

Closing Session

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 27, 2018 (KECSKEMÉT, THEATRE)

**“Shalom aleichem! Pax nobi! As-salamu alaykum! Béke legyem veled!
Peace be with you!”**

By Dr Jutta Hausmann

Peace be with you!

We are now at the end of a very intensive conference with a lot of highlights, some challenges, wonderful encounters and conversations – and many as an impulse just as an open question. As an Old Testament scholar I try to reflect on the experiences of these days as well as on our possible expectations concerning the great question what next? How can peace be with us?

I will draw your attention to three texts from different contexts but in some connection with each other. The first text is a part of the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue (found with several variations in Ex 20 and Dtn 5), which is not one of the commandments itself but speaks about the consequences of following or not following God’s will. We read in Ex 20, 5-6//Dtn 5,9-10: „I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.“ Though this statement is in the Decalogue part of the prohibition of serving foreign gods we can find in it a deep connection to our own experiences of intergenerational consequences regarding the decisions and deeds of our forefathers. That strikes the positive consequences just as the negative ones, in our individual life as well as in our families, communities, nations, societies. In the Decalogue we can see the idea of intergenerational responsibility which is very similar to our own experiences – we suffer from the bad decisions and deeds of our fathers/mothers and grandfathers/grandmothers and witness that most cases the bad consequences decrease from generation to generation. And we like to remember all the good things and influences going very far back to former generations. So the differences in the length of time for the consequences of deeds and decisions made by the Decalogue seems very true-to-life. Consequences – I don’t use this term accidentally for I think the aim of the Decalogue is not to speak about punishment for the next generations or about reward. Neither only to explain painful situations in our personal as well as in our community life caused by our ancestors. Rather we can see a pedagogical aim and therefore an admonition for all of us not to forget our responsibility to have in mind the consequences of our words and deeds not only for us, but for the next generations, too.

In direct dialogue with the verses from the Decalogue we can read the ideas of Ezekiel 18. At first view it seems like an immense contrast to read in v. 1-3: “The word of the LORD came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’? As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be

used by you in Israel.” But having a look at the context of these verses we learn very fast that Ez 18 speaks from another point of view and therefore with another emphasis. In its focus is the relevance of individual responsibility – God will hold accountable each person for his or her own deeds, words, decisions as well as, concerning communities, each generation. There is no chance to rest on the failures of previous generations. No chance to hold accountable only my education and the mistakes of my parents for my disappointments, it is on me what I make of my life. There is no chance to make responsible mainly former governments and leadership, former political structures for what is going wrong in our society. It is the decisions of today that are crucial for the well-being in our political, religious, family communities. In biblical language (v. 19-20): “When the son has done what is just and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor does the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.”

From another point of view, we have actually a similar interest as in the Decalogue: everybody as well as each community has to pay attention and to be careful with its own words, decisions and deeds. While we have the intergenerational perspective in the Decalogue with the responsibility for the fate of the next generations, Ez 18 is concentrated on our own verdict in the eyes of God – but both texts are permeated by the pedagogical interest to motivate us for a life under the good will of God and so to contribute to the well-being of our societies.

Well-being is the interest of Jeremiah’s letter to the Israelite exiles in Babylon, too. We read in Jer 29,7 the prophet’s request in the name of God: “But 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.” Despite enforced migration by deportation the Israelites shall do what is possible to participate in promoting the prosperity of their surroundings, much more than to do what is absolutely necessary for their own survival. We can see in this chapter an idea of inter-national responsibility far from national egoism, but rooted in the experience of depending on each other. To get involved with the well-being of the place where one lives – by choice or enforced by what reason ever – will not only be good for the others but brings participation in one’s own well-being. What seems an ordinary experience is imbedded in God’s expectations of, as well as his promise to, Israel. So it is much more than a single trust in experiences even though underlined with it. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you – as a minority, as persons from another nation, another religion, with other conceptions for the conduct of life, living in a context which is strange and challenging, we all have our experiences with this challenge: as part of a minority with needs to arrange oneself or belonging to a majority which has to find out how coexistence with minorities can work. To seek the welfare of the city nowadays includes both and assumes that both are equal partners even though the reality often seems otherwise as it is the case in Jer 29.

This attempt of intertextual reading from the perspective of an Old Testament scholar at the end of a conference on the topic of "Towards Reconciliation in a Broken World: Jewish and Christian Contributions to Responsible Citizenship" concentrating on texts dealing with responsibility may show some aspects which invite to reflect on our own experiences in different national and religious contexts. And it may remind us of the possibilities of recommencement and/or changes of perspectives where we suffer under the failures of others as well as confront ourselves with our own responsibility and request us to live up to it to avoid new guilt. So we get an opening of a future where we can “build” together.

Peace be with you – a desire whose realization cannot be thought without the work of God but it is also connected to God's expectation of us.