Shalom for Europe in 2026

Esteemed audience, dear brothers and sisters, how can we, as Christians and particularly as Christian schools, seek and foster shalom for Europe in our time? This question has been the main focus of this conference, and we will continue to explore it this morning. In my contribution, I will proceed in three steps. Firstly, we will revisit the message delivered by the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 29 of his book. Secondly, we will consider the status of Christians in this world as resident aliens or alienated residents. Thirdly, we will underline the rich heritage of the Christian faith and its relevance to European society today.

1.

The prophet Jeremiah delivered his message in many different ways. In Jeremiah 29, we read a moving letter sent by him in the name of the Lord to Jewish exiles in Babylon. Its content is still relevant today, even in 2026!

In 594 BC, the situation in Jerusalem was bleak. Many houses were empty and many people had disappeared, having been taken away to a place 400 miles away in the vast kingdom of Babylon (verse 2). The nation's elite was in exile; only the common people have been left behind under the weak leadership of 'King' Zedekiah. In reality, this man had no real power, and was completely subservient to Nebuchadnezzar, the powerful ruler of the Babylonian Empire.
One day, when Zedekiah sends envoys to Babylon, Jeremiah, being still in Jerusalem, seizes the opportunity to deliver a letter to his deported people. This letter is a pastoral guide for the people of Judah residing as strangers in a foreign land.

The actual sender of the letter is Yahweh, the God of Israel. In verse 4, we read, *'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel'*. God reveals Himself again in His greatness and majesty as the Lord of the heavenly hosts. The exiles must not be blinded by Babylon's display of power.

The idols of Babylon pale in comparison to the LORD, who remains faithful to his covenant with the people of Israel. Addressing the exiles God says that He is the One who has taken them into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. He has given them into the hands of the king of Babylon. These are painful words; there is a sting in them. The exiles must learn to see their exile to Babylon as God's just

punishment, and accept their situation from that perspective. They must remember that even Nebuchadnezzar cannot act beyond what the LORD allows him to do.

Verses 5–7 convey the core of the message. The exiles are instructed to prepare for a long stay in Babylon. This will last for seventy years (verse 10), which is a lifetime, touching three generations: not only will their children be born in captivity, but their grandchildren will be born in exile too. The exiles should not assume that they do not need to settle down. On the contrary, they will have to build houses to live in long term and create gardens to earn a living. They must let their children marry and start families.

Eventually a new future will dawn in God's time: after 70 years, they will return to Jerusalem, and the people must be numerous and vigorous by then. Note that this does not refer to marriages with pagans, as the Israelites are forbidden to mix with pagans. They must keep their identity, but not withdraw from society. They are called upon to be observant, hardworking members of the Babylonian community, taking responsibility for the city's well-being and ensuring that people speak well of them.

This call would certainly have surprised the exiles. Must they look for peace and shalom for the city? Have they really to contribute to the well-being of Babylon? Moreover, to pray for their enemies and for a city that they would rather turn their back on forever? Many may have found this letter very disappointing. They would rather have heard the message of the false prophets, such as Hananiah in Jerusalem and Ahab and Zedekiah in Babylon (verse 21). These false prophets told the people that all the troubles would be over within two years, the good old days would return, and all Israel would live peacefully in Jerusalem again. Jeremiah earnestly warned against this doctrine of lies. These fair-weather prophets are publishing their own dreams instead of the word of God. The Lord has not sent them, and those who trust in them will be utterly ashamed. Jeremiah's message is that there will be no cheap peace or future without true repentance to God, facing their guilt and acknowledging God's righteous judgement. God's word dispels all false hope so that they learn to trust only in his grace and no longer build on unstable foundations.

In fact, this letter to the exiles is very encouraging. In verses 10–14, we look the LORD into his heart. God will have mercy on his people again. He is angry and punishes, but ultimately his mercy triumphs over his wrath. The Lord says: *I know the plans I have for you, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.* There will be a bright future after the dark night of exile. How will that work? Well, the exiles will cry out to God for help in their time of need. They will realize that they must look to Him alone for it. They will call on Him, and He will hear them. Then the Lord will gather his people from all the nations and places where He had driven them, and bring them back to Jerusalem.
The Word of God is always a *timely* message. That is certainly true of this letter, which makes it clear that it is possible to serve God in a pagan environment. It is not the circumstances that are decisive, but the attitude of the heart. The message of Jeremiah 29 has a lot to say to us in view of our situation and vocation as Christians in Europe today.

2.

I will now consider *the status and calling of Christians* in the world. To a certain extent, this situation can be compared with that of the Israelite people in Babylon. The apostle Peter writes that Christians are 'strangers' and 'sojourners' in this world (1 Peter 1:10; 2:11), but also 'priests' (1 Peter 2:9). God gives us this planet earth and the world of today as our dwelling place and homeland. In this sense, we are 'world citizens'. Nevertheless, we are *in* the world but not *of* it. (cf. John 17). We are citizens of two worlds. Our homeland is occupied territory. The powers that control the world today are no more devoted to the living God than Nebuchadnezzar was in his time. The Church of Christ is marginalized and considered a fringe phenomenon in Europe and many other parts of the world. However, she lives in hope of the great liberation and of God's new world, that will be realized when Jesus appears in glory. It is by this hope that she endures, remaining vigilant and active. It is not our task or calling to make a really new world, nor can we do so. However, God calls us to look after those who are in need of help. In doing so, we make no distinction between church members and others. We pray for our hometown, our country, Europe and the whole world. Like the apostle Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:1–2: *supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quite and peaceable life, godly and respectful in*

every way. The more wicked Babylon is, the more fervently the Church prays that God will grant salvation to a world lost in guilt. The more we carry 'Jerusalem' in our hearts, the more we can do for 'Babel'.
As is well known, the word 'world' has varying connotations in the Bible. Sometimes it conveys a negative sense of hostility towards God and of turning away from Him. At other times, it refers to the stage on which God's deeds take place and the area in which the believer fulfil their life's task. In the context of the Christian faith, we consider the world from four different perspectives.

1. **From the perspective of creation**

Here, the idea of vocation comes to the fore. The world, the created reality, is the place where we are called by our Creator to work with the talents given to us for his glory. Calvin speaks of the *statio*, the place where man must fulfil his *vocatio*, or calling. A sanctified life does not take place in seclusion, but amid the rich variety of life with all its possibilities, challenges, temptations and threats. Recognizing this, we can embrace the rhythm of life, balancing work and rest, effort and relaxation. The world has a framework of creational orders, like the alternation of work and rest, marriage and family, and authority and obedience, which Christians want to respect as much as possible because they recognize the beneficial intention of a charitable God in them. It is a privilege to be able to live and work in this world. There are many moments when we can feel at home here.

2. **From the perspective of sin**

Creation is broken and groans as if in labour. The world is full of wickedness and is under the control of the devil. Therefore, sincere believers cannot be absorbed in this world. They are like 'citizens of two worlds' or 'exiled citizens'. They cannot fully identify with the world's fashions, trends, mores and customs since they know of a better homeland and a higher fulfilment of life than bread and circuses, entertainment and pleasure. This sense of being a stranger leads to a unique lifestyle: not consuming so greedily, not profiting so uncritically and not embracing the all-encompassing consumerism that is so prevalent in the modern welfare state. This involves setting boundaries based on obedience to God's word, not following the majority in evil, and having the courage to swim against the current and to stand alone for God's sake, ‘daring to be a Daniel’.
The New Testament does not equate this world with the realm of the antichrist. Even as 'occupied territory', the world remains God's world. In my opinion,

Christians must characterize themselves through *participatory pilgrimage* with a faithful-realistic view of the present.

3. **From the perspective of reconciliation**

The cross of Golgotha has been planted in this world. For Christians, this leads to a new turn to the world in imitation of Christ. It is the mission of the Church to bear witness to its Lord through word and deed. The daily carrying of the cross after Christ is directed to the salvation of the world. The Saviour never turned away from those who did not know the law, but went again and again to sinners on the fringes of society to show God's love for those who are lost. Because of the cross of Golgotha, the world must not be dismissed, but rather, through selfless service, the true good of one's neighbor must be sought. This world-oriented service to God can be summarized by the term 'mission', as is often used today in reference to the 'mission' of an institution or company. The church's mission encompasses both the apostolate and the diaconate, a comprehensive approach in the name of God who saves body and soul. The church is challenged by time to arrive at a contemporary and appealing interpretation of the Gospel in word and deed.

4. **From the perspective of consummation**.

There is also the eschatological aspect of Christians' service in this world. I refer to a statement of mr. Luc Bussière: ‘Christian hope does not consist in fleeing the world, but in living *today* in the light of what God will bring about *tomorrow*.’ This includes standing up for justice and fighting injustice and it involves committing to just structures and tenaciously resisting all damage to humanity, social injustice, violations of human rights and the exploitation of the poor by the rich. The Church of Christ recognizes the great future in which the principles of the Torah, the visions of the prophets, and the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount will be realized. Therefore, it refuses to accept the status quo of injustice and oppression. Instead, it fights persistently for justice and salutary order in the face of a world dominated by selfishness and the law of the strongest. In this way, we align the concept of 'justice' with the idea of 'mission'. The church's mission includes practicing and pursuing justice. This has also to be discussed in Christian politics, with social criticism serving humane relations within the public system.

We participate in history; we live in Babylon. We live in the relationships in which God has placed us. We cannot flee from it. We cannot escape it. We have an assignment for the here and now. At the same time Christians must clearly proclaim the victory of Jesus and show the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. From a consummation point of view, the great challenge for Christians in the 21^(st) century is to combat *spiritual pacifism*. A pacifist does not want to manufacture weapons, not even to protect their own country. Likewise, spiritual pacifists do not want to take up their armor where they are required to do so.
I would argue for *spiritual militancy,* an assertive and creative response to the advancing banishment of faith from the public domain. This spiritual militancy does not express itself in fighting all kinds of differences between Christians themselves, but is rather reflected in a common effort to counteract the internal erosion of society.
Christians must remain at their posts for as long as possible, seeking to influence others for good through the power of the Holy Spirit. Often, we must work with people who operate on the basis of non-Christian principles and ideals. Such cooperation reaches its limit where our own actions come into conflict with God's commandments. Mr Roger Kiska provides clear examples of the tensions and challenges currently facing Christian parents and teachers. I quote: ‘Our task is to demonstrate the public value of Christian education through excellent teaching, safeguarding, intellectual seriousness and compassionate community life.’
Through prayer, listening to the Scriptures and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we continually learn to determine our position as servants of Christ: alert and active until the Master comes. We should not try to anticipate the coming Kingdom, but may participate in the European society and culture not forgetting that we are called to pilgrimage. In the light of the *Parousia*, the glorious appearance of Christ, it is precisely *eusebeia*, godliness, that matters. We need an 'ethics of vigilance' (Chr. Fahner).
The justification of the ungodly remains central: it is only through Christ's accomplished and applied work that we receive eternal life in God’s Kingdom. On our journey to that Kingdom, we are comforted by what Christ has achieved. However, there is also the call to daily conversion, working hard to take steps towards the Kingdom of God.

3.

I will now move on to my third and last point. What is the relevance of the rich heritage of the Christian faith for European society today? How can we, as Christians, contribute to shalom for the city and for Europe in a concrete and meaningful way? In search of an answer to these questions, I found very helpful a recently published book by David Boogerd, Beatrice de Graaf and Stefan Paas entitled *The Incredible History. How Christianity Changed Our Culture* (De ongelooflijke geschiedenis. Hoe het christendom onze cultuur vormde). In this book, the authors examine the historical and cultural developments in the Western world over thousands of years. We live in a time when our history, which is strongly marked by Christianity, is disappearing into the distance. However, Christian values and norms have certainly left a strong mark on European and American culture. Unfortunately, most opinion leaders are blind to this, and public opinion is far from aware of it. Nevertheless, the book I mentioned demonstrates that many of our current, widely accepted views on human dignity originated with 'some dusty fishermen and their rabbi, long ago and in a country far away'. The underlying message of the book is that modern and premodern Europeans and Americans are more stamped by a Christian heritage than they realize.
The authors formulate six theses, indicating that these are all inextricably linked to our Christian history. These propositions read:

1. There are universal human rights. Every person has value, regardless of their origin, gender, or status.
2. No one is above the law. Not even the king.
3. Sex without consent is wrong.
4. Slavery is wrong.
5. Richer people have a responsibility towards poorer people.
6. Peace is better than war. If war is inevitable, it should be conducted in a controlled manner and with sorrow in your heart.

These truths are hold to be self-evident by the vast majority of European citizens. Yet they are rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Torah and the Gospel. The authors of the aforementioned book elaborate further on this observation using the keywords 'Power', 'Equality', 'Sex', 'Nature', 'Money' and 'War'.

(1) *Power*. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, power is always subject to a moral appeal: rulers must be humble and virtuous, and especially subservient to the poor and oppressed, not enriching themselves. Jesus set a great example in this respect: He did not come to rule, but to serve.

(2) *Equality.* According to the Christian faith, the basis of equality lies in the fact that we are all equal before God as creatures and as sinners, and this foundation is outside ourselves. Equality is fundamentally a *religious* concept. God has created a bond of brotherhood between all humans. Furthermore, 'God's incarnation affirms human dignity and, at the same time, urges us to recognize that dignity in everyone.' (120)

(3) *Sex.* 'It is precisely the high value placed on sexuality in Christianity that calls into question the commodification of sex.' (164).

(4) *Nature*: "Throughout most of our Christian history, it has been emphasized that nature has an intrinsic meaning and that sinning against creation is sinning against the Creator himself." (216).

(5) *Money*: 'Wherever Christianity gains a foothold, care for the poor soon follows.' Care for the poor is in the DNA of the Christian movement. This care has had a profound impact on Western culture. 'For the first time, the poor were given a face and a name among the Christians.' (238).

'Money is not something to rake in; it is a means to connect with others. This can only be achieved by sharing generously and being hospitable.'

(6) *War*. It is Christian to strive for peace and to beat swords into ploughshares. The enormous tragedy of war must continue to be emphasized. Augustine clearly taught that war is not fresh and cheerful, but dull misery.

The authors mentioned certainly do not intend to paint an unrealistic and one-sidedly rosy picture of Christianity. The legacy of Christianity has its dark sides, too. 'Christianity is not only the cross, but also the Crusades; not only the Sermon on the Mount, but also burning people at the stake.' Professing Christians in particular should face up to this and acknowledge it frankly. We must do justice to history in all its complexity. However, the negative aspects do not negate the many positive aspects. In the year 2026 AD, the Christian faith is like salt in porridge, which of course contains several ingredients. 'If something of Jesus'

message and lifestyle can still be found in our culture, then perhaps there is also a seed for the renewal of our culture and for new vitality.' (355)

I am convinced that, as Christians, we can promote shalom in Europe by being faithful to, and modestly proud of, the Christian heritage. During the summer holidays last year in Switzerland, I came across an example of how this modest pride can manifest itself. During a church service in the Swiss canton of Valais, the attention of the congregation was drawn to a flyer issued by the national church to mark the national holiday on 1 August. In that flyer, Rev. Willi Honegger from Bauma explained the meaning of the Swiss flag: the well-known white cross against a red background. This flag, which has been used since 1500 to mark the connected cantons, speaks volumes about the country's Christian past. Many believe that the red color symbolizes the suffering of Jesus Christ, while the cross is, of course, the central symbol of the Christian faith.

In response to criticism from secularists who argue that it would be inappropriate to use a religious — let alone explicitly Christian — symbol for a population that is largely non-religious or even atheist, Honegger points out that the symbol in question is not a religious symbol, but a national one. Should faith be a purely private matter, with references to it banned from public spaces? These arguments are also often heard in the Netherlands. The separation of church and state is then wrongly understood as a separation of faith and society. Rev. Honegger poses some counter-questions: Should one not know the history of one's own country? Shouldn't one appreciate the origins of one's own culture? Shouldn't one love the sources from which the values of justice and mercy have emerged? Those guided by today's "cancel culture" and woke ideas would answer these questions in the negative. They can apparently only view our Western history with shame. They associate the many centuries of Christian culture only with social injustice, the exploitation of enslaved people, and the oppression of women and minority groups. They want to free themselves from this historical legacy as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, the European Union is following this path. In 2004, the proposed EU constitution explicitly rejected any mention of the Christian heritage. The argument was that it would be better to focus on the future rather than the past. But what are you doing when you deliberately destroy your own birth certificate

and deny your roots? The aforementioned Swiss document sharply but accurately describes this attitude as *hubris* and a form of 'cultural dementia'. The Swiss church thinks that the time has come for a clear counter-voice. According to them, the white cross against the red background acts as a history teacher, introducing us to the vast past that shapes us. In the Netherlands, for example, the national anthem, 'Wilhelmus', could play such a role, particularly given the significance of its sixth stanza.
Undeniably, many things have gone wrong throughout our national history, and these should be openly acknowledged. At the same time, however, we should be grateful for God's guidance. It is high time that we Europeans learn again that our continued enjoyment of democratic freedoms is due to Biblical insights. Alongside Christian education within families, churches and Christian schools have a significant role in fostering and reinvigorating a Christian historical awareness, looking to “God, our help in ages past.”

O God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the storm blast,
as our eternal home.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly forgotten, as a stream
Dies at the opening day.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guard while life shall last,
and our eternal home.

Jan Hoek, October 2026