



## Landesbischof Heinrich Bedford-Strohm

### Predigt an Weihnachten, 24.12.2015, am Hauptbahnhof München

Dear brothers and sisters,

I don't know whether you have ever celebrated Christmas service in a railway station. For me, in any case, it is the first time. Normally we prefer locations like churches or parish halls which are our spiritual homes and therefore are priority



number one if we choose the place for our Christmas service. However, I dare to assume that there are people amongst us who have not celebrated Christmas in a cozy church last year. Some of you have been on the road for a long time until you arrived here to seek refuge. And maybe, when we get together after the service, we can share stories about where we have been last year.

A railway station is an unusual location for a Christmas service. But it is probably closer to the origin of our celebration than the churches we normally meet in. We have just heard the story of Mary and Josef again as they were travelling while expecting a baby not finding a place to stay.

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." Artists have always imagined a stable and even ox and donkey around the manger in which Jesus was laid. In any case it was probably as cold as it is today here in the railway station. And the place probably had as little to do with what we would call a home as this station here.

We are here to honor the Christmas story and the precarious location in which it takes place. But we are also here to reflect and bring before God what has happened here at Munich Station in the past months, to assess where we are now and to get guidance as to where we go – as refugees, as

volunteers, as officials and simply as Christians who share the problems and the hopes of all those involved.

Munich station has become a symbol of German Welcome culture. The pictures of this September weekend went around the world. Pictures of people arriving in trains from Hungary being received with applause after having being shifted around back and forth in the days before,. I will never forget the faces of those arriving, especially the children, a mixture of exhaustion, relief and joy for being welcomed this way. And I will never forget what I heard from volunteers. One of the voluntary coordinators had come all the way from Regensburg in the morning simply to help. I saw many happy faces of helpers as much as of arriving refugees.

What has happened since then? We do not see the euphorism of those days anymore, but we see a lot of continuing readiness to help. The officials have meanwhile worked out a sophisticated system of organizing the arrival, registration and distribution of refugees. I have tremendous respect for the organizational competence and the commitment with which the city and district administrations as much as the police, the Red Cross and all the other help organizations have handled this situation.

Germany has changed. We have discovered how strong we are in empathy and in organizing help, receiving 1 million refugees this past year. We will never lose this experience.

Of course many things are not easy. Some of the people who have arrived here in September and afterwards still don't know what their perspective will be. The legal procedures are slow because of a lack of staff in the asylum offices. And some who have arrived here with high hopes have been sobered by the difficulties to get settled here. And some are in deep concern about their loved ones which they had to leave behind. We grieve about those who did not make it all the way to here and lost their lives.

Our feelings this Christmas afternoon are ambivalent: joy and satisfaction about what has been accomplished. And exhaustion and doubts in the face of the enormity of the challenge and uncertainty about the future. Will the empathy and the strength suffice to meet the challenges?

And now Christmas. Christmas here in the railway station – this place where so many people arrived and were welcomed.

The Christmas story fits in this context. It speaks not into some romantic environment as much as the nativity scenes we see in these Christmas days in the shopping centers and cities might suggest it. It speaks in the midst of our daily reality, in the midst of a world which is so full of poverty,

hatred and violence. It speaks of this couple looking for a place to stay for the birth. And then after the birth – as the gospel of Matthew tells us – the flight to Egypt persecuted by King Herod who killed all newborn children to prevent a possible competitor for the throne of Judäa. Egypt grants asylum to the refugee family with Mary and Josef and the little Jesus.

From these very ordinary events comes the greatest revolution which the world has ever seen. God lives amongst us as a human being. God becomes visible in a human being. God shares all the hopes and fears, all the dangers and promises, all the injustices and sorrows that we experience as human beings. God becomes a human being out of pure love. God is not a governor from outside who commands the course of the world. God who has created us human beings to his image becomes one of us to show us the way to a fulfilled life. A life in faith, hope and love.

The Christmas story is so fascinating because it turns religion upside down. Religion is not anymore the movement to a transcendent world but it is always at the same time a movement into the world. Praying to God now means being concerned with the world. God is not "out there" anymore, but "in here". In the face of the least of our brothers and sisters we encounter God himself.

And that has a revolutionary consequence: there is no faith in God without empathy towards human beings. Maybe the most challenging question in this coming year is the question of our resources of empathy. How will we be able to deal with a situation where many people who have found refuge here need further care and accompaniment to become part of our society? And how will we – without getting exhausted – be able to receive those with dignity who will newly arrive?

We will need a lot of empathy in this coming year. That is why Christmas is so crucial. Christmas is the greatest source of empathy which the world has ever seen. The birth of Jesus Christ whom we as Christians call our Savior is one big movement of love into the world. After the birth of Jesus Christ no one can pray anymore to God without caring for their neighbor.

If people are worried and ask the question: Will we manage?, the Christmas response is: Yes we will manage. We will manage if we open our hearts to this energy of love which has come into the world with the birth of Jesus. We will manage if we live in a relationship with God which reaches our soul every day. We will manage if we pray to the God who has become visible on earth as the least of our brothers and sisters.

There is no reason to be afraid, if we stay connected with God and the fascinating energy which flows from God into the world. Let us - as the shepherds in the fields - listen to the wonderful news which the angels brings:

"Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

The angel and the multitude of heavenly host fill the air with praise in the fields around Bethlehem. And they fill the air with praise here at Munich Station. Love is in the air. Hope is in the air. Joy is in the air.

Jesus Christ is born. The light shines in the darkness. God will never leave us alone. We will manage.

AMEN