



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
in a video message for the digital celebrations to mark the
500th anniversary of Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms
in Worms
on 16 April 2021**

People of Worms,

It is a great pity that we cannot be with you today: in Worms, which is celebrating its moment of historic global significance in these days. I am sure that many people have long been looking forward to the celebrations. My special greetings go to them, but I welcome all those who are watching, wherever they may be.

At the celebrations for the anniversary of the Reformation four years ago, it was more of an academic event that we were commemorating: Luther's publication of his theses, which was the start of everything.

Today, however, we are remembering the time, and it can be precisely determined to the date and the hour, when the thoughts, the religious experiences and the theological insights of a professor and monk from Wittenberg, a town more on the sidelines, became an affair of state. Luther stands before the Emperor and the empire – and stands unshakeably by his insights, his findings and his convictions.

We are commemorating one of the defining moments of awakened individual conscience in Europe. Indeed, those hours and days in Worms five hundred years ago have had a precious and lasting impact, not only on us Germans, who have honoured, interpreted and instrumentalised Martin Luther in myriad different ways over the past centuries, but on all of Europe and the world.

The idea that religion cannot be conceived and practised without freedom, that the freedom to be able to speak out and act according to one's conscience is one of our fundamental and indispensable convictions – in 1521 that was undoubtedly not a thought that Luther's contemporaries were capable of thinking. The Middle Ages were still far from over.

But it was here that the seed was planted.

The seed of the conviction that neither authority, whether the Emperor or the Pope, nor tradition alone, however holy and well established it might be, has the right to dictate religious practice and consequently also life in society. Luther's insistence on making use of argument to convince others and to be convinced himself revolutionised the intellectual, the religious and ultimately also the political world.

As we know, that also had deeply tragic consequences. The division of Christianity led to devastating confrontations, to wars, terror and irreconcilable enmity. And the empire that the Emperor wanted to protect fell apart.

Considerable time passed before the denominations finally began to look for what they still had in common and find new common ground. Here, too, individuals first followed their theological conscience, opened up paths for reflection and eventually made it possible to set out along new paths of shared experience. Today, when Catholics and Protestants look back together on the origins of the Reformation, we owe this privilege not least to dedicated pioneers of ecumenism, such as the late theologian Hans Küng. We ought to be grateful to him and all those who are similarly engaged.

After all, the commemoration of the Diet of Worms tells us that there are times when a person is on their own with their conscience, when all that matters is their courage, their will and their resilience. Luther is a role model for how to live and prevail through such a defining moment of conscience – and he prevailed because he was willing also to put his freedom and his life on the line. Luther's return journey with its constant dangers and the flight to his hiding place in the Wartburg are part and parcel of the events of Worms.

No doubt about it, these are extraordinary, exceptional situations. That is why it is important – not least out of respect for moral questions of real consequence – that we do not turn every dispute on what is the right thing to do into a matter of truth and conscience.

Through patient listening, through honest exchange with one another, by acknowledging that one side is not usually in sole possession of the truth, very many issues can be resolved in a civilised and non injurious fashion. We do not have to turn our back on our own personal positions and beliefs to overcome prejudiced mindsets. Self confidence should not be confused with self assertion at any price. Those who are confident in themselves are open to questioning and to new perspectives.

Today we commemorate a defining moment of conscience. And we will work to ensure that the need for such moments remains as rare as possible.