Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As a pastor I thought I’d know the Bible quite well. But when I prepared this sermon for today and realized the text that was chosen from the Old Testament I was not sure. Had I ever read this story before? Well, some time I must have read it, but I didn’t really remember.

It is one of the stories that the Hebrew Bible tells us about the struggles and wars between the people of Israel and their neighbours. Some of these wars were quite cruel – not really something I like best in the Bible. But our reading from the Books of Judges describes a different kind of battle. Gideon, the leader of the Jewish troops, sent most of his soldiers home. They would not be needed to beat the enemy, the people of Midian. The Israelites were not to think that a victory would be their own doing, but Israel’s winning the battle would be God’s victory. So, for this battle Gideon and his soldiers just took trumpets and torches, no swords or harnesses. And hearing the sound of the trumpets and seeing the light of the torches the enemy cried and fled immediately.

To be honest: It is not a completely peaceful story, the leaders of the Midianites were killed later. But the battle itself was not a bloody one. Gideon did not follow military logic such as: The more massively we stand against the enemy, the more we harm the enemy the better it is. No, this was not Gideon’s intention. Gideon was convinced that God himself would give victory to his people if He wanted to.

In our times, however, most wars are led differently. The City of Coventry was massively damaged by German bombing in 1940. And my city, Kiel, was massively damaged by British bombing during the following years. But then something different happened between the two cities. In 1947 Provost Howard went to Kiel and brought a small cross to our city, made from nails of the truss of your destroyed cathedral. It was the first cross of nails donated to representatives of Germany, and we treasure its memory by keeping that cross in our main church, St. Nikolai. In 1947 a cautious relationship began between our two cities, which led to a partnership of our cities that has lasted for 50 years now.

Is there another way of dealing with conflicts than treating the opponent as an enemy who has to be beaten, hurt or destroyed? Fortunately, in our times quite a number of non-violent strategies of dealing with conflicts have been developed. And for conflicts between individuals different kinds of training one’s abilities of self-defence are offered, which teach people to become more powerful and fearless by strengthening their inner self.

Somehow this is what Gideon did with his troops. Strengthened by his belief in the God of Israel and encouraged by a dream he equipped his troops with trumpets and torches. And their sheer presence, the sound of their trumpets and the lights of their torches made the Midianites flee without fighting.

Two weeks ago we celebrated 500 years of Lutheran reformation. And in Germany, the land of Martin Luther, this was a huge celebration. In the course of the celebration I realized how much strength Luther had gained from reading the Bible. For him neither the Emperor nor the Pope was right – as long as the Bible said something different. And from the words of the Bible he took his certainty that only through the grace of the Lord can a human being be redeemed and made righteous.
Retrospectively we know that the Reformation also led to terrible wars. Therefore it is still good to gain one’s certainty and strength by believing in Jesus Christ, our Lord. But in our times it is also necessary not to see this as the only way to live. That would be fundamentalism – and we all know how destructive such an attitude can be. Today it is necessary to stand clear and upright by your own convictions, by your belief and religion. But at the same time it is necessary to respect others and communicate with them. And if conflicts arise – I am sure: We can always find ways of dealing with them without destroying the opponent. For Gideon trumpets and torches were enough. Amen.