

**Sermon on occasion of the presentation of Woldemar Flake and Sabine  
Behrens as LEP-pastors in the Diocese of Blackburn  
from Bishop Dr. Friedrich Weber**

May the words, that I speak, and the meditation of our hearts may always be acceptable to God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ!

„Being a Christian means being glad about God’s merciful grace.“

This sentence was written in the early 1930ies by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his friend Franz Hildebrandt in the German catechism for young people.

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What really matters, is this: To be glad about God’s mercy and grace. Anyone who is able to be glad about God’s grace will find the freedom to regard him- or herself and the world we are living in as gifts of our God.

Bonhoeffer then went on to say: Anyone who is able to be glad about God’s grace will not be afraid of the powers of other authorities and will be assured of the transcendent fulfillment of his own life as well as in the history of the world. We can be certain that our lives are moving closer to God and that there is a future beyond the limits of our lifetime. Therefore we need not be afraid.

And so on this special occasion in Blackburn I want to focus attention on this message: do not be afraid, but be glad about God's mercy.

Last year throughout the world Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 100th birthday was remembered. He was one of the most prominent Christian resistance fighters against the former totalitarian government in Germany. And he had been living and working as a pastor in England, as Woldemar Flake and Sabine Behrens will do from now on.

It was said of people around Bonhoeffer, that - whenever he was present – they laughed frequently and heartily and that they always had great fun. He is said to have radiated great confidence and to have been very humorous, although on the other hand Bonhoeffer was a sharp-thinking person with foresight, who was able to anticipate future developments. Although there might have been many reasons for him to give up or not to continue his resistance and to be overwhelmed by despair, he never communicated frustration. And I am sure that there were times of despair in his life. Yet, he taught people around him to take responsibility, to look for indications of God here on earth, to live one's life gratefully and if necessary to change life.

I would partly agree with the French philosopher Sartre, who once said:  
„Maybe, there have been better times and still will be – but this time is ours to take on responsibility.“

Well, this attitude is reasonable and fairly optimistic: but it expects a good deal of every single person.

Therefore I would add another condition: „Being a Christian means being glad about God's merciful grace.“

With all this as a background let us look in the future.

And there are many reasons for us to be glad:

I am glad about the prospering link between our two churches and about how it has developed during recent years. It seems obvious that God's blessing is upon this link.

I am glad that a family with two pastors from the Lutheran Landeskirche of Braunschweig and with their children are risking this adventure to come and live here among you and - by so doing - to express the good neighbourliness of our churches.

Further, I am glad to be able to look forward to one of your priests to coming to minister in Winnigstedt, a village in the Landeskirche of Braunschweig,.

Finally, I am glad that together we succeeded in establishing this Local Ecumenical Partnership and proved to be pioneers exploring new ways towards our aim of a visible unity between our churches.

All these things are matters which encourage me and cause me to be grateful and confident.

I do believe that God's kingdom has already risen among us and I do hope that God is with us as he was with Moses.

You know: God had a big plan with Moses. He sent him on his path through the desert, up to the limits of his endurance and of his confidence. But he was not on a wrong track, but on a track to the land being provided for him by God here on earth. A track to a destination which proved to be worthwhile to strive for. A track into a foreign land and at the same time a track towards his own fulfillment and towards God. The Bible shows us that Moses had to travel over long and arduous paths through the desert - together with companions who were full of doubts and often grumbling.

My wish for you, Woldemar Flake and Sabine Behrens together with your children Henry and Elsa, - my wish for you is that you will not need to experience what Moses had to experience. I wish you and the people of the Diocese of Blackburn and in your parishes that this time of living and working together will be a useful and blessed time and that you will return to Germany with stimulus and new ideas for our church.

Starting a new period of life in a foreign country – even with little children – requires a lot of courage and fearlessness. You have proved to be courageous. What matters now is to settle in this country and in your parishes and to share the everyday life with the parishioners. I wish you all the best for your new ministry.

I guess this exchange will also be exciting for our brothers and sisters in Christ here in Blackburn. It will also be a challenge for them to experience a spirituality different from the traditional Anglican background.

Finally, take the words from the book of Isaiah as a watchword for the year 2007. The prophet says in chapter 43, verse 19: „I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?“

We normally prefer going on in well-known paths and avoid the risks of new and strange paths. Recently there was a conference of all German protestant churches in Wittenberg, the town, where Martin Luther used to live. This conference dealt with the future of the churches in Germany. We share the opinion that we need dare to start off into a future which is different from the situation as it is now. Yet, we feel, how difficult it is. But it is necessary to ask: How should in the future the co-operation between the Christian churches alternatively be organized, between Anglicans and Lutherans or at home in the

area of my church, where – because of historical reasons - five autonomous protestant churches exist? How should the co-operation with the Roman-Catholic Church be developed? Isn't it the time to lay emphasis upon what we are agreeing in: the baptism, the doctrines of trinity and justification, our common commitment to human rights and justice or to the welfare of the children in Europe? And how shall we tackle the problem of still existing differences?

It is not only that we have a clue about the necessity of change, we are certain: new things must be done. The word of the prophet Isaiah shows us: There is no turning back. God has made a promise to us to be true and to be with us. He is a God who – again and again – leads us into freedom, even if we do not realize it. Remember the miracle, when God divided the waters, or the path through the desert, when there was no water, how he opened the sources and the waters sprang forth so that his people survived and started again?

Nowadays it is the same: God says: „I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?“

Here, now and today, we can perceive it. Something new is starting.

We have good reason to be sure:

„Being a Christian means being glad about God's merciful grace.“

Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen