

Closing worship at the international conference
of Church and Peace
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Sermon on Psalm 85:9-12

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Let me hear, what God the Lord will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.
Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet,
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.

(Psalm 85:9-12, New Revised Standard Version, anglicised edition, Great Britain 2011)

Dear sisters and brothers,

Righteousness and peace shall embrace. This message of hope from Psalm 85 is the motto of our conference and the chosen text for our worship. Justice and peace will get so close that they kiss each other. The verse can also be translated in this way. What does this hope mean to us?

We have come together from many different countries, each of us a "knot" in the Church and Peace network which spans across the whole of Europe. As Christians from various communities and congregations, churches and communions, peace service agencies and peace organisations, we are "journeying together for reconciliation in a fractured Europe", as it says in the invitation to this conference.

What is our hope for Europe?

For this fractured Europe: a part of the Earth where God's spirit and the Gospel are so sorely needed?
For this fractured, conflict-ridden Europe, which is exporting weapons and violence? For this Europe dominated by new nationalist movements and an unjust economic system?

The Europe of today needs a new vision of the future. A vision which can inspire young people as well. Europe needs a broad vision, in which all sorts of people can find a place for themselves.

For us, as people who put our faith in God, we find that there is such a vision underlying Psalm 85 and the biblical message as a whole.

The whole of the Bible is concerned with these two great concepts, justice and peace, for all people. Jesus Christ talks about the Kingdom or Realm of God and says that the peacemakers and those who hunger and thirst for justice are blessed.

"The kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit".

This is what we've been singing. And this is the message of the Gospel summed up in a single theological sentence in the Letter to the Romans (Romans 14:17).

Psalm 85 says that justice and peace belong together - along with friendliness, compassion, and respect for one another's human dignity - and with God, with God's mercy, in which we put our faith.

"The kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit".

Our lives are inspired by this great hope for the future: In God's Realm people will come together from all over the world, from East and West and from North and South, to sit at one table. And finally, at long last, they will live in peace with justice and in freedom with dignity.

This is what constitutes God's Realm - and there is joy too! Fun and joy are part of life too, aren't they? - hugs and kisses, singing, and sharing together in all our diversity.

(We savour a tiny foretaste of this at all our Church and Peace conferences and meetings!)

We are journeying together on the pilgrimage of justice and peace. We each represent a smaller or larger group of people, who are working for reconciliation and solidarity in their own areas and regions in a variety of practical ways. At the same time, within the Church and Peace network, we are all bound together across national borders and are trying to help create a new culture, a culture of nonviolence.

There are only a few of us - and we are a minority, even within the churches - who speak out with such clarity for new economics, for the abolition of war, for nonviolence, and for civilian conflict transformation.

We can't do a great deal at the European level or even at the national or regional level. And whatever we are able to do, we can only do it when God gives us strength and courage and an awful lot of patience. But we don't want to become resigned or just live our own private lives.

We are called to follow Jesus. And we trust in God's spirit, which is powerful in those who are weak. God gives us strength and patience for the long haul.

So we try in many different places and with very limited resources to make our fractured Europe a little better, a little kindlier, a little more just and peaceful.

We think globally and act locally: There's no other way.

Europe - and the whole world - desperately needs a great, global vision of hope! A globalisation of the vision of people living together in peace with justice.

Will we succeed in maintaining this great hope? - in the areas and regions where we live, at least?

What does this Europe look like from here, from England, from London? What do people think about Europe, as Brexit is becoming imminent?

There's more to Europe than the European Union, of course. There's the good old Europe which we often glorify when we look back at it. There's modern Europe with its terrible history of war and destruction. And there's the Europe of today - a political entity which is full of tension and deeply divided in so many ways.

Europe: all these countries from Britain to Russia, from Norway to Sicily, from Portugal to Iceland, from the south of Spain to the north of Lithuania, from Ukraine to France, from the islands off the south coast of Greece to the Scottish Hebridean Islands.

If we were to put aside all the problems, just for a moment, and imagine that we were floating over these countries in a hot air balloon, then we would say: Isn't this continent a breathtakingly beautiful part of the Earth?

Space in which to live, for which we thank God!

A precious part of Creation which we need to cherish.

A diverse and multitudinous ensemble of landscapes and natural habitats. A great treasure trove of mountains, seas and lakes, islands and rivers, cities and villages.

Yes, in spite of all the problems, Europe is a wonderful, richly varied melting pot of all sorts of people with lots of different gifts, traditions, languages, music, and art of all kinds.

Thank God for all the times and places, in which people succeed in living together. For the overcoming of deeply-rooted enmity and prejudice.

Thank God that it was possible to reconcile the nations of Europe after two great wars. Not everywhere, but to a large extent.

Thank God for every wall which has been torn down, including those in the hearts and minds of Europeans.

But we also bring to God our desires and requests. We are in the year 2018 and we are aware of a great deal of suffering. A lot of people are fearful and suffer because of new walls, exclusion, and discrimination. We think of the refugees who are drowning in the Mediterranean. Of the people who, for all sorts of reasons, are sent back into destitution, poverty, and places where they have to fear for their lives. We think of the many people who live in abject poverty in the heart of Europe.

No, the Europe of today is not a peaceful place! I can't stand it any more, when people giving speeches claim that we have had peace in Europe for 70 years. It's a false peace! We've simply exported war and violence - to the borders of Europe and beyond. The cruelty and brutality are obvious and it is the poor who suffer most.

What does the vision of Psalm 85 have to say to us today in our fractured Europe, in the current reality in which injustice and violence prevail?

We still have a great hope and a great vision: Justice and peace will meet and kiss. And justice will shine down from heaven and transform the Earth. This is our hope for Europe and for the whole world.

Not because we have the power to transform the world. But because God will sort it out! Because God's Realm is already growing. This is the great hope which we - all of us in Church and Peace - share. It is a hope which we also share with our fellow believers in all the various countries of Europe and throughout the rest of the world. And with all the people of goodwill who are journeying together with us on the many pilgrimages of justice and peace:

The vision of Psalm 85 has the potential to appeal to people of other faiths.

God wants peace and justice for this world. The two are bound up together and are indivisible. Not at an abstract, philosophical level, but in physical reality. Without justice, without a more just economic system, there can be no lasting peace, neither in a particular region nor in the world as a whole. Everywhere where armed conflict and civil wars predominate we see that where there is no peace, there is no justice of any kind and only the strongest or the most heavily armed people hold sway.

A just peace requires that justice and peace come together and embrace. (As portrayed in the illustration of Psalm 85 in the Stuttgart Book of Psalms from the 9th century.)

There is also a modern illustration of Psalm 85 on our songsheet. This work of art was created during a workshop attended by people participating in an international ecumenical partnership conference which was held in the German city of Essen in 2010. The theme of the conference was: "Overcoming Violence - for a culture of reconciliation". At workshops, in which young people also participated, art was used to give visual expression to texts from the Bible. This is how this beautiful image of Psalm 85 on a long sheet of cloth came to be created.

"Justice and peace kiss each other" is written in German across the top.

We can see a strong sun, the sun of justice. "Justice shines down from heaven", as it says in our psalm.

To the left and right of the sunbeams, which join in the form of a cross, two brightly coloured peace doves are sitting on what could be the branches of a large tree. Justice and peace belong together.

In the centre of the picture there's a monk - could it be Jesus? - who is stretching out his arms to bestow a blessing and saying: "*Peace be with you all.*"

The scales in the top part of the picture are an intriguing feature: In the upper dish is *Iustitia*, representing justice and what is right. In the lower dish is *Dominio*. Power and dominion. They weigh more in our world, which is why this is the lower of the two scales.

This is today's reality: Power and oppression rule the lives of millions of people. Unjust trading relationships and an exploitative economic system make a few people increasingly rich and powerful and many many millions of people increasingly poor and dependent.

Hunger, violence, and war are becoming prevalent, especially in the global South, as a result of the power structures, the empire, established by the global North. This is called "Dominio" here.

But we shouldn't let ourselves off the hook too easily. Through our lifestyle and all that we consume we are all bound up in an economic system which causes people to be exploited and has upset the Earth's climate and ecosystems. This economic system is killing people and destroying nature.

Directly. And indirectly, through the destruction of whole tracts of land, land-grabbing, the arms trade, and armed conflict.

Isn't it about time that we listened to the voice of God? - as the psalmist asks. We're beginning to understand that we have to repent, so that everyone can enjoy a good life.

"A good life for everyone": That's the Latin American vision of a more just and peaceful world. And it's the starting point for a new theology of liberation from the false God's of our time.

What can we do here in Europe? as a first practical step, at least? The picture contains two possible answers:

Firstly: We can support and promote fair trade. In the bottom left we can see the outlines of Europe and a few white-skinned people. Above this we can make out a bar of chocolate. And above that a South American cocoa-picker with a couple of cocoa beans which are going to be made into chocolate. The word (or words) for "Thank you" appear in a different language on each chocolate bar.

Another idea is depicted in the bottom right of the picture: Here we see the flag of Namibia and a man with a banknote in his hand - 100 Namibian dollars. The letters B-I-G stand for "Basic Income Grant" - a universal basic income.

A pilot project, which was conducted in a Namibian village a few years ago, showed that a basic income gave every individual the opportunity to access education and health care. A lot of people were able, through their own skilfulness, to significantly improve the economic situation of their families. A basic income is now being tried out in many other places and it is to be hoped that more and more politicians - in Europe as well - are being convinced by it.

The whole picture is a good representation of Psalm 85, which is so full of wisdom: Justice and peace belong together. Justice shines down from heaven like the sun, when God's will prevails. When we repent and turn away from worshipping the false Gods of this day and age, and listen to the voice of God, we will then do things differently - and stop doing a lot of things altogether. We will turn away from the false God's: power and Mammon, violence and greed.

Psalm 85 puts it so well: Let us hear what God will speak.

God speaks "Peace!" to people, to His people - even today: Indirectly, through the words of the Bible and through Jesus Christ and his message and all that he did. And God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit, which we pray for again and again. God always says the same in every situation and in every language: "Peace!"

So we pray to the God of Peace for all our pilgrimages. We pray for strength, love, and patience for the short pilgrimages as well as for the long ones, for the difficult journeys and also for the easy ones.

We trust in Jesus Christ, who has sown in our hearts the hope for the Realm of God.

Jesus stretches out his arms and says: Peace be with you.

Peace be with you all.

Amen