

Wie mich der Vater geliebt hat, so habe auch ich geliebt. Bleibt in meiner Liebe!
John 15.9

The first German that I ever remember hearing came from two popular songs from the 1960s. The first was: *Wunderschönes fremdes Mädchen, warum bist du so allein?* The second was *'Sag mir wo die Blumen sind?'* ('Where have all the flowers gone?' the Pete Seeger song sung by Marlene Dietrich). It made me think the Germans are always asking questions, good questions, important questions! Asking questions is important. Jesus asked people questions and His Gospel words ask questions of all of our lives.

The first German I ever *spoke* in public was a sermon in Schweiz in 1982 shortly before my ordination. I still remember the opening words: *'Ich möchte sie vielen gruezie von Schottland, und ich hoffe das wir etvas voneinander lernen können.'* Schweizerdeutsch! etvas voneinander lernen können.. Christian discipleship is about *learning*. A disciple, the New Testament word is *'mathetes'* means **learner**.

It is a privilege to be here and to learn so much of what God is doing in Germany, especially in the ministry of reconciliation, the ministry of crossing boundaries. There are physical walls out there, like the Berlin wall was and the dreadful Israeli Palestine wall still is and there are walls within us, the walls of personal, cultural or national prejudice and fear. I studied in Switzerland with people from every continent. (I made friends with pastors from East Germany under Erich Honecker where Christians suffered much for their faith and pastors from West Germany.) There were 60 different languages spoken. Our life together moved between two states, the tower of Babel and Pentecost! While we were there, Margaret Thatcher sent troops to the Falkland Islands. I remember being made as a British person to feel personally responsible for the war. I have listened to some German friends here who have told me that when visiting other countries, they can't help feeling judged for what happened in the Second World War. We are not responsible for what others have done before us but as Christians we recognise that we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and that history teaches us how easy it is to collude in the structural sins of our own national governments. But we recognise too that ,as forgiven sinners, we are called to be, in the words of Karl Barth, 'reconciled reconcilers'.

Whenever we cross boundaries of race, of culture, of any kind of difference we become bigger people, or to borrow the language of St Paul, our hearts are enlarged and our minds are enlightened. We become more Christ-like, we begin to love more as Christ loves, Christ in whom divisions are healed and difference is celebrated.

Jesus' words, *'liebt eure Feinde und betet für die, die euch verfolgen'* ('Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you') ask questions of all our lives. This we cannot do without the grace and mercy of God who makes the sun to shine on the just and the unjust, *'er lässt seine Sonne aufgehen Bösen und Guten'* (Matt.5.45) How can we love with such a love? How can we human beings with all our personal insecurities and cultural prejudices live out this radical all-inclusive love of God? This is the love of God which loves unconditionally, to the end. This is the love with which Jesus loves us: *'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.'* How much of the worst of human behaviour and the worst of our own behaviour comes from not knowing, not experiencing or not believing that we are held in such love in the heart of God? Jesus tells us to live in this love, to remain in his love. *Bleibt in meiner Liebe.* How? *'If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love.'* (John 15.10) Obedience.

Obedience is a somewhat unfashionable, indeed counter-cultural concept in today's western world, where the emphasis has been for some years now on self-fulfilment. 'Obedience' does not sit well in today's individualistic 'Fulfil-yourself' cultures. In Britain, one of our largest young people's uniformed organisations, The Girl Guides, has recently changed the promise made on joining. It used to begin 'I promise I will do my best, to love my God'. It now begins 'I promise I will do my best: to be true to myself.' God is replaced by self, but as Christians we know that it is only through the grace and forgiveness of God that we can become our true selves and truly free. For freedom Christ has set us free. So obedience is not the denial of freedom but the doorway to freedom. Jesus said *'I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete./ Dies habe ich euch gesagt damit meine Freude in euch ist und damit eure Freude vollkommen wird.'* John 15.11. The root meaning of the New Testament word for obedience-*hypakouo* - is to listen under. I often walk my dog in the woods along the road. He is an obedient dog

in that he listens. He comes when I call him. Most of the time! He is obedient until he sees or smells a rabbit. Then when I call him, he pretends he is deaf! The reason I am calling him is that I don't want him to chase the rabbit across the road and get hit by a car. God knows what is good for us better than we do.

Obedience for us means to listen to God and to trust Him. God gives us the freedom to do this or not do this, to choose his way or ours.

Many of us here have been meeting in these last two days to listen to God, especially in His call to us all to be ministers of reconciliation, to be people who cross boundaries, people who resist the scapegoating tribalisms that demonise those who are different and create enmities. You will know, I'm sure, of the famous First World War football match on Christmas Day 1914 in Ypres, when German and British soldiers stopped shooting at each other, came out of their trenches and played football in the No Man's Land between their trenches. This was begun by a brave German soldier who took the risk of coming out of the safety of the trench and walking into danger to seek a Christmas peace. For three days there was a ceasefire before the fighting continued with terrible bloodshed on both sides.

As human beings, as children of God, we are called to come out of the trenches, the trenches of our prejudice and fear and reach out in love to the stranger, even the enemy.

During the Second World War, on Remembrance Day 1940, in Coventry Cathedral Provost, Howard prayed this prayer: 'Let us pray for our enemies: Lord of boundless love, who in thine hour of agony didst pray for those who nailed thee to the Cross, we beseech thee for our enemies that thou wouldst turn their hearts and incline them to mercy. So that when this hour of conflict is passed, they and we may be united in the bonds of Christian love and work together as friends for the advancement of thy kingdom by the power of thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

Four nights later, on November 14th bombs fell on Coventry and her Cathedral. In the national Christmas Radio broadcast six weeks later, standing in the ruins Howard said: '*We are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge; we are bracing ourselves to finish the tremendous job of saving the world from tyranny and cruelty; we are going to try to make a more Christ-*

Child-like sort of world in the days beyond our strife.' As we know, later the seaport Kiel was to be bombed even more heavily, and later Dresden with even greater devastation. But bridges of reconciliation were to be built and communities of reconciliation – Communities of the Cross of Nails - have grown across this country and the wider world, inspired by the God who in Christ brings life out of death who was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. There are so many human stories of the healing power of reconciliation. I was moved to discover that in the recent reconstruction of the FrauenKirche, the craftsman who made the orb and the cross on the dome was the son of a bomber pilot who dropped bombs on Dresden on Ash Wednesday 1945.

This Church here in Hofgeismar is known, I believe, as the *Fountain Church*, built on the site of a fountain or a spring, known for its healing waters. People came here for healing. We read in Psalm 36.9 . *'For with you is the fountain/well of life, in your light we see light./ Denn bei dir ist die Quelle des Lebens/in deinem Licht schauen wir das Licht.'* It is in Christ we know our sins are forgiven and true healing. It is in Christ, who has broken down the dividing walls, that we find peace that this world cannot give. It through the grace and mercy of God in Christ that we can be instruments of his healing, his forgiveness and his reconciliation.

Jesus said, Jesus says *'Remain in my love. Bleibt in meiner Liebe.'*

+John