

Joint Message
to conclude the pilgrimage by the
German Bishops' Conference and the
Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany
to the Holy Land from 16 – 22 October 2016

“We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Cor 4:5)

Our pilgrimage to the sources of faith has enabled us to re-discover the heart of our common faith, and that is Jesus Christ. On the road together, in conversation with one another and in times of prayer and meditation offered for one another we have learned to listen with the ears of others and, in our hearts, to understand others in their faith.

2017 will recall the beginning of the Reformation 500 years ago, and we wish to celebrate that ecumenically as a *Christusfest*, a festival of Christ. Accordingly, as members of the German Bishops' Conference and representatives of the Evangelical Church in Germany we set out to the Holy Land to seek out the places of origin of our common Christian faith.

Unlike previous Reformation centenaries, the emphasis is not to be on denominational differences but on our common responsibility for our faith. The Reformation intended neither to found a new church nor to split the old church. Instead, it wanted to renew the Church of Jesus Christ from top to bottom. At the heart of the Reformation was therefore an intention that should underlie any church reform: focusing on Jesus Christ as God's Word, that has become human, and on his gospel. This is also at the heart of the Reformation anniversary in 2017.

And we express that with our pilgrimage here to the Holy Land; we are following in the footsteps of God's story of salvation with humanity, particularly in Jesus of Nazareth. We have deliberately situated ourselves in the long tradition of Christians of all confessional backgrounds who have peacefully come to the Holy Land to this day in order to sense something of God's presence and pray for God's peace.

Jerome, the Church Father, called the Holy Land the “fifth gospel”. The Good News reaches out to us here in a special way. And so we have visited places connected with Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan. He reminds us of our baptism as a common bond linking all Christians. Jesus called his first disciples in Capernaum. Our common commitment to discipleship leads us to follow in his footsteps and become a blessing

for others. At the same time, this deep-rooted unity has caused us all the more to feel the pain of what still separates us.

Various places on the way from Galilee to Jerusalem recall the parables and miracles of Jesus located in this landscape, for example, the healing of the ten lepers, or the encounter with the woman of Samaria at Jacob's well. With them we associate the hope that God's Kingdom, which has already dawned in our world, will grow. It is our responsibility to help to build it and to become a blessing for our neighbors. The sites of the early church in Jerusalem, which recall the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, emphasize our calling to proclaim God's mighty acts in all languages and to all peoples.

God became human in Jesus Christ – this overarching expression of God's love is linked in a particularly impressive way with the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Finally, the places where Jesus suffered and died are found in Jerusalem. That was not the end of his story, however, since the risen Christ overcame sin and death for us. Together with the Christians of other denominations whose representatives we met in Jerusalem, we can today confess with the Roman centurion: "Truly this man was God's Son" (*Mark* 15:39). That is our faith and our hope: through his life, death and resurrection he has become the cornerstone that the builders rejected (*Matt* 21:42). He promises us: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (*Matt* 28:20).

The Holy Land is, as no other, bound up with the fate of our older brothers and sisters, the Jews. When visiting Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, and at the Wailing Wall we noted the profound unity between ourselves, and we thank God that it has now been rediscovered. However, we also recognized afresh what responsibility we bear in view of our history. Jesus was himself a Jew. We believe that the great promises of God for his people were opened by Jesus Christ for all peoples. With the Apostle Paul, we profess that God has elected and loves Israel, "for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (*Rom* 11:29). We hope for the coming consummation in which "all Israel will be saved" (*Rom* 11:26). We know how of the great burden of guilt our churches bear towards their older brothers and sisters in faith. We also embarked on the pilgrimage to Israel in order to be called to repent and to place our ecumenical partnership in the service of Judeo-Christian understanding. It is our mandate together to oppose any form of anti-Semitism and racism that poisons our relations and threatens peace.

Jerusalem is also a holy city for Muslims. We visited the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock to show our great esteem for this faith. In responsibility before the one God, Jews, Christians and Muslims are committed to working for justice and peace. We recall Isaac and Ishmael, who after years of alienation came closer to each other again at the grave of their father Abraham (cf. *Gen* 25:9), and hope that Jews, Christians and Muslims will find a way to establish peaceful relations in the Holy City and the Holy Land today.

We are following the political situation in the Middle East with great attention and deep concern. The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has many losers on both sides. The

continuing violence shows the fragility of the peace that this country so urgently needs. We appeal to all those with responsibility to move towards one another and work for a just peace order based on respect for human rights. Besides, the existence right of Israel is to be respected as the right of the Palaestinian people to own state. That is the only way to achieve a stable peace that fosters the common good in the Holy Land and in the whole region.

We are in solidarity with all Christians in the Holy Land, the home of our faith. Their situation is difficult. Extremist groups deny their right to exist; violent attacks on Christian institutions have increased lately. The relevant state authorities must resolutely oppose this and combat anti-Christian attitudes. Together with Israelis and Palestinians of good will and all our Christian sisters and brothers we pray for peace in the Holy Land and in the whole world. We encourage the Christians from our home country to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and thus to renew their faith. The Holy Land is and remains a place in which the gospel is experienced and lived in its original power. That is why this country and the Christians living in it need our special support and solidarity.

With our joint *Christusfest* we want to take up Jesus' radical question: "But who do you say that I am?" (*Matt 16:15*). Compared to the Reformation epoch, our times today are completely different, and often described as a secular age. For many, Christian faith has lost plausibility and is only one option among others. Consequently, we are as Christians particularly challenged today to give a common response to the question of Jesus, and so we want to give an account of "the hope that is in us" to our society (*1 Peter 3:15*).

The places we have visited on our ecumenical pilgrimage have an inner meaning pointing to Jerusalem, the place where Jesus gave his life for many on the cross. At the Last Supper, he himself gave this inner meaning to his death. In giving himself on the cross, Jesus transformed the violence done him into a love that excludes nothing and no one, not even his executioners (cf. *Luke 23:34*). And Easter makes manifest that he is wholly accepted by God and this love is stronger than death.

This hope that Christ's love can overcome violence and transform death into life is also highly relevant in our age; we Christians want to testify to it with humility but also with determination, and in many different ways in our society. We want to work for the human dignity of all, particularly the most vulnerable. Consequently, through visiting the places where our faith originally arose, we are challenged to pass on this hopeful message of God's free grace to all peoples – knowing that we ourselves first rely on this grace.

As we now return to our daily work in our dioceses and regional churches after these full days together, we do not intend to forget the impressions from the Holy Land. We will return to our country that, as ever, depends on comforting and liberating God's Word. We go back to a country that has grown to appreciate ecumenical partnership ever more strongly – and we thank God for that – and therefore expects us to witness to faith together. We are committed to Jesus' call to be one (*John 17:21*). We are meant to be united. We encourage a strengthening of what we hold in common at all levels. It is our common mission to proclaim

Christ, the risen Lord. Here in the Holy Land we have gained strength to stand up for the gospel with energy and passion. Our common mission for our country is not yet completed. We are confident that the *Christusfest* in 2017 will become a credible witness to God and will strengthen us beyond this special anniversary year in our journey towards full visible unity.