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## Sunday Prayer Sermon

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Sunday, 25 June 2023

**Bishop Dr Heinrich Bedford-Strohm**

*“You shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.”*

Dear sisters and brothers, I cannot imagine a more beautiful word on this day and in this so special place. What a promise! What a comfort! What a hope in a world, which so often makes us feel that heaven is closed!

When the WCC was founded 75 years ago in Amsterdam, this feeling of a closed heaven was very present. Sixty million people had died in this aggressive war started by Nazi Germany. Six million Jews had been brutally murdered in concentration camps and gas chambers. I speak here as a German feeling shame of the failure of Christian witness in my country in the face of all these cruelties. The Christian churches in Germany had not spoken up against this war. Most of their representatives followed and religiously legitimized a state ideology, which was in deep contradiction to Christian faith. There were no angels coming from heaven but bombs, which killed untold numbers of children, men, and women. German Christians failed to be salt of the earth and light of the world. Instead, German churches became witnesses of death and darkness.

My parents raised me in a spirit of “Never again!” Never again should we look away when injustices happen and hate is instigated. The World Council of Churches, for me, was therefore from my young age on, a sign of hope. Reconciliation was, from the very beginning of its existence, part of WCC’s DNA. People came together in Amsterdam in 1948 with a clear purpose of leading the churches of the world together and making them an instrument of peace. They clearly declared that war is against the will of God and that our task as Christians is exactly to overcome nationalism and other forms of division between peoples, which had just resulted in this terrible world war with so many million victims.

They committed to pray and listen to Christ and put Christ before all other loyalties in the future. And that means: care for others, care for the world. They stated already then what the world mission conference in Arusha has reemphasized in 2018: Service to Christ is intrinsically connected with service to the world.

Where are we now? Have we lived up to the legacy of Amsterdam? Are we, as churches, really an instrument of peace in all the armed conflicts on this globe? I wish the answer was a clear “yes.” But it is not. Too often, we still put our national or political loyalties before our loyalty to Christ, and sometimes, we don’t even notice it. That is why we have to listen to the biblical witness about Christ again and again.

It is the key! It is the absolute key! It is the way, the truth, and the life! It is clear after all what Jesus says to us: go with me. Let me accompany you, enter into fellowship with me - so you will see heaven open.

Why do we hesitate simply to follow this invitation? To really trust completely in Christ? To really put our lives in his hands? I find today’s story on Philip and Nathanael so powerful precisely because it captures this hesitation that we know so well. Philip, one of Jesus’ disciples, says to Nathanael: “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathanael

reacts to this message initially only with scepticism: "What good can come from Nazareth?" Nathanael does not say: "You have found the Messiah? Lead me to him! Let's go immediately!" But he reacts distantly, almost a bit mockingly: "What are you saying? From Nazareth - this little provincial nest in Galilee, of which hardly anyone has ever heard, from there the Messiah is supposed to come? You don't believe that yourself!"

It really is an impertinence to believe that this man from a small village in a small country in the Middle East, that this man is the saviour of the world, that with him something new has come into the world, something that changes our life, and not only our life, but the life of the whole world. And the doubts gnaw all the deeper when we look at all the suffering, all the crises, all the hopelessness that are in the world today just as they were 2,000 years ago. First the pandemic and now this terrible war in Ukraine and all the other wars on this globe, climate change, world hunger.

What does Philip answer to the doubting Nathanael? Philip just says, "Come and see!" Don't think abstractly about where help for the world can come from and whether the message you hear will stand up to your critical scrutiny. But come and see! Meet this Jesus, have experiences with him. Trust your heart as much as you trust your mind! I can't explain to you why Jesus has become so important for my life, says Philip, come and see, so you will understand.

Then, Nathanael does indeed meet Jesus. And it is a life-transforming experience. So fascinated is he by the spirit of radical love, which he senses in Jesus that he ends up saying, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel!" What the sceptic cannot believe from a distance, he understands when he comes and sees, when he meets Jesus.

"Come and see," - dear brothers and sisters – this is the decisive word that Philip says to Nathanael, no more and no less, and this is the decisive word that Philip also says to us. He says it whenever our heart threatens to become blind to what God is doing. If you want to understand what God is doing in your life, in the life of this world, look to this Jesus. Come and see! He makes the blind see, he makes the lame walk, he raises up the weak, and he gives justice to the poor. He welcomes the stranger with open arms, and with those excluded he holds a meal. To the sad he wipes away tears and to the lonely he is a friend and companion. Come and see and you will understand that this man is the Saviour. Meet him and you are no longer lost. It happened the same way to Nathanael. And it is happening to you, too. You will see greater things than these. You will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending over the Son of Man.

These words touch me. They touch me because I so much long for the open heaven. I so much long for hope in this wounded world. I so much yearn for the inner strength to deal with all these challenges that sometimes seem so overwhelming! Where does it come from?

I need people like Philip who take me by my hand and say to me: Come and see! I actually begin to understand something. It was Philip people who invited me to this worship service in the Geneva Cathedral. The invitation said: Come and see! There is this World Council. This World Council of the Churches of Jesus Christ! Come and see! They have been together for 75 years now. They went through good times and through difficult times. But Jesus has never left them alone. Jesus has always been the corner stone. Jesus has always called them to repentance when it was needed. Jesus was always present when two or three of them were gathered in his name. Come and see and understand what God is doing here!

You are asking where the angels are ?

Don't you have eyes? Come and see! Look at all these people around you! They might come from the other side of the globe. But they are your angels. God has sent them to you from heaven to let you experience what Jesus has promised us: a world, in which everyone treats each other with respect, a world, in which everyone shares until nobody goes to bed hungry anymore, a world, in which no one who suffers is left uncomforted, a world in which all forms of exclusion and discrimination have ceased. Come and see how Christ's love moves you and your brothers and sisters around you to reconciliation and unity!

Yes, we meet Christ when we look high up beyond the Lake of Geneva into the mountains and enjoy the presence of God in his wonderful creation. We encounter Christ at the very bottom with the least of his sisters and brothers. And we encounter him here in the community to which we have gathered in his name. Christ is present in our WCC Pilgrimage for Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity. He will not leave us alone. He is in our midst. He is with us always to the end of the age.

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