as follows:

“...The best (and indeed the only) way to overcome the fear of death is to live life in such a way that its meaning cannot be destroyed by death. That may sound pretentious, but it is really very simple. It means that we must struggle against the urge to live an egotistical life, a life which mostly revolves around our own needs and wishes. It means overcoming our greed and practising generosity. It means being humble and not seeking power and influence. And ultimately it also means always being willing to give up everything – including our own self-image, our own life, and our own (selfish) opinions and plans. ... There is only one thing which is important: to live our lives for love, because only then will we be able to look death in the face with confidence when the time comes. I say this, because I'm sure that we will not be asked how successful we have been in our lives when we have

breathed our last breath and stand before God. We will be asked whether we have loved enough. John of the Cross put it like this: “In the twilight of life, God will ... judge us ... on how much we have loved.” (3)

In the invitation to our conference we asked: What does “500 years of Reformation” mean for us in today’s world where there is violence at so many levels – personal, societal, global? If Reformation means realising that God is grace, love and mercy, and calls us to freedom, then we need to articulate what this means and to persevere in living it out in all areas of our lives:

- to embrace God's love which is given to us in Jesus Christ in all vulnerability
- to accept our own security in God's love and our own human vulnerability
- to denounce false powers and principalities, false security and, as a consequence, the use of violence as a means of protection and security
- to live out nonviolence in all areas of life – personal, societal, global – and to advocate for policies which affirm life.

This means, as Dietrich Werner says, applying, once again, the liberating power of the Gospel in new social, cultural and political circumstances. We need to think of liberation of faith, liberation of people, liberation of the Church, liberation of the world, and liberation of creation all as a single whole, and to develop the concept creatively.

For us, that means that it is now time for the churches to take the reforming step of faith towards fearlessness grounded in God's love and therefore also towards nonviolence.

During the conference we want to reflect on some of the different areas of our lives, to bring each other “good news” and to allow fear-free, safe spaces for sharing and learning together to take form.

- (1) Dr. Dietrich Werner, Reformation - Bildung - Transformation, Ökumenische Perspektiven zum Thema Reformation und Eine Welt, 12 Thesen - Vortrag Bad Herrenalb, July 14, 2015
- (2) <http://www.enzyklo.de/lokal/42134>
- (3) Johann Christoph Arnold, Be Not Afraid: Overcoming the Fear of Death, The Plough Publishing House, 2002, p.203