

## **Summer School in Hofgeismar**

*Predigt von Bischöfin Dr. Beate Hofmann am 19.08.23 in Hofgeismar.*

“Blessed are the peace makers”

Grace may be with you and peace from God who is and was and will be with us. Amen.

Dear participants of the UEM Summer School, dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to welcome you here to the International Summer School "Peacebuilding and Human Rights Protection". You came here to Germany from many different countries and churches. You will reflect the art of peace making in connection to the conflicts and struggles in your respective contexts. I am happy and proud that UEM and all the partners of this summer school chose this place and Gewaltfrei Handeln from Wethen to work with you around these issues.

As a bishop of this church, I would like to welcome you warmly to our regional church and I want to thank all those people who support and organize this summer school.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Mt 5,9) Jesus gives us with this beatitude a very clear and profound orientation for our life and work as Christians. We are supposed to work for peace, to be ready for peace and to be creative in regard to ways of peace making.

This is a huge challenge and I am sure, a part of this conference will deal with sharing experiences around the complexity of this challenge. When I listen to stories from partners from other churches, it seems like the language of war and violence is global and universal. The cycle and the mechanisms of hatred, of violence and of war seem to be similar all over the world. However, the way of peacemaking does not have a global recipe, it needs local knowledge about roots of conflict, about cultural traditions and important network people that could support peacemaking. But we share the challenge as Christians to be peace makers, to show that it makes a difference if you live in the perspective of the Kingdom of God and as children of God.

The challenge of peace making is very present in Germany and in this region in these days. In Germany, we have a long history with violence and with wars, with horrible wars. Kassel, the big city nearby, was heavily destroyed 80 years ago in WWII. Nearly 90 % of all buildings were destroyed through heavy bombing, 400 000 bombs were dropped and more than 10 000 people killed in a single night.

Why did the allied forces destroy Kassel? The Nazis in Germany started the war and Kassel was and is a center of military weapon production. So it was also a symbolic act to destroy this city.

People of my generation grew up with the clear conviction:

"War shall not be according to God's will!" This was a central and shared conviction when the World Council of Churches was founded in Amsterdam in 1948. God wants life for all people in abundance, in safety and without fear. He wants us to live in just relationships, without oppression and exploitation, without violation of human rights and with all people and all creation. In Hebrew, this peace in justice is called "Shalom": peace with God and in each individual, peace with people near and far, peace with nature and the generations after us.

I grew up with a strong yearning in my country and my family for peace. We protested against nuclear weapons, I was part of big peace demonstrations in the 1980s for disarmament. "Swords into ploughshares", that was the slogan in East and in West Germany.

And today? Today we experience a war in Ukraine, not very far away from Germany, with many refugees in Germany. A war that was started by an aggressor who does not respect any rules of international law and human rights, a war that kills thousand of people not only in Ukraine, but all over the world because of rising prices for wheat and corn. And suddenly, Germany spends millions of Euro to support the army in Ukraine. Suddenly, the weapon production in Kassel is a part of supporting the struggle of the people in Ukraine for freedom and democracy.

So, we Christians are in a huge dilemma. We do not want war, but we cannot push the people in Ukraine into a regime that kills people, violates human rights and destroys the culture and the will of the people in Ukraine. For many people in Ukraine a forced peace according to Russian rules is no option. Justice and peace need to go together.

What does it mean to be a peacemaker in this situation? How can the Christian tradition help in this war to find peace?? That is our challenge and our struggle in Germany these days and we discuss this a lot. I want to share some learnings from our discussion around peace making in this situation.

As Evangelical Church in Germany we realized: there are different perspectives, different voices, different arguments in this conflict. There is not one perspective that is right and all the others are wrong. We have to accept: we are in a dilemma, there are good arguments for both sides and we need to listen to all these different voices and we need to endure the complexity of this conflict and deny the temptation of easy answers. That is not easy because politicians and the media and many people love clear pictures of good and evil and easy answers of right and wrong. So, one of our tasks in this situation is to teach living with ambivalence and strengthen what we call "ambiguity tolerance".

This endurance of ambiguous situations is one aspect of Jesus` way of conflict resolution. I think of a certain biblical story: Jesus met the adulteress and said: those of you who are without sin may throw the first stone. That sentence put people in the middle of a dilemma.

Yes, this woman did something wrong, but who are you to judge and what does it help to kill her?

A second aspect is the inner attitude in this conflict. Jesus says in the Sermon of the Mount: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." (Mt 5, 43-45) Here Jesus refers to our inner attitude towards those who do evil. Do we allow us to hate those who do evil and to dehumanize ourselves as well or do we manage to still see the vulnerable person in our enemy, a person who is created in God's image as well?

Blessed are those who are ready for peace, that is one way how Luther translated the beatitude. Are we willing to give peace a chance by looking differently at people and at conflicts?

In Germany, we have a long tradition of prejudice against Russians. With the war in Ukraine all these prejudices and fears came up again. As Christians we have to work against demonizing a whole country and all the people who live there. Pinchas Lapide, a Jewish theologian, taught us that love your enemy does not mean you have no right to protect your country and your loved ones. But you have to work for ways of de-enimization, Entfeindung, to overcome the idea that the other is your enemy.

Strategies of the sermon of the mount like turning the other cheek or going the extra mile are ways of surprising the other to find another relationship and reframe the perspective, breaking the cycle of violence and aggression. The effort to listen to the other side, to understand the other perspective is one aspect of this process.

These strategies lead to my third aspect. Christianity has a strong tradition of pacifism, of nonviolent conflict resolution, of practicing methods and ways of dealing with conflict and anger in a different way. The Quaker, the Mennonites, the community of Sant'Egidio are examples for this tradition of peace makers in Christianity. Our task as Christians is: keep the other thinking, the other voice, the other experience alive, so that people do not only know and learn the language of hatred, of violence, the circle of aggression, but also the knowledge about nonviolent conflict resolution, about getting out of the circle, creating places where there are other rules, where people listen to each other and accept different perspectives and opinions.

I think it is our task to keep this peace loving approach alive, to look for other ways of dealing with conflict and to introduce these other perspective into the public discussion. That is one way of being light for the world.

Being a peace maker needs public involvement, needs the courage to say: War is not the only way how we can deal with conflict and difference in interest and option. And if you want to get out of this killing and this incredible and unbearable waste of resources and lives and future perspectives, then think of this and prepare for creating peace. Being a peace maker includes both, the prayer for peace in our churches and the practical work for peacemaking in our societies.

We can do all this because there is a very basic conviction:

We belong to one family though we come from all parts of the world, from different religious and cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

That is the great chance of international work and ecumenical movement: we can work together for conflict resolution, we can learn from each other, teach each other about traditions of peace making and conflict regulation, enrich us in our faith, learn about how we get involved in our societies and countries, how conflicts are connected with each other and how we make a difference.

That is the blessing and the chance of this summer school.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” That is our challenge, our task and our vision. Amen.