

Ecumenical Service for the 75th Anniversary of the Liberation of the Dachau Concentration Camp

Bell rings to begin the service

Welcome

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with you all evermore.

Amen.

Jesus Christ says:

For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. (Mt. 18,20)

There are five of us here today in the Protestant Church of Reconciliation, on the site of the former Dachau Concentration Camp. On this, the 75th anniversary of the camp's liberation, we would like to remember the victims of this place of terror.

My name is Björn Mensing, and I am the pastor of this church. Here with me are music student Sophie Aeckerle, Ludwig Schmidinger from the Catholic chaplaincy to the site, and Deacon Klaus Schultz. With us behind the camera is Axel Mölkner-Kappl. He is filming our act of remembrance so that those who wish to can watch this recording at home at 5pm on the 29th April – the time at which the liberation took place – or later. The church is currently closed due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Public services and events are sadly not possible at this time.

We would like to especially welcome you, the survivors of the concentration camp system, as well as you, the allied liberators, and your families. We know that several of you will be watching this at home. This is a great joy and honour, and we do not take this for granted – especially given the involvement of the German churches in National Socialism. Bearing in mind my own family's past, I face you with the words of the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt from the Fall of 1945:

It is with great pain that we say: through us, boundless suffering has been brought to many peoples and places.

At the centre of our ecumenical service today shall be the recollections of prisoners of the Dachau concentration camp.

We shall now hear the first and last verses from the Dachaulied, 'The Dachau Song', written by Jura Soyfer and Herbert Zipper. The two left-wing opponents of the Nazis came from Jewish families and were deported to Dachau from Vienna in 1938. Here Herbert Zipper explains how the song came to be:

In August 1938 [...]: Jura Soyfer and I had to spend a whole week loading a truck with chunks of cement [...] one day [...] I said to Jury, who was pulling the same load as I was, "You know,

this inscription over the gate – Work Sets You Free – makes a mockery of us. We really must write a resistance song to give our fellow prisoners some encouragement.” [...] it was about three days later [...] when Jura [...] recited the text to me, as there was no way he could write it down [...] so I set to learning the text by heart [and setting it to music].

We will now hear the first and last verses of the Dachaulied.

Dachaulied

1. Stacheldraht, mit Tod geladen,
ist um uns're Welt gespannt.
D'rauf ein Himmel ohne Gnaden
sendet Frost und Sonnenbrand.
Fern von uns sind alle Freuden,
fern die Heimat, fern die Frau'n,
wenn wir stumm zur Arbeit schreiten,
Tausende im Morgengrau'n.

Refrain:

Doch wir haben die Losung von Dachau gelernt
und wurden stahlhart dabei.
Sei ein Mann, Kamerad.
Bleib ein Mensch, Kamerad.
Mach ganze Arbeit, pack an Kamerad.
Denn Arbeit, Arbeit macht frei.

4. Einst wird die Sirene künden;
auf zum letzten Zählappell.
Draußen dann, wo wir uns finden
bist du, Kamerad zur Stell'.
Hell wird uns die Freiheit lachen,
vorwärts geht's mit frischem Mut.
Und die Arbeit, die wir machen,
diese Arbeit, sie wird gut.

Shortly after, the SS transferred both artists to the Buchenwald concentration camp. Herbert Zipper was released in 1939 and fled to the Philippines via Paris. Jura Soyfer died from the murderous conditions in Buchenwald at the age of 26. The final verse of the Dachaulied begins as follows:

*One day the sirens shall resound, the roll-call taken one last time.
Freedom smiles on us brightly, as freshly emboldened we stride on.*

He would not live to experience the liberation he so longed for.

We now light a candle for Jura Soyfer. May freedom smile brightly on him for ever more.

Kyrie Eleison [Lord have mercy]

We now light a candle for all those who were murdered, here in Dachau and in the millions of other places under the violence of national socialist tyranny: Jewish men, women and children, Sinti and Roma, Communists, Social Democrats, and other women and men active in the resistance, Jehovahs Witnesses, homosexuals, the socially excluded who were labled as 'asocial' and 'career criminals', conscientious objectors, forced labourers, Polish priests and pastors, and Soviet prisoners of war.

We also remember those who have been victims of Antisemitism, racism, political persecution and violence since 1945. Most recent among these are those affected by the attack in Hanau in February of this year.

We also remember those allied soldiers who fell in the struggle against Hitler's Germany. May they all rest in peace for ever more.

Kyrie Eleison [Lord have mercy]

Quote from Joseph Rován

The young German-French journalist and Résistance member Joseph Rován describes the moment of his liberation on Sunday, the 29th of April 1945:

Suddenly [...] the mass of people on the Appellplatz surged towards the Jourhaus [the guard house at the entrance]. The cast-iron gate was wide open. [...] Four people in American uniforms had leapt out of [the Jeep] [...]: a very tall black man [...], two white men and ... a woman. [...] One of the white men ran to the door of the Jourhaus. A moment later, he appeared on the balcony [...]. No one had shared the Word with the oppressed, despised people, not in prisoner memory. "Let's pray, brethren", he shouted, "let us thank the Lord for this day of delivery. Once more he has guided Israel, his People, out of Pharaoh's Egypt." Very few of those who listened to him in amazement understood English, and even fewer had continued to believe in Heaven in the face of Hell. This unexpected prayer brought tears to my eyes; it was so inappropriate and yet so wonderful; too beautiful to be real. [...]. I glanced over at the fourth American, who had stayed by the Jeep with the black man and the woman and realised [...] he was a Jew. A sudden inner joy seized me. Too many symbols had suddenly met here [...].

Joseph Rován experiences how the exhausted soldiers give gifts to the prisoners in the barracks.

They hardly knew how to show their sympathy to their enemies' miserable victims. They gave us cigarettes, chocolate, rations, [...] even money, with both hands.

Joseph Rován searches out the spot - only a few meters away from here - where, by secretly attending Mass over the previous months, he had been able to inwardly strengthen himself, so that he could "withstand the hunger and the fear a little better".

From 1941 interned religious ministers were allowed to celebrate religious services in a modest chapel in Block 26. However the SS excluded the many Polish priests from these services soon after. Along with all other prisoners. Several managed to attend despite the restrictions, among them Joseph Rován.

I left the noise, the screams of joy, the chaos, the groans of the sick and the death rattles of the dying behind, went into the chapel and sat in the dark. [...] I breathed in and out slowly to steady my heart. I don't believe I really prayed [...]. I merely lost myself in the silence that slowly pushed its way into the emptiness around me. It was an instant of mercy.

When Israel was in Egypt's Land

1. When Israel was in Egypt's land:

Let my people go,
oppressed so hard they could not stand,
let my people go.

Refrain:

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.

4. Oh let us all from bondage flee.

Let my people go,
And let us all in Christ be free.
Let my People go.

Refrain: Go down ...

Gospel Reading: John 6:35+37-40

We now hear the Gospel reading that is to be read in Catholic churches across the world on the 29th April this year. It comes from John Chapter 6, and should be comfort for all who have lost loved ones – back then in the concentration camp, or today through violence and illness.

35 Jesus said to them, I am the bread of life;
whoever comes to me shall not hunger,
and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

37 All that the Father gives me will come to me,
and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.

38 For I have come down from heaven,
not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.

39 And this is the will of him who sent me,
that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me,
but raise it up on the last day.

⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father,
that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him
should have eternal life, and I will raise him up
on the last day.

Quote from Karl Adolf Groß

On April 30th, 1945, the German publisher and writer Karl Adolf Groß who was brought to Dachau in 1940 writes in his diary:

We've never had as much meat as today. It was almost too much of a good thing, and a sudden change from bitter need to almost miraculous abundance. In addition to a quarter loaf of bread, we were given a big can containing two pounds of meat that two people alone could hardly consume. [...] Not a bad start, absolutely not a bad start. What does it say in today's bible quote of the Brethren Church [from Psalm 34]? "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!" May the palate also witness the tender care of our Lord in heaven!

Reading: Psalm 133:1

We are about to hear a setting of the words from Psalm 133 in the original Hebrew.
The English translation is as follows:

Look how good and how pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity!

Hinneh mah tov uma naim

We know from survivors that, even amid the murderous conditions in the concentration camp, there were moments when the prisoners experienced peace and community. This came through sharing what little they had, as well as communal singing and prayer. Often the words they prayed were those of the Our Father. As a sign of our connectedness, that transcends all borders across time and eternity, I invite you to pray the Lord's Prayer with us, each and everyone in their own language:

Our Father which art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done in earth,
as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil:

For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,

for ever.

Amen.

We shall overcome

1. We shall overcome,
We shall overcome,
We shall overcome, some day.

Refrain:

Oh, deep in my heart,
I do believe
We shall overcome, some day.

3. We shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace, some day.

Refrain: Oh, deep in my heart ...

4. We are not afraid,
We are not afraid,
We are not afraid, TODAY

Refrain: Oh, deep in my heart ...

Blessing

Go in peace and with the strength to carry on working
for the universal recognition of human rights,
for all those persecuted, suffering or in need.
We pray for peace, with the Lord's blessing:

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you
and give you peace.

Amen

Bell rings to end the service

Conception, text and music selection:
The Rev. Dr. Björn Mensing, Pastor and Historian,
in coordination with
the Singer Sophie Aeckerle,
Chaplain Ludwig Schmidinger
and Deacon Klaus Schultz.