

Council on Christian Approaches to Defence and Disarmament 2013

Bible study on Judges 7: 1-25: Trust and Disarmament

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Sisters and Brothers!

Thank you for inviting me to this conference and giving me the opportunity to share a biblical text with you in order to make it speak to us so that we become inspired and touched by the spirit of God.

Some important topics need to be discussed: Comprehensive Approach – Cooperative Security – Just War Tradition – Just Peace Concept. Which biblical text should we choose to interpret and receive inspiration? This is truly a challenge! Allow me to suggest an unusual story from the Old Testament that may be rather unfamiliar to many of you. It is the story of the judge Gideon as told in the book of Judges, chapter 7. I titled it "Trust and Disarmament".

I will read the text now. It is a long text, and I invite you to read along.

1 Early in the morning, Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) and all his men camped at the spring of Harod. The camp of Midian was north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh. 2 The Lord said to Gideon, "You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, 'My own strength has saved me.' 3 Now announce to the army, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'" So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained. 4 But the Lord said to Gideon, "There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will thin them out for you there. If I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go; but if I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go." 5 So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the Lord told him, "Separate those who lap the water with their tongues as a dog laps from those who kneel down to drink." 6 Three hundred of them drank from cupped hands, lapping like dogs. All the rest got down on their knees to drink. 7 The Lord said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the others go home." 8 So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites home but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others. Now the camp of Midian lay below him in the valley. 9 During that night the Lord said to Gideon, "Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands. 10 If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah 11 and listen to what they are saying. Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp." So he and Purah his servant went down to the outposts of the camp. 12 The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore. 13 Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream. "I had a dream," he was saying. "A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed." 14 His friend responded, "This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands." 15 When

Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he bowed down and worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, "Get up! The Lord has given the Midianite camp into your hands." 16 Dividing the three hundred men into three companies, he placed trumpets and empty jars in the hands of all of them, with torches inside. 17 "Watch me," he told them. "Follow my lead. When I get to the edge of the camp, do exactly as I do. 18 When I and all who are with me blow our trumpets, then from all around the camp blow yours and shout, 'For the Lord and for Gideon.'" 19 *Gideon and the hundred men with him reached the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just after they had changed the guard. They blew their trumpets and broke the jars that were in their hands. 20 The three companies blew the trumpets and smashed the jars. Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, they shouted, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" 21 While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled. 22 When the three hundred trumpets sounded, the Lord caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords. The army fled to Beth Shittah toward Zererah as far as the border of Abel Meholah near Tabbath. 23 Israelites from Naphtali, Asher and all Manasseh were called out, and they pursued the Midianites. 24 Gideon sent messengers throughout the hill country of Ephraim, saying, "Come down against the Midianites and seize the waters of the Jordan ahead of them as far as Beth Barah." So all the men of Ephraim were called out and they seized the waters of the Jordan as far as Beth Barah. 25 They also captured two of the Midianite leaders, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued the Midianites and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon, who was by the Jordan.*

New International Version

Dear Sisters and Brothers!

1. First of all I would like to point out that the Bible is not a manual for soldiers and no pocket card for deployments, nor is it a road map for international disarmament. I do not expect that all weapons are thrown away and replaced by trumpets and jars today or tomorrow. I do however expect that we accept the challenge of this extraordinary story and that you belong to those people who can contribute to peace and disarmament. Please allow me therefore to take up some observations from the story and apply it to our current-day situation.

2. Before I talk about the beginning of the story, I have to comment on its end. The deliberate killing of the captured Midianite leaders would be a violation of any form of modern-day martial law. Even those who think of wars as in some way legitimate will oppose a violation of the Geneva Conventions, particularly Articles 13 and 14 of the 3rd Convention, as the soldiers of Gideon would have committed. Prisoners of war must not be treated in this way. Such behaviour is clearly a violation of international humanitarian law and a war crime.

Other questions with regard to international humanitarian law and the assessment from the perspective of peace ethics are still unsettled. The debate on the US Army's and the CIA's using drones in Pakistan or Yemen for example raised an international question that has not been answered yet. In my opinion this kind of targeted killing is a breach of international humanitarian law. This practice is also part of the German debate on drones.

Incidentally, the end of the story also violates the concept of Responsibility to Protect. The Responsibility to Rebuild is part of this concept. The water of the Midianites thus must not be seized, but protected and restored. Today it might rather be about wells that would have to be drilled. Whether soldiers should do that is in fact the question and the subject of disputes.

But now I am already right in the middle of the current debate. I however wanted to be inspired by the story as a whole, which is why I start at the beginning.

3. The story tells us of the Israelites being besieged and threatened by the Midianites and the later-mentioned Amalekites. The former are traced back to Midian, the fourth son of Abraham. Moses had fled to Midian after murdering an Egyptian and had married the Midianite Zippora, daughter of the Midian priest. The people of Midian were later regarded as an aggressive tribe, being at war with Israel over many years. Amalek is listed in the Bible as a grandson of Esau. The Amalekites were later among the fierce enemies of Israel during the exodus from Egypt and the entry into the Promised Land.

This story leads us to the entangled threads of conflicts in the Middle East that have persisted until today. At the same time it raises the following fundamental question: How can it be that people, religions and cultures related to each other are at war against one another? How can Protestants fight against Catholics? How can Shiites and Sunnites carry out attacks in order to kill each other? How can members of the three monotheistic religions be enemies of each other? The questions I ask with regard to the religions are equally aimed at different ethnic groups and cultures.

From peace and conflict research and experiences with reconciliation processes we have learned that going back to the past is necessary but also infinitely laborious. Addressing shared history and separating differences and looking at the wounds that men and peoples have inflicted on one another is part of reconciliation. American peace activist and researcher John Paul Lederach has described the answer to this dilemma as a place where justice, peace, forgiveness and truth meet each other. Only if all four of them are considered, a conciliatory relationship can be built.

There is indeed much to be done on the way towards reconciliation. The most important contribution to peace our faith enables us to make as Christians is the maintenance of a dialogue with other religions. The recollection of shared roots and beliefs, but also of mutual injuries form part of this dialogue.

4. Gideon and the Israelites camp near the Harod Spring. The Hebrew word "harod" can be translated to mean "trembling". The Israelites therefore camp at the "Fountain of Trembling". Verse 3 relates how Gideon is ordered to sort out "(a)nyone who trembles with fear". The Hebrew word "haraed" is used in this context. It is a nice

wordplay which hints at a subject that is taken up again later with Gideon's fear in verse 10.

There is healthy fear that protects us from being careless. This kind of fear can and should be experienced by deployed soldiers, because it is the expression of respect for the situation. The same is true for all people who find themselves in dangerous situations. It also applies to civilian employees, development aid workers and peace specialists in theatre. Fear that results in trembling is nevertheless not healthy. It is dangerous. This is why it was certainly the right decision to send those back who trembled with fear.

We do, however, also know that dangerous missions can inflict psychological wounds on people in such a manner as they afterwards live in persistent states of anxiety. This also applies to soldiers as well as to civilian employees. Already in World War I the "shell shock" reaction became known. Today we speak of posttraumatic stress disorder. As a society, we must not block out the fact that people live among us who are affected by this. In Germany this fact has been blocked out or neglected for a long time. Today we provide care for those people in hospitals and with a number of offers. The Protestant Military Chaplaincy of the Bundeswehr has started a project for returnees which is aimed at those suffering from the effects of their deployment. All of this reveals the high price that is to be paid for a war or military mission. This does not only entail the costs for the mission, but also the consequential costs, not to mention the price paid by those who are affected.

As a phrase says: Fear is a bad advisor. We know that many conflicts are triggered or promoted by fear. And if fear is fuelled, conflicts escalate. Fear of alienation, fear of the power of others, fear of attacks: all of this plays an important role. The shock caused by the attacks on the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 was huge. It has influenced politics over many years and led to the War on Terror and a long-term mission in Afghanistan. Today we also realise that our fear has made us accept excessive surveillance and control. Is it not time we had a level-headed discussion on the irrational fears that guide our policies and on the fears our Western politics, way of life, and, yes, arrogance have caused over decades in other countries and cultures?

5. In the story of Gideon, exactly that mirror is held up to the Israelites and they are confronted with that same question. "Israel would boast against me, 'My own strength has saved me.'" is what is written in Verse 2 of the text. Israel is just at the beginning of its history as a new state when the story of Gideon takes place. The Bible tells us that after Moses leads the people out of Egypt, they conquer land under the lead of Joshua, and afterwards they are led and reigned by the judges. Today we know from historical research that the Bible contains much fiction and idealisation concerning this matter. It was probably rather a labourious process of the small group of Hebrews gradually gaining ground. This process entailed a mixture of conflicts, fights and a process of slow assimilation.

According to the Bible God rejected the idea of having a king. The direct reign of God was to be maintained. The judges partly were actual judges in a legal sense. Others, like Gideon, were military leaders and warriors. Military conflicts occurring at that time were understood as "Holy Wars". This meant that those "Holy Wars" were wars of God. The story of Gideon bursts right in on these stories of the "Holy Wars". Israel

had become arrogant. They had taken matters into their own hands. They praised themselves for their own strength. They had mobilised 32,000 men. The present story contains massive narrative criticism of arrogance and confidence exclusively built on military power and strength. The history of the Bible itself and especially the experiences collected over many centuries have shown that the concept of a "Holy War" has frequently been abused to serve personal or national interests, including the usurpation of God's name on the belt buckles of German soldiers during the 1st World War: "Gott mit uns!", meaning "God with us!".

6. But let me talk about the astonishing disarmament of which our story tells us. It is no Bundeswehr reform for financial, strategic or geopolitical reasons. This disarmament entails several steps. In the beginning, there were 32,000 soldiers. After the first selection process 22,000 return home, while 10,000 remain. There is another selection, after which only 300 men are left. This corresponds to 0.938 per cent of the previous strength. For many pacifists this is still too much. For many of those who bear political or military responsibility it would be a horror scenario. The method by which the 300 men are selected has been subject to much speculation. Those who kneel down and lap water like dogs can have their hands free to hold their weapon and are thus ready to fight. This is one interpretation. The meaning of this may remain open. There eventually are only 300 men left.

No sword is used. The Midianites and the Amalekites are put into flight by means of trumpets and jars and kill each other in the resulting confusion. This reminds us of another story: Joshua's victory over Jericho. It tells the story of how the Israelites brought down the walls of Jericho by means of the sound of their trumpets. By now shrewd researchers suppose that the noise of the trumpets was only a diversion. The Israelites actually dug tunnels underneath the walls of Jericho in order to make them collapse and to subsequently take the city. The trumpets were just to drown out the sounds of people digging. However, let us return to our story.

Israel was not to rely on military strength. The story also reminds us of the promise and vision of the prophet Micah: *They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree and no one will make them afraid.* (Micah 4: 3-4)

In the recent history of Germany this text from the Book of Micah became a root of a peaceful revolution and contributed to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The members of the GDR Peace Movement had gathered under this biblical motto and had the courage to sew it onto their clothes as their motto. Some were arrested and went to prison for that. This vision of a peaceful world has become a powerful force of change in the world. As some have said after the fall of the Berlin Wall: "We were prepared for everything. But not for candles and prayers."

It is, of course, sort of a joke of history that the bronze sculpture by Yevgeny Viktorovich Vuchetich named "Let us Beat Swords Into Plowshares" is now part of the United Nations Art Collection in New York. It stands there, however, as a reminder and promise to all of us.

I am ashamed of my country and its steadily increasing arms exports. Germany is the world's third largest arms exporter. This is scandalous for a country that started two

world wars and has experienced a peaceful revolution. I consider it Germany's historical responsibility to take the lead in a movement that advocates disarmament and takes concrete steps. And I think it is wonderful that you as an ecumenical group discuss this topic and I hope that this conference will also bring impulses in that direction.

Disarmament is a step-by-step process. It is a complicated network of armament research, defence production, arms exports and economic conversion that has to be considered here. Disarmament can only be successful if trust-building measures are taken, accepted and implemented. Trust versus fear: That is the topic of the story of Gideon. Gideon must learn to trust in God and take steps.

I want to state, however, that the story of Gideon is not a story about non-violent conflict management. Too many people die for that to be true. The thing that indeed alarms me about this story is that in the 3000 years since then we have made no progress and have learned nothing. That is why I am glad that you discuss the "Just-Peace-Concept" at this conference. The guiding principle of the Evangelical Church in Germany has been formulated in the Position Paper of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany. "Live from God's Peace – Care for Just Peace" It emphasises the correlation between peace, righteousness and justice. Civilian life and non-violent conflict management must have priority over any kind of military mission.

This is why we must focus our efforts on developing the instruments of prevention and non-violent conflict management. The experiences of the countries represented here are precisely what forces us to do so. Whoever does not invest in prevention, fair distribution of goods, and non-violent conflict management loses any right and legitimation when it comes to military missions.

7. There are other aspects of this story that would be worth to be considered. Those include the aspects of sleeping and the dream, because sometimes one should sleep on issues before making a decision. This also applies to political decisions and also the employment of soldiers. The little nightly eavesdropping mission by Gideon and his servant Purah prompts many a current association, even though there is no institution such as the NSA involved.

But I would like to come to an end and conclude with a quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He gave a famous speech at the Fano Conference on 28 August 1934 (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 13, [transl.: Cf. Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich: The Church and the Peoples of the World*. - In: *No Rusty Swords*. From the *Collected Works*, ed. and transl. by Edwin H. Robertson. New York, Evanston, Harper & Row, 1966. p. 291]). In this speech he mentions the story of Gideon in a side remark.

How does peace come about? Through a system of political treaties? Through the investment of international capital in different countries? Through the big banks, through money? Or through universal peaceful rearmament in order to guarantee peace? Through none of these, for the single reason that in all of them peace is confused with safety. There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared. It is the great venture. It can never be made safe. Peace is the opposite of security. To demand guarantees is to mistrust, and this mistrust in turn brings forth war. To look for guarantees is to want to protect oneself. Peace means to

give oneself altogether to the law of God, wanting no security, but in faith and obedience laying the destiny of the nations in the hand of Almighty God, not trying to direct it for selfish purposes. Battles are won, not with weapons, but with God. They are won where the way leads to the cross. Which of us can say he knows what it might mean for the world if one nation should meet the aggressor, not with weapons in hand, but praying, defenceless, and for that very reason protected by a bulwark never failing? (Gideon: "(...)You have too many men (...)") God himself puts disarmament into effect here!

Thank you for your attention!