

GLORY TO GOD AND PEACE ON EARTH

MEDITATIVE INTRODUCTION:

1. The motto of the *International Ecumenical Peace Convocation* and this *Initial Statement towards an Ecumenical Declaration on Just Peace* is from Luke's Gospel. Shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem are the first to hear:

"Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord, and this will be the sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths 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, and on earth peace, good will among men." (2:10-14)¹

Why this motto?

2. It is often said that religions are accomplices to the violence that plagues our world. Therefore, we would be better off without them. We in the World Council of Churches, however, are convinced that the God who speaks to us through this baby lying in a manger is the foundation of everything we can say and do about overcoming violence and promoting peace in and with the earth.

3. We are aware of the fact that throughout its history Christianity has been involved in many acts and forms of violence. Therefore, everything that we say on the following pages is said in the spirit of repentance. What we express here is directed to our churches as much as it is directed to all readers of good will.

4. In the Gospel, angels are needed to tell us the good news that God has entered the world of humans in the form of an utterly dependant child, born to parents on the margin of the Roman Empire. This message goes against the human inclination to identify God with the powerful. It is a decisively different story: God enters the vicious circles of violence and greed, dependence and misery from below. Good news indeed. The Hebrew word "Immanuel" says it succinctly: God is with us, a gracious, forgiving, healing reality in our midst. God's grace, greater than human sin, God's compassion, deeper than human pride and despair. We can face our world in truth, love and hope.

5. The Christmas story in Luke 2 has become so familiar that we sometimes overlook its political relevance. In verse 1 it begins with a reference to the Emperor Augustus and it ends, in Verse 21, with the naming of the Saviour: Jesus. Hence the "oikoumene" of the Roman Empire is the violent reality against which the "oikoumene" of the "Prince of Peace" (Isa 9:5) is set. Here we see the perennial tension between the peace of God and the "pax romana" – and all the "peace-dictates" of imperial powers up to this day. We look at the life of Jesus, his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead and affirm: This is the alternative to the powers of the world.

6. The angel's song puts the emphasis on the earth as the location of peace, so as to indicate that the curse that was placed on the earth because of Adam's sin is lifted (Gen 3:17-19). We believe that Christ, the "second Adam", opens up new ways of dealing with the earth. Our salvation cannot be separated from the wellbeing of creation. This is the horizon for the churches' peace-building ministries. We wish to affirm this in the face of the dangerous realities of climate change, nuclear threats and the ever-widening gap between rich and poor.

7. The first word of the angel is: "Be not afraid!" These simple words occur again as the Risen Christ meets his fearful and dispirited disciples (Mt 28:10). We, too, are fearful people in fearsome times. We need to be embraced, encouraged and comforted. We pray for the peace of Christ Jesus to fill us from within. We want to be part of Christian communities which understand themselves as places of confidence and joy, truth and solidarity, forgiveness and healing.

¹ Here and in all quotes that follow the Revised Standard Version (RSV) is used.