

Opening devotion on John 20:19-23
International Ecumenical Conference "Mission Today
facing the challenges of the 21st century

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I.

Dear brothers and sisters, the evangelist John tells a very unique Pentecost story. Unlike his colleague Luke, he does not have a stormy roar and tongues of fire; he does not have enthusiastic people and international crowds who understand each other in a miraculous way, even though they speak different languages.

In John, Pentecost comes quietly, gently and tenderly. And therefore strong in its own way.

Let us listen to what John tells us:

19 Now on the evening of the first day of the week, when the disciples were gathered together and the doors were shut for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them: Peace be with you. 20 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad to see the Lord. 21 Then Jesus said to them again: Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, so I send you. 22 And when he had said this, he blew on them and said to them: Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 Whose sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; whose sins ye retain, they are retained.

II.

The doors are closed - because of fear. This is how the Pentecost story of John the Evangelist starts. This scene, dear brothers and sisters, grips me especially this year. It literally jumps out at me - more than any exuberant enthusiasm could do.

Closed doors - and behind them sits fear: fear of the Jews.

Those who know the history of Christianity know that the Jews of that time were very soon replaced by others from whom Christians closed themselves off: out of fear of the Romans, out of fear of the Turks, out of fear of the Muslims, out of fear of the policemen or the anarchists, out of fear of the atheists and communists, out of fear of the foreigners, out of fear of Asians and Africans. Out of fear, always out of fear.

Who knows the history of Christianity, also knows that the small scene of this Pentecost story had to be told very soon with reversed roles. In John it still says: For fear of the Jews. Only a few centuries later it will have to say: There was a small gathering of Jews behind closed doors - for fear of the Christians. Jews have to be afraid - of dull hatred and brute force: Until today this is an outrageous and disturbing reality in Germany. Still and again anew.

When it comes to fear, the roles change quickly. Frighteningly fast. Those who were afraid yesterday are now spreading fear themselves. Because they were afraid yesterday, they then make others afraid. Often it even happens at the same time: to be afraid and to spread fear; to be afraid and to scare others.

This persists: Among peoples and nations, among different groups and parties, between individuals. There are always those who sit inside and are afraid of those who are outside. And those outside are afraid of those inside. People are watching each other, people are threatening each other - out of fear, always out of fear.

III.

Now in the evening of the first day (...) Jesus came and stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them: Peace be with you!

In the midst of the jungle of mutual fear, in the midst of the vicious circle of being afraid and spreading fear, the Risen One speaks the greeting of peace. Already for the chosen people of God this greeting was wish, longing and promise at the same time: Shalom alechem!

Throughout the centuries up to our days, up to our church liturgies it sounds - as wish and longing and promise: Peace be with you!

Christ wants to open the doors to his greeting of peace; the closed doors, the closed faces and mouths, the closed hearts. He enters - through the closed door - and thus makes clear: peace is not possible behind closed doors. Peace needs access to each other, peace needs open doors, peace needs people who open up to each other - even and especially when they are afraid of each other. Peace depends on people admitting and expressing their fear of each other - and being open to each other's fears.

Literally translated, the ancient greeting of peace reads: Peace be with you. It can be a wish: Peace be with you. It can also be a statement: Peace is with you. In every human being, without exception, who is born in this world - wanted by God, loved by God and used by God - a piece of divine peace is already present. Perhaps deeply buried, perhaps invisibly hidden, perhaps hidden behind a terrible mask or gesture: but nevertheless in such a way that it is worth all effort and all commitment to count on this peace in my counterpart, to talk to each other again and again, to approach each other again and again. If we really take Christ's greeting of peace seriously, we trust that we will also find a piece of peace in other people. That they, like us, long for peace, hope for peace, are capable of peace and ready for peace.

IV.

And now, at Pentecost, Christ enters into our midst and dares us, trusts us, even gives us the explicit command: receive the Holy Spirit - and forgive one another. Let God's power work in you and through you - and forgive one another for the wrongs that have been done to one another. This is our mission!

Forgiving is more than forgiving. Forgiving is something other than excusing. Forgiveness means: whose sins you remit, they are remitted to them; whose sins you keep, they are kept for them.

It is up to us whether forgiveness becomes tangible and thus valid. Whether it relieves people, whether it frees people from a burden, whether it casts out fear, whether peace becomes possible. Forgiveness is: moving something away, giving it somewhere else, taking it away from a person - putting it into God's hand. In this way, after a debt, something new may really become possible. In this way, after an injustice, something truly wholesome may grow.

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