



**Christmas message
by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
in Schloss Bellevue
on 25 December 2019**

Merry Christmas to all my fellow Germans!

I hope you are enjoying the holidays. And I hope you have had a good year.

Do you remember what I said last year? Twelve months ago I told you my Christmas request.

I asked you to talk to people who do not agree with you.

Today I want to ask you how that went. What debates and discussions have had a particular impact on you this year?

Many of you have written or spoken to me about your experiences. Of heated debates about elections and election results. About the future of Europe. About the state of our national unity, 30 years after the fall of the Wall. About climate change and what needs to be done to tackle it. This question in particular has shaped politics and will probably still be discussed in many households around the Christmas tree.

It is my impression that we have – up and down the country – genuinely talked to each other and argued with each other more this year.

We live in highly political times. I really don't think we can complain about a lack of freedom of opinion! Far from it. We haven't had so many arguments for years!

The question is what are we going to do with all this dispute?

How can we learn to respect one another again in the face of so much friction, how can we ensure our debates become more constructive and not coarser in tone, how can we fashion greater cohesion from so many contrasts?

Do we now have fewer things that unite us than divide us?

Perhaps you expect me to provide a highfalutin answer to all these questions in this Christmas message.

In truth, even the President cannot provide the answer. You are the answer. All of you.

One particular image has left a deep impression on me this year. I see a door. A strong, sturdy door made of wood and iron. It bears the traces of some 20 bullets. You see the splintered wood, and the metal remains in the bullet holes.

This door guards the entrance to the synagogue in Halle. It is a miracle that it held. That no more people fell victim to this brutal antisemitic attack in which two of our fellow citizens were murdered.

This door is in Halle. This strong, battered door, stands in my opinion for so much more.

It stands for us. Are we strong? Can we defend ourselves? Are we standing shoulder to shoulder? Do we stand up for each other?

It is in your hands, ladies and gentlemen.

You are the people who have to get up and speak up when you see someone being insulted on the bus because they look different, or when you hear racist slurs being cast in the playground or the pub. You have a voice on the internet and in social media.

You decide whether to award the most uproarious and extreme posts and sound bites with more clicks – or whether you prefer facts, respect and sound reasoning.

You lend a hand to help your fellow human beings – in your neighbourhood, in your clubs, as a volunteer or a salaried employee. Thousands of you are helping, even tonight, for example in police stations, in hospitals and care homes.

And what is more, you are part of this democracy. By casting your vote, by being politically active – by demonstrating in the streets, or supporting a political party, or perhaps even by serving as a local councillor – a job for which fresh blood is urgently needed in so many places.

To sum up, you all hold a piece of Germany in your hands.

And because that is so, there is much, much more that unites us than divides us. We all – each and every one of us – are citizens of this country. There is no such thing as first or second class.

However, what unites us as citizens is not a guarantee. It is a promise and a set of expectations, a privilege and an imposition. The Basic Law does not claim that “all good things come from the top,” but rather that “all state authority is derived from the people.”

30 years ago, this promise, this allure of democracy drove hundreds of thousands of people in East Germany onto the streets. What courage they showed! It was these brave people, these peaceful heroes and heroines who brought the Wall tumbling down.

For the past 30 years we have lived in unity, in freedom, in a democracy. But please never think that this can be taken for granted. We need democracy – but right now democracy needs us!

Fortunately, our democracy – unlike a dictatorship – does not need heroes. It needs something different. It needs self-assured citizens, who have confidence and drive, common sense and decency, and who show solidarity with others.

I know that all these qualities are present in you, in us, in this society. And that is why I believe in us. I believe in this country.

“Fear not!” as the angels said after Jesus was born. Be courageous and confident! That is what I wish you personally, that is what I wish all of us in the New Year.