

## SERMON BY REV. JOHN HAYWARD, VICAR OF St. MARY'S MERTON

### 'Crossing Barriers', with reference to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Delivered at Ecumenical Evensong 15<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2017, 6.30pm at St Marys Church, Merton SW19  
Corinthians 5: 14-20 John Chapter 4

At the Court of the Eternal King, we are ushered in via the Ambassador's entrance and await a royal audience..... for *We* are ambassadors for Christ.

So says St Paul. Christ has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

The dismantling of seemingly impermeable barriers that separate us from God and one another.

We are each in need of it - personally, as churches, denominations, communities and nations. And in the approach to the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, crossing barriers, mindful of the fall of the Berlin Wall, is our theme.

In the summer of 1989, while on a college placement, I had the good fortune of meeting Florian from west Berlin, in England teaching German to British students, part of his national service. We got on very well and during our time off enjoyed quite a bit of pushing the boundaries ourselves, in what was a pretty stuffy public school institution. He teaching German and me shadowing the Chaplain. We said our goodbye at the end of summer and all was quiet until a phone call from Berlin on 10<sup>th</sup> November, the day after the Wall was breached. Florian had explained the tortuous security business he was used to, travelling through the corridor that was an island within east Germany, that linked west Berlin to the rest of western Germany. The annoying nuisance passing two custom barriers each time he left or entered the city of west Berlin was a regular feature of his life, queuing up for a long time to be thoroughly controlled by what he describes as '*robotic like officials*'. When the phone call came however, Florian was ecstatic. He couldn't believe what had happened nor suppress his joy and why should he! In utter amazement he described his witness of the fall of the wall and without a shot being fired! As an intelligent and enthusiastic student, he knew instinctively, great opportunities lay ahead.

I am grateful to Florian and our other German friends, Peggy, Hans and Carsten, who is present this evening, staying with us this week at the Vicarage. Each has offered their different perspective to the fall of the Berlin Wall and is contained in this sermon.

I share with you their different perspectives of the same event and how it unfurled, literally ***from four different points of view***. From Peggy, who now works in the tourist industry, who till the age of twelve lived in the north- eastern region of the district of Mecklenburg in the former GDR; and from Hans who looked from the eastern part of Berlin itself. Florian lived

in west Berlin and Carsten, originally from Osnabruck in Lower Saxony, deeper inside western Germany, now a resident of Berlin.

I retell their perspectives of this historic moment in European history as we, churches together, join in worship, with certain walls still existing around our churches. We have just heard the Gospel reading from St John - the account when Jesus met the woman of Samaria at the ancient site of Jacob's Well. He spoke with her, and even asked her for a glass of water. That was as unheard of in Jesus' day, as it was unheard of, pre 1989, for citizens from east Germany to talk to those in the west. It was verboten!

As in the gospel story, when the converted Samaritans told Jesus:

***'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves'***, Florian had to see the wall with his own eyes to witness what he could hardly believe and see it for himself and by extension wanted me to fly over and see it for myself too, which I did.

*'You must come to Berlin John and I will show you the places where these momentous things occurred.'* Alexander Platz where the student uprising gained momentum, the places where the wall once stood, at first commemorated with markers in the road, showing its path slicing through the city, but more often these days, even they have disappeared. And virtually every year since, I've returned and watched the change unfurl. On my first visit, early in 1990, with headphones plugged in into a cd player, I walked down the centre of the road - Unter den Linden, the music of one of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos accompanying me as I processed through the ceremonial central arch of the Brandenburg Gate, feeling intensely the moment of history.

I would have been shot just a few months prior if I'd ever got that close.

Death by gunshot was a regular occurrence for those who dared to try crossing from east to west; as in centuries past, some of our churches burned one another for **not** crossing from one denomination to another, depending on which was in power! We can learn much from reflecting on our respective histories, be they ecclesiastical or political.

Some of the positive things my former east German friends speak about, after the fall of the wall, included having far greater choice, not having to wait 10 years to buy a car, one could choose which school to attend, what job one did and suddenly bananas and pineapples appeared in the shops! However, Hans laments the so called 'gain of freedom', as he sees it as a *kind* of freedom more imposed by transatlantic interest.

Both of those I spoke to from the former east lament the loss of social cohesion. Before the fall of the wall, people helped each other more, stuck together, and enjoyed a life with far

less general violence, crime and drugs. And even in west Berlin, which was insulated from the worst of western Germany's general social forces, life there was more peaceful and disturbed with far less crime. Before the destruction of the wall, the west German government paid money to citizens to stay or move to west Berlin to keep the city populated – a policy known as the Berlin benefits - '*Berlinzulage*'. The influence however of west Germany directly into west Berlin, after the fall of the wall, unravelled much of its settled peace. Not surprisingly, Carsten says: '*I guess no form of government is perfect!!*'

What would the Christian Church look like, if united? What form of government would it enjoy? What if all our walls fell like that in Berlin in 1989 and Christians could freely cross from one to another, as frequently as they liked? How would it be to enter each other's churches, and enjoy *all the benefits*, blind to former allegiances ..... as Berlin citizens now cross the former, and now largely invisible boundaries, that once dominated their landscape?

If that were to happen, many Christians might well feel like Peggy or Hans, the shock of a different form of governance. '*For it felt like having all the windows in your house broken*', says Hans, a strange wind blowing through – '*taken over by an unknown, foreign power*'.

There would be the uncertainty of living in a culture where to a larger degree, for some, you could make decisions yourself. Those who gladly sheltered behind institutions which made those decisions for them, might well not welcome the freedom. Others still would rejoice! One, united Church might well struggle to respect all the different strands of its cultures. But as barriers fall, as they did in Berlin, what Florian most welcomed, could become the general order of the day.

### ***Meeting and speaking with people, different from yourself.***

*'The most striking and emotional revelation'* he said, '*were the unknown people we suddenly were able to meet and interact with. What a humongous treasure had been covered up, cut off by a long piece of armoured concrete!*' As Carsten echoes with Florian, after twenty-seven years, one of the legacies is still the *mental wall* that keeps many people from mixing and being open minded towards those who are different. Especially people over 40 – but not so the younger generation for whom a united Germany is all they've ever known.

Florian's family, recently hosted a meal with a Syrian refugee family just before Christmas and in the process put human flesh upon what can easily remain just a remote *subject*, about which we read and see in the news.

He concludes with a different version of President Regan's famous speech made on his visit some two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, in which he invited Mr Gorbachov to: '***Tear down this wall***'. Florian says: '*So let's tear down those walls inside our heads. As*

*many fear the unknown stranger - the foreigner; because the picture we have of others consists of things we have not experienced ourselves.'*

As Jesus crossed the barrier at Jacob's well, spoke to a foreigner and, against the prevailing wind, even received simple hospitality from her; as the people of Berlin and Germany generally reach out beyond the wall which previously obscured those living behind it, so may we in the churches, be ready to do likewise. Not to fear the difference, but break down the walls of institutionalised separation which obscures Jesus Christ's gospel message of salvation. It obscures our appreciation of each other too, as we see them from just a human point of view. For, as St Paul said: *'Even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way'*. His offer of salvation is to everybody, irrespective of the direction from where their, or our, point of view begins. No more the mantra, *'East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet'*.

Rudyard Kipling wrote so well:

*'Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;  
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,  
When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!'*

For Christ is Saviour of us all, from north and south, from east and west and to this we should bear witness:

***One Church, One Faith, One Lord.*** Amen.

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