

Michael Pernt-Weigel, from the Palatinate gave the following address on behalf of the international guests and with regard to the German perspective on the commemoration of the First World War.

Mr Pernt-Weigel addressed the General Assembly on the morning of Saturday 5 July.

Moderators, members of the assembly, dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

It is my honour and pleasure to bring greetings from the members of the synod and our synod's president Henry Franck, greetings from church president Christian Schad, from the head of the Ecumenical Department Manfred Sutter (who is also in charge of charity, care and church music), greetings from the 21 churches and institutions which are linked to a URC congregation, college or synod, greetings from all of the Protestant Church of the Palatinate.

I was asked to commemorate the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, which will be a hundred years from end of this month and the beginning of August. Sadly, both our countries were fighting each other. The soldiers died in their teens and twenties. These young men were not given the opportunity to have a family, see their children grow up and have grandchildren to kiss and care for. These unborn lives add to the actual numbers of losses (17 million both military and civilian), as they never had the chance to come into being.

We treasure the memory of those brave men who, leaving gear, gun and gas mask behind, came out of their trenches, had their international football match on Christmas 1914 and shared the contents of their Christmas parcels from home - much to the disapproval of their respective generals. Despite all the tragedies and sad memories of this war it took only 21 years and another World War broke out. Sadly enough both our countries were fighting each other again. And again it was the individual British and German opposing the frenzy of war and Nazi-ideology. We remember George Bell the bishop of Chichester and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Having first met at an ecumenical conference in Switzerland they became friends when Bonhoeffer was in London from 1933 until 1935 as minister of two congregations, St Paul's Whitechapel and Sydenham Forest Hill.

"Cheap grace means grace as bargain basement goods, cut rate forgiveness, cut rate comfort, cut rate sacrament. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ... Costly grace is the Gospel which must be sought again and again... It is costly because it calls to discipleship; it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs people their lives; it is grace because it gives them their lives."

This is quoted from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* and in the years that followed his faith certainly cost him, as he courageously took his stand against the Nazi regime. For him it was indeed costly discipleship for on 9th April 1945 he was murdered by hanging in Flossenbürg Concentration Camp. As his captors entered his cell with the ominous words "Prisoner Bonhoeffer get ready to come with us" he goes with them asking a British prisoner, the Captain Payne Best, to take his greetings to his friend George Bell the bishop of Chichester: "This is the end. For me the beginning of life". Near in time but far in location his brother Klaus was murdered and his brothers-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher and Hans von Dohnanyi. Bonhoeffer's statue was placed above the west entrance to Westminster Abbey as one of ten modern martyrs in 1998.

George Bell was denied the archbishopric of Canterbury as he strongly opposed the area bombing of German cities. He remained a leading figure against atomic arms race and played an important role in worldwide ecumenism.

It was my dear friend and tutor the Rev Cliff Bembridge now Buckland URC Portsmouth who opened my eyes for the importance of Bonhoeffer and Bell. Cliff is member of this Assembly and belongs to Wessex Synod. Thank you, Cliff!

Nothing short of the war tragedies makes us approach the roots of the link between the URC and the Palatinate.

The year is 1946. A lady from Worthing West Sussex is visiting a village in the northern Palatinate called Wolfstein. The name is Auguste Radbone. Born Auguste Fadel in Wolfstein she had married an Englishman before the war. Now in the year after the end of the war she comes to see whether mother and aunt are still alive.

Alive they were. But Mrs Radbone was struck by the appalling hardship people were enduring at her native place. Back in England she tried to enlist help of the churches in Worthing. One approached: Shelley Road Congregational Church.

They started with sending two parcels. In one there were seven pairs of shoes and in the other what now seems a strange assortment of food: one marmalade pudding, one packet of egg powder, one tin of sardines, one pound of semolina, two tins of corned beef, one tin of ideal milk, half a pound of tea.

Both parcels arrived safely. Many more should follow in the twelve years to come. And people began to visit each other, growing together as John Reardon describes it in his book *Together met, together bound*.

So reconciliation is where the link between our churches roots. Parcels were sent from England to Germany. Nothing special, just what was at hand. At a time when the British endured hardship as well and food was rationed. Reconciliation as the fruit of discipleship of the Worthing Shelley Road Congregational Church. It had cost them what they needed essentially for themselves.

Reconciliation being the theme of our next year's theological consultation we will again approach what brought us together and makes our link so lively and important.

War between Britons and Germans: utterly unthinkable. May this be the case in the very near future for any war between anybody: utterly unthinkable. Thank you.

Michael Pernt-Weigel
5 July 2014