

Ephesians 4: 3-6
"Liberated for Unity"

Thanksgiving Service , Liberation Day 2003, Guernsey
May 9, 2003

"The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you all!"

I.

"Do your best to preserve (RSV "be eager to maintain") the unity!"
Words of the Apostle Paul, written to Christians in the ancient world of the Roman
Empire.

"Preserve the unity", maintain it - for there is unity! Despite of all disunity and
conflicts around us, despite violence and wars: there is a given unity , which was and is
one of the greatest gifts of God to mankind. Paul calls it a "unity which the spirit gives
by means of the peace that binds you together".

But apparently we are not very much aware of that unity,
apparently we are not very able to live according to it,
to put it into practice in our personal lives and among the nations and cultures of our
world.

We do not "do our best" to maintain and to preserve, to honour and to guard the divine
gift of unity. This becomes evident particularly in times of conflict and of a
(questionable) new war.. .

II

I belong to the generation which is still fully aware of World War II, with strong and
lasting impressions of that time when I grew up in Germany. In May '45 I turned
thirteen - too young for the military , but old enough to know what was happening: the
nights we spent in our cellar during air-raids; the memory of people we had known,
friends and relatives, who were killed by bombs or on the battle-fields. Many had lost
all their belongings, or even their native country forever, with no return.

Under the Hitler-propaganda it was difficult for us youngsters to see our "enemies"
still as normal human beings, leave alone as children of one heavenly father, who is
described to us here as "the one God and Father of all mankind"(V.6).

Years after the war I met one of my father's cousins in the United States: Uncle Bill, second-generation German-American, told me then, how during the war he had to fight in the US-army against Germany. At the same time however my other uncle Karl, Bill's German cousin, was a soldier in the German army. Bill had to fight at the Italian front, Karl had to drive a tank in Russia.

But it could have happened very easily, that both cousins, on different sides, would have fought against each other. One could have killed his cousin without knowing it - what a grotesque situation! Thank God this did not happen.. But the thought itself was frightening: What a perversion of family ties, what a perversion of God's family on earth!

At war's end we could not have hoped that our former enemies would talk to us again and even send CARE packages with food and clothing to starving and freezing Germans. But the churches were the first ones to join hands with us in reconciliation. And we realized: "There it is, the spirit of unity that still binds us together!" What had started among christian people, who wanted to help and to practice unity, had a far reaching impact and changed our world (thinking for instance of the UN and of the WCC).

III.

With thanksgiving and praise unto God you celebrate today the fifty-eight- th anniversary of your liberation: the end of the five year long German occupation of Guernsey. This year you officially invited people from the nation of your former enemies. You invited us - citizens of the South-German town of Biberach, where hundreds of Guernsey people once were held in captivity. And now, almost unimaginable in former times: You wanted to celebrate this Liberation Day together with us!

Because something wonderful has happened in recent years: The little seed of two longtime private contacts had developed into quite a plant of broader relations to former deportees and between our churches. A "Friends of Guernsey" group came into being in Biberach, followed a year ago by the "Friends of Biberach Association" in Guernsey.

We got to know each other personally and to understand each other better. Quite a number of Guernsey people -some of them once born in Biberach- were invited back to our town and were hosted by local families. We worshipped together and shared with each other our experiences and opinions, our sorrows and our joys. Linked together by history in times of a dark past, we discovered our unity and found reconciliation and friendship. That has enriched our lives. Thank you so much for today's invitation!

IV.

Your joyful liberation back in 1945 actually was also a liberation for us in Germany. But under quite different circumstances: in a totally devastated country and population, with chaos and destruction all around, and more tragedies to come.

It was the 8th of May. I helped to ring our church bells, on the occasion of the end of the bitter war. People had tears in their eyes.

Tears of relief: "Thank God, it's finally over!"

Mixed with tears of shame and of grief for all the victims and innumerable sufferings this war had brought upon the world.

But nevertheless, there was a strong feeling of liberation during those days, and the beginning of a new hope for a better time in peace. We pledged, no war should ever start from German soil again! And that has been Germany's position ever since.

Our younger generations are not responsible for what has been done in times before. But we are all together responsible for the consequences: How do we respond to the horrors of war? And what conclusions do we draw, in order to maintain the unity that God has intended for us?

For that reason it is important to remember and never to forget!

We have learned to deeply distrust voices which preach prejudice, hatred and hostility towards others.

We have also learned to understand better the biblical view, how close together good and evil are within our human nature. There are not totally good people on one side and totally bad people on the other. The "good guys" and the "bad guys" are both within us.

But God has given us the capacity to "overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21), and to live with each other - not against each other.

And we have learned the truth of an old wisdom, which says: there is no reconciliation without remembrance. We are grateful for the experience, that unity with others can be found again and that reconciliation is able to lay to rest the pains of a troubled past. But it needs honest remembrance. Here in this ecumenical service of thanksgiving is the right place for it..

V.

I am convinced that nobody among us here can imagine that our nations would ever fall back to that ultimate disunity of another war. That should never, never happen again. And it will not happen again if we will keep in our hearts and minds St.Paul' s message: "Do your best to maintain and to preserve the unity that binds you together in the bond of peace."

May the Spirit of God help us to stay liberated!

Liberated for unity.

For unity among Guernsey and Biberach, and with others in our world.

Liberated for unity.

Unity sometimes becomes friendship.

We thank God for your friendship!

He is " the One God and Father of us all" - now and forever. AMEN

Pfarrer Eberhard Göhner, Biberach/Riss