

## REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY 2012 (Hans-Willi Büttner)

Why should a German speak to you – today of all days – a descendent of those who unleashed endless suffering on our continent? Would it not be better for him to listen when he comes to England? I believe I was asked to speak because I have listened. I was invited as a friend and a fellow-Christian. And please be assured that I regard it as a very great honour indeed to be allowed to address you on this British Remembrance Sunday.

I will share with you a little of the way in which I see strangers becoming friends. After all, what do I have to do with English people? I live far from your country, and my everyday life is occupied with the tasks of my calling as the pastor of my congregation. Our people do not expect me to travel to Ludlow as a German peace ambassador. They want me to be at home for them.

But then came the story of a friendship which arose, long before my time, between two women. One of them came from Nuremberg, and she died last January aged 84. As a young woman she braved the journey to England, which was not easy for Germans then. The other was a woman from your community, who wanted to know what Germany is like. Both were Christians, and they lived for peace and reconciliation in their small way. They communicated their inspiration to their congregations. They were greeted with scepticism at first, but a parish partnership was established nevertheless.

When I came to Langwasser in 1996, I entered into a great inheritance. There was already a lively interchange between the churches of Ludlow and Langwasser. There were long-standing personal friendships. And all this had started not with a great fanfare about history, or healing the wounds of the past, but with a simple resolve: "I want to find out about these strangers".

As far as I am concerned, my friendship with you and your country also has personal roots.

In 1986 I was appointed as pastor of the German-speaking Protestant Church in Brussels. I thus came to the place where European unity was not only dreamed about, but was being worked hard at. And one did not get very far in the international and ecumenical city of Brussels without the English language.

Then we sent our eldest daughter to the British school. We needed a stretching environment for this highly alert child, and it was exactly the right school for her. Afterwards she studied in Oxford, took her Doctorate and married. She now teaches at Birmingham University, and I have a four year-old English granddaughter.

My time in Belgium included the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the First World War Armistice, and through my daughter's school I became aware of the significance of Flanders for the British soul. I visited many of the war cemeteries, and the never-ending rows of soldiers' graves brought home to me the dark shadow of war over that land. And then in 1988 the Anglicans invited me to take part in their Remembrance Service in the Pro-Cathedral in Ypres.

The implication of this invitation only became clear in the course of the ceremony. Apart from many officials there were also some British veterans, as well as the Duke and Duchess of Kent. I was asked to read from the Holy Scriptures. And as I found out later, I was the first German clergyman who had ever been invited to such an occasion. Perhaps I was also the first German since 1914 whose hand the war veterans had shaken. If there were British people who would have preferred me not to be there, I saw no sign of it. On the contrary, I was told several times by British people, and with a sort of relief that sharing remembrance of the past with descendants of the German enemy and acting out reconciliation, were long overdue.

In 1989 I was invited to preach at the service in Messines on the 75th anniversary of the beginning of the war. I spoke to an international gathering of guests and members of the band of the London Scottish Regiment in Dutch, English, French and German. At the end of the service the band took me by surprise and gathered me into their midst and we marched, left, right, with bagpipes, to the memorial to the fallen of the London Scottish, 500 metres away. There I was asked to pray and give a blessing. I, the old peace campaigner, would never have dreamed that I would one day find myself in my robes marching along with a military escort to the accompaniment of martial music. But I admit it: it was a powerful and inevitable sign.

It can therefore surprise no-one that, when I came to Nuremberg-Langwasser in 1996, I was delighted about the ecumenical partnership with Ludlow. Your then Rector Brian Curnew and I quickly became friends. One day my father confessed to me with tears in his eyes how happy and thankful he was that I, his son, had such a good English friend, 'After all that has happened between us Germans and the English'.

During a visit to Ludlow there was a visit to the Ludlow CE School. The children were assembled in the sports hall. Our trombonists from Langwasser made a great impression. The Revd Brian Curnew introduced us, and talked about the partnership. A touching moment was when he told the pupils how much it had meant to his father, who by then had died, and to my father, that their sons were friends. I remember a moment of absolute quiet in a hall filled with 400 pupils.

Perhaps, dear friends, my words may encourage you to make the bridges of understanding in your own history part of your Act of Remembrance. Even if we live far from one another, we are not really that far apart.

Finally, a small biblical reflection. Because we are Christians, we have a special contribution to make. We all know the provocative words of Jesus, when he says that hostility cannot be overcome by following the principle of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". In the Old Testament there is a letter which the prophet Jeremiah wrote to his countrymen who had been deported in the course of a war. They had to bear the consequences of the war, and of the misguided policies of their rulers. Jeremiah tells them, "The word of the Lord to you is this: Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you (into exile), and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare". The decisive thought is: Do not let yourselves grow bitter! Overcome your grief for what you have lost, and overcome your need for revenge and the refusal of friendship. Rather, build a future in which you too will benefit. Let your faith take the strain! This world with its difficult and tragic history needs your example of love and hope. It needs your prayers, and the creative imagination of those who know how to love God and their fellow human beings.

"Seek the welfare of the city!" Are we Christians not the right people to tackle the task of overcoming the tragic past of our countries?