



1977-2017
Celebrating 40 years of Partnership
of 32 Churches in Mission

TRAVELLING TOGETHER

Daily Devotions 2018



Travelling Together

DAILY DEVOTIONS 2018



Introduction



CWM is pleased to present this prayer book for every day of the year in 2018, in observation of our fortieth anniversary. Yes, we are forty years old; and we are grateful to God for having led us all the way. It has been a dynamic journey of dreaming, daring and dancing in good times and in bad times. Through it all God has sustained and strengthened us, giving us the spirit of discernment to comprehend the signs of the time and to move towards the unfolding future with confidence and hope.

As we prepare to embark on the next forty years we are convinced, more than ever before, of the sustaining power of God's grace to pave the way for us and to keep on

enlightening (opening) "'the eyes of our hearts' to know the hope to which Christ called us, the riches of his glorious inheritance and the immeasurable greatness of his power for us" (Eph. 1: 18). This gift of enlightening or discernment locates us at the heart of God, where God's purpose is revealed, though dimly, and our mission defined. It is our prayer that as we submit ourselves to God we will see more clearly and that our experience of walking with God will bring us peace and joy.

This devotional guide is an invitation to the reader to explore, and hopefully experience, the unfathomable riches of God's grace and to live in confident hope that God's future, buoyant with possibility, is already breaking in on the horizons of our consciousness. The reflections herein represent the experiences, faith and convictions of the contributors; their reflection on scripture within the context of current landscape; and their vulnerability in making public their theological views and biases. We pray that reading and meditating on the content of these pages will serve to inspire faith and encourage us in our walk with God throughout this year.

God has created a world, full of beauty and charm. The sounds of the whistling winds amid the swaying trees and stately mountainside; the chirping birds, sweetly singing as sun sets and evening dusks; the laughter of children; and the rush of heartbeats, celebrating love and

connecting kindred spirits display the miracle of God's creative imagination at work. Despite the wonder of it all, however, we live in the midst of brokenness, where shattered dreams and broken promises often define our experience; broken systems ruin our best resolve; and hope fades as our fragile frame succumbs to the failures of efforts pursued. And yet, because we belong to the God of hope, we live with confidence that healing is coming and we speak with conviction that, by the grace of God, we shall be made whole.

Prayer is a spiritual resource to resist the forces of evil, however daunting; to reframe our perspectives in the face of doubt and fear; and to renew our resolve to confront the forces of empire that serve only to steal, kill and destroy. It is our prayer that this devotional will offer you some insights into claiming God's best for your life and that you will be energised to take your stand for God.

I commend this devotional to you, with my prayers and best wishes for a great year ahead in your walk with God and in your search for wholeness and fullness of life in Christ.

Shalom!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Cowan', with a large circular flourish above the name.

Rev Dr Collin I. Cowan

General Secretary, Council for World Mission

2018 YEAR CALENDAR

January						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
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1 Jan New Year's Day
 16 Feb Chinese Lunar New Year's Day
 17 Feb Second day of Chinese Lunar New Year
 30 Mar Good Friday
 31 Mar Easter Saturday
 1 Apr Easter Sunday

1 May Labour Day
 24 Dec Christmas Eve
 29 May Vesak Day
 25 Dec Christmas Day
 15 Jun Hari Raya Puasa
 31 Dec New Year's Eve
 9 Aug National Day
 22 Aug Hari Raya Haji
 6 Nov Diwali/Deepavali

1 January

Mission in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: 1 Kings 21: 1-7; Luke 12: 13-34

TOPIC: God's Mission – Hospitality and Generosity of Spirit

Empire is based on 'lordless domination and destructive self-interest – God's mission is about relationships, based on hospitality and generosity of spirit

On August 2, 1990, Iraqi troops stormed into Kuwait, a country one-eighth the population of its invaders. After the dust had settled, Saddam Hussein, the then President of Iraq, announced to the world that Kuwait was now a province of Iraq ... just like that! Ostensibly, Iraq invaded Kuwait, among other things, because of their claim that Kuwait was originally a part of Iraq, which was separated under British rule. Many believe, however, that Iraq's decision to invade Kuwait was driven by its desire to take over Kuwait's substantial deposits of crude oil. Unfortunately, stories like this are the stuff of which the fabric of human history is weaved. Take, for example, the story of King Ahab and Naboth, told in 1 Kings 21.

As you read this story, you'll notice that the request of Ahab was not unreasonable, but his expectation was unreasonable. Given the proximity of Naboth's land to his, and that he was prepared to pay for it, one can understand King Ahab's proposal. His expectation, however, was based on his power; as such he was unable to take no for an answer. He was unable to see the value of Naboth's desire to protect his patrimony and secure the heritage of his family. As it turned out, Jezebel, his wife orchestrated a scheme to use power to manipulate and prey upon the weakness and vulnerability of Naboth. Naboth became the loser – he lost his life and his land was taken by force. Jezebel's question, "Do you not govern Israel?" is the epitome of an attitude of lordless domination; the way empire works. The death of Naboth meant nothing to Ahab; he was ready to claim the land.

However, God's mission is about hospitality and generosity of spirit. When confronted with the request to arbitrate between two brothers on the matter of family inheritance, Jesus refused (Luke 12: 13-14). Instead he invited the complaining brother to consider what is essential to life – not the abundance of things (Luke 12: 15); not greed, hoarding for one's private consumption (Luke 12: 16-20); but trust in God (Luke 12: 32), use of possessions to serve the needs of the poor and displaced (Luke 12: 33); and focus on God's "unfailing treasure" – the imperishable values such as love, hospitality and a generous spirit (Luke 12: 33b-34).

King Ahab was to learn that "in the (very) place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth dogs will also lick up your (his) blood" (1 Kings 21: 19). The principle of life that outlasts our self-serving interest is to treat others with respect and positive regard in the very way we wish to be treated.

Prayer:

Let us pray for help to engage in just relationships, honest transactions and hospitable lifestyle.

Rev. Dr. Collin Cowan
General Secretary, Council for World Mission

2 January

Mission in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Mark 6: 14-44; Jeremiah 31: 7-14

TOPIC: God's Mission – A Place for All

Empire protects the interests of the powerful - God's mission provides a place for all

As Ban Ki-moon, then Secretary-General of the United Nations, addressed the 68th Session of the **General Assembly** in September, 2013, he reminded his audience that, of the world's estimated 1 billion people who live with some form of disability, many of them face exclusion by and from society. Such persons, he said, are often denied access to education, employment opportunities, health care services and other social amenities. On the other hand, however, God's Kingdom is inclusive ... no one is ever excluded. This contrast between empire and God's Kingdom is highlighted in today's Scripture passages.

Herod was prepared to flaunt the law and it did not matter that his own brother, Philip, would likely be robbed in the process. John's intervention angered Herodias and planted evil intentions within her. Although Herod respected and revered John, he would not allow his power to be challenged. So when Herodias, his daughter, instigated by her mother, asked for the head of John the Baptist, Herod could not help himself. He ordered that John's head be brought to him on a platter, whereupon, he gave it to his daughter, who, in turn, gave it to her mother. So John lost his life in a senseless act, which "grieved" the king; yet Herod was prepared to do it "out of regard for his oaths and his guests" (Mark 6: 26).

The death of John is empire at work; the powerful are protected at the expense of the powerless. However, Jesus demonstrated that in God's mission there is a place for all. That which follows the terrible story of John's tragic death is the miracle feast in which the large crowd that followed Jesus, away from Herod's feast, was feted and actually served by Jesus' disciples. Despite the resistance of the disciples, Jesus insisted that they provided food for all the people, organised them in a community and served them (Mark 6: 35-44). Jesus was moved with compassion for the people who "were like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6: 34), lacking in protection, provision and place - shalom". These acts are marks, both of servant leadership and of power in reverse. God's mission counters empire, with its design to protect the interest of the powerful, and provides a place for all.

Imagine a party where there is the best of food and wine, great music and dancing, fun and merriment... everyone is there – every kind of people! This is Jeremiah's vision of God's design – nothing and no one will be missing (Jer. 31: 7-14). Can we stretch our imagination to envision such a world? What would it take to get us there?

Prayer:

Let us pray for eyes to see, minds to comprehend, and hearts to embrace God's community, where justice reigns and no one is a stranger.

Rev. Dr. Collin Cowan
General Secretary, Council for World Mission

3 January

Mission in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Mark 14: 1-11

TOPIC: God's Mission – Inclusive and Just

Empire weakens and divides – God's mission is inclusive and just.

"It is noteworthy that apart from constituting over 50 percent of the world's population, women perform two-thirds of the world's work, and receive one-tenth of the income. They, in proportion, represent 70 percent of the world's one billion poorest people" (Abubakar Jimoh, Newsroom, Washington D.C.). Such a situation is ultimately the outcome of unjust and inequitable policies and practices perpetrated by those who exercise power over the masses who remain nameless and faceless. Jesus, too, had to confront and unmask the oppressive and divisive power of empire. In this story, the religious leaders colluded with the Roman Empire to destroy Jesus. Jesus' message of radical departure from the practices of exclusion and his teachings of an alternative way of living in relationship with others, were uncomfortable to empire. In their plot to destroy Jesus, the religious leaders were simply seeking to protect their place of prominence and privilege within that exclusive system. So although Jesus was a Jew and his message was in fulfilment of God's mission, the very God of the Jews, the religious Jews parted company with him. The religious leaders knew that the crowd would resist their evil scheme so they chose to avoid their participation in any decision-making concerning Jesus; however, they were pleased to collude with Judas, one of Jesus' close disciples in their scheme. Some in the crowd, following Jesus, gossiped about the woman who anointed Jesus with expensive oil, another attempt at dividing loyalty and affirmation. Then comes the betrayal by Judas, joining forces with the religious Jews, to hand Jesus over to the Roman officials. All these are the subtle ways of empire, meant to weaken and divide.

Jesus' response to the woman's expression of love and devotion, however, points to an inclusiveness that defies the ways of empire. He affirms the woman, who otherwise could have been ridiculed or punished, even to the point of exclusion from the community. By that response Jesus stood on the side of the woman, and by extension, the vulnerable and marginalised; and he declared solidarity with her and those she represents. Despite the act of betrayal by Judas, Jesus sat at a meal with him, in what became his last supper, and served him. God's mission is both inclusive and just.

"A good solution begins with a wise decision to do the right thing, the loving and unselfish thing" (M. S. Fontaine). However, as in the case of Judas it is quite easy to be persuaded to do the wrong thing and thereby side with empire, with its intent to divide and conquer.

Prayer:

Let us pray that God would arouse our curiosity to know what is wise and right; and awaken our capacity for compassion and our passion for justice

Rev. Dr. Collin Cowan
General Secretary, Council for World Mission

Mission in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 1: 1-22, 2: 23-25, 3: 7-10

TOPIC: God's Mission – Protects the Vulnerable and Disadvantaged

Empire worships capitalism and economic dominance – God's mission protects the vulnerable and stands in solidarity with the disadvantaged

The news that the government of Guyana was prepared to receive and provide hospitality and refuge to people of the Caribbean, ravaged and dislocated by Hurricane Irma, was a breath of fresh air and pleasant news. How different from the story in our reading for today.

Although Joseph had much to do with the economic prosperity of Egypt, he was conveniently forgotten when it became obvious that the Israelites living in Goshen were prospering (Exodus 1: 7). Jacob, the father of Joseph, and his family were given space in the community of Goshen as part of the expression of the Pharaoh's gratitude to Joseph for having assisted Egypt to prepare for seven years of famine (Gen 46: 1-47: 12). The Israelites flourished in the land and, as such, they became a concern to the leadership of Egypt. The view was that foreigners were taking up too much space and benefiting too prominently from the economy of Egypt (Exodus 1: 1-7). The Pharaoh instituted and imposed harsh labour and intolerable pressure on the Israelites, to the extent that they cried out beneath the yoke of their burden (Exodus 1: 9-14; 2: 23-25). So consumed and obsessed was the king with the need to maintain dominance over the resources of the land that he attempted, and was prepared to destroy the future of Israel by killing all male babies at birth.

God's concern for the plight of the vulnerable and the disadvantaged was expressed in God's call to Moses to approach Pharaoh with a view "to bring my people, the Israelites out of Egypt" (Ex 3: 9-10). Moses was to serve as God's instrument of liberation and hope for

the oppressed by confronting Pharaoh with a clear mandate and by leading Israel into a secure future. Such an act of liberation was earlier exemplified in the subversive activity of the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who defied the king's order by making a deliberate choice to follow the leading of the God of Israel, sparing the lives of the baby boys at birth (Exodus 1: 15-20).

Pharaoh's concern surrounded the economic advances that the Israelites seemed to have been making; and he was prepared to do whatever it took to maintain dominance over the resources of Egypt, at the expense of human lives and dignity. God heard the cry of Israel, observed their suffering and determined to bring hope and vindication to them (Ex. 3: 7-8).

Prayer:

Let us pray that God's concern for justice and the liberation of the oppressed may propel us to hopeful actions towards healing and freedom in this present climate of dislocation and despair for many.

Rev. Dr. Collin Cowan
General Secretary, Council for World Mission



Christ is the Answer by Renita Barnes (acrylics on canvas).

My prayers and reflections on this week

Mission in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Esther 3-7

TOPIC: God's Mission – Collective Discernment and Collaborative Engagement

Empire uses propaganda and colonisation of consciousness, values and notions of life by the imperial logic – God's Mission is about collective discernment and collaborative engagement

"Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds." These words, popularized by Bob Marley in his widely influential, Redemption Song, are actually a paraphrase of a 1937 speech delivered by Marcus Garvey, who was the source of much of Marley's ideologies. These words challenge us to not be constrained by the limits others impose on us, and to stop allowing our past experiences to limit our horizons for the future. In this way, we will eventually be able to muster the courage to stand up and free ourselves from the vice-grip of empire.

In the book of Esther, the activities in King Xerxes' palace are a glimpse into the workings of empire by imperial logic. The logic, through the lens of this text of Scripture, is that empire is supreme and cannot be touched. Esther came to the throne as queen within this context (Esther 2: 1-18).

The lavish display of elegance, presence of the 'A-listers' and the delectable outlay of food and wine provided the setting for merriment and festivities at a special banquet. The King called for Queen Vashti to display her charm and beauty to his guests, as if she were part of the decoration. Queen Vashti refused, as any liberated woman would. And because the king was "furious and burned with anger" (Esther 1: 12, NIV) at her refusal, on the advice of his counsellors, Queen Vashti was dethroned and Esther named queen.

The real reason for Queen Vashti's dethronement, however, was that the king was disrespected; and this could send the wrong message to women. (Esther 1: 13-22). This logic of supremacy also led Haman's scheme to have the king issue a decree for the destruction of

all Jews living in the king's domain. Queen Esther almost fell prey to this logic until confronted with the hard truth by her cousin, Mordecai. In keeping with the propaganda that the king is supreme, Esther could not imagine herself approaching him without being invited (Esther 4: 9-11). Mordecai, however, challenged that logic and caused Esther to consider her own vulnerability, notwithstanding her prominence (Esther 4: 12-14).

In the end it was the collective discernment and determination of Mordecai, Esther and their fellow Jews, through prayer, fasting and courageous acts of strategizing (Esther 4: 15-17) that the Jews were spared the fury of King Xerxes' edict and Haman's scheme (read chapters 5-8).

The courage of Mordecai to challenge Queen Esther; and the response of Esther to approach the King, even if it meant that she would perish (Esther 4: 16), is what is required today to topple empire and bring freedom and hope to the powerless, deprived and disadvantaged.

Prayer:

Let us pray for courage to do the right; to know when it is time to stand and be counted among the brave; and to dare to confront power even in the face of personal threat.

Rev. Dr. Collin Cowan
General Secretary, Council for World Mission

Mission in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Daniel 3: 19

TOPIC: God's Mission – Heals Breaches, Lives Hope

Empire sacrifices humanity and exploits creation - God's mission heals the breaches and lives in hope.

The Cockpit Country of Jamaica – an area roughly one-tenth the size of the entire island – has unique climatic conditions, and is home to several species of plants and animals, many of which are found nowhere else in the world! Its many rivers and tributaries constitute forty percent of the island's water! But the area also has one of the largest reserves of bauxite in the country; an estimated 300 million tons valuing US\$9 billion! With such rich deposits of bauxite, Jamaica's Cockpit Country is now in danger of being exploited for its bauxite. This could lead to the destruction of the rich biodiversity of the area, removal of the forest cover, blockage and pollution of waterways, displacement of residents, compromise of air quality, the threatening of agricultural livelihoods as well as the health and well-being of thousands of Jamaicans. Here's the choice: to preserve God's creation, or destroy it in the pursuit of economic wealth and power?

This question again rears its head in today's Scripture reading. "...Filled with rage... that his face was distorted..." (Daniel 3: 19 NRSV), King Nebuchadnezzar ordered the strongest guards in his army to throw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the furnace of blazing fire, which he also ordered to be heated seven times more than customary (Daniel 3: 19b-23). This fierce order was given because these Hebrew men refused to honour the God of Nebuchadnezzar and to worship the golden image that he erected as a symbol of his supremacy (Daniel 3: 1-18). The King felt dishonoured, if not assaulted, by these Hebrew boys; and, as such, he was prepared to sacrifice their lives, along with those of his own guard

(Daniel 3: 22). Emphasis is placed on the sacrifice of human beings in this text and not so much on the exploitation of creation in general. However, both were at stake as it was a senseless and unproductive use of the resources of the environment to erect both the statue of gold and the furnace of fire. Such wanton exploitation to serve one's ego is an expression of empire at work. There is no regard for God's creation in the pursuit of power.

God's mission is about healing the breaches and living in hope. The Hebrew boys were determined and defiant; they were prepared to face the furnace at whatever cost; but their hope was in God (Daniel 3: 18-19). Healing the breaches requires radical hope in the face of ferocity and rage. This hope expresses itself in discontent, defiance and determination. It will neither retreat nor surrender to the forces of evil and it will not rest until change comes.

Prayer:

Let us pray that God will grant us grace to hold out until change comes, despite the treacherous path and the turbulent waters. "Lord... the way may not be easy; you didn't say it would be; but when it gets dark and I can't see my way, help me to put my trust in you".

Rev. Dr. Collin Cowan
General Secretary, Council for World Mission

Mission in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: John 9: 35-10: 10

TOPIC: God's Mission – Fullness of Life for All Creation

Empire lacks compassionate justice and disregards the gifts of creation and the household of life – God's Mission is about fullness of life for all creation

The church is called to be a life-affirming community. Several years ago a survey was conducted among people who had either returned, or converted to the church. The results revealed that the number one reason that led people into the church was their need for help in handling their family difficulties. This finding supports the view that the community of faith is called to recognize its role as a life-affirming community, which offers unconditional love and acceptance, compassion, and support in time of need, as modelled by Jesus Christ.

The Pharisees were more concerned that Jesus healed the blind man on the Sabbath than they were about the healing and freedom experienced by one who was blind and is now seeing (John 9: 13-16). The interrogation that followed suggested that they had little regard for the plight of this man, no compassion for his condition and no joy in his recovery (John 9: 17-34). The issue of compassionate justice has to do with the state of this man, categorised by his circumstances; and the action of Jesus, in response, neither of which was taken into consideration by the Pharisees on this occasion. This man born blind was not regarded as part of the gift of creation nor of the household of God. He had a disability and that was regarded as sin, either his or that of his parents (John 9: 1-2, 34).

Jesus saw the man, born blind, excluded from community because he spoke truth to power (John 9: 35-41); and Jesus welcomed him into the open space of the life-giving and life-affirming community he was forming (John 10: 7-10). In naming life in fullness as the hallmark of his mission (John 10: 10), Jesus parted company with the death-dealing works of the world and held up an imagery of life offering space for all and affirming everyone and everything as important to the experience of wholeness. It is that mission to which CWM is called in the context of empire. As it was when Jesus walked the streets of Nazareth; throughout the history of empires to this very day; the dealings of empire stand in striking opposition and contradiction to the mission of Jesus; and those called to follow him must part company, as did Jesus. The choice we are called to make is one for life, rooted in values of respect for all, space for all, and involvement of all. This life is counter-empire; but for this life Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem (Luke 9: 51-55) and faced the cross of Calvary.

Prayer:

Let us pray that God's light of truth may shine on us and point us to the way of life. "Lord, the light of your love is shining in the midst of our darkness; Jesus light of the world, shine upon us; set us free by the truth you now bring us; shine on me...."

Rev. Dr. Collin Cowan
General Secretary, Council for World Mission

8 January

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Psalms 24.1-10

TOPIC: The Power of Knowledge

The debate about “climate change” or “global warming” started in the 1820’s when a scientist Jean Baptiste Joseph Fourier discovered that “greenhouse gasses” trap heat radiated from the earth’s surface after it has absorbed energy from the sun. It has been discovered later that doubling the carbon dioxide content of the air would gradually raise global temperatures by 5-6 C.

Greenhouse gas in the earth’s atmosphere absorbs infra-red radiation (IR) from the sun then releases it and radiates it in all directions. Some of the heat released reaches the earth, along with heat from the sun that has penetrated the atmosphere. Both the solar heat and the radiated heat are absorbed by the earth and released; some is reabsorbed by greenhouse gasses to perpetuate the cycle. The more of these gases exist, the more heat is prevented from escaping into space, and consequently; the more the earth heats. This increase in heat is called the “greenhouse effect”, affecting most part of life on earth.

Here are common examples of greenhouse gasses, listed in order of abundance: water vapour, carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, ozone, and any fluorocarbons. Although water vapor is the most abundant greenhouse gas, it is a relatively ineffective one.

The world and all that is in it belongs to the Lord, the earth and all who live in it are His, as we read in Psalms 24. The Lord cannot be indifferent to any cause of damage to the world and the earth which He loves. Churches and Christians are therefore expected to do something about it. There are still many people who do not seem to be aware of the danger, but there is time, before it is too late, to act responsibly.

Question:

What can we do to convince people that this is a serious matter without unhelpfully alarming them?

Prayer:

Lord! Help us to find efficient ways to help people to be aware of climate change and its impact. Make us keen to update ourselves with information about this issue. Give us courage to be patient enough in the process.

Rev Yvette Rabemila
Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Romans 12.9 – 16

TOPIC: The Case of Tuvalu

The people of low low-lying atoll islands like Tuvalu and Kiribati live no more than three meters above the surface of the Pacific Ocean and now, the Ocean is rising and they are in danger of being completely inundated. Heat from global warming is increasing the Ocean volume, melting polar ice, raising sea levels worldwide, and nowhere are the effects more devastating than for the developing island states in the Pacific. This is climate disaster in progress.

Global warming is a great concern in Tuvalu since the average height of the island is less than two meters above sea level. Tuvalu could be one of the first nations to experience the worst effects of sea level rise. Not only could parts of the island be flooded but the rising saltwater table could also destroy deep rooted food crops such as coconut, taro. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_warming_in_Tuvalu)

Desperate messages are coming from Tuvalu: “Our history and our culture are very important to us and we believe this is the place we are supposed to be. We don’t want to lose that.” People of Tuvalu will have to go to other places, and this is very hard indeed. Migration is the last option for the Tuvaluan people”. (www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may14/our-country-will-vanish-pacific-islanders-bring-desperate-messages).

Some people have already fled to other countries like New Zealand. Thanks to the New Zealand Government for having accepted them.

Questions:

1. Taking into account what we read in Romans 12.9-16, how can CWM member Churches express solidarity with the Tuvaluan people?
2. What is the life-affirming perspective in that situation? They are losing their land.
3. Is there still any opportunity to rejoice with Tuvalu?
4. Can we weep with them?

Prayer:

Grant us, Lord the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change what we can and wisdom to know the difference.

We pray, Lord that people in high positions may change their mentality and care more for those who are victims of global warming; may they respect important decisions taken in international conferences held in different places over the past years.

Rev Yvette Rabemila
Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar

10 January

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Romans 8.18-25

TOPIC: Groaning Creation

Scientists have noticed that not only has climate change raised the sea level but it has also modified the way the Earth rotates around its axis. The following information might help us to take seriously this question of global warming: In addition to all the devastating and obvious effects sea-level rise will produce on the planet, such as flooding and erosion, sea-level rise also has the more subtle but nonetheless mindboggling ability to alter the way the Earth rotates on its axis. (<http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/scientists-may-have-just-solved-one-of-the-most-troubling-mysteries-about-sea-level-rise-1254560>)

The connection is through the change in the speed of the earth's rotation. Melt water from glaciers can not only raise sea-level but could also shift mass from the pole to the Equator, which would slow down the rotation (<http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/our-days-are-getting-longer-study-1254344>)-Dec13, 2015). If this is so, it would be catastrophic for all living on earth as it would result in slow adaptation of living organisms, in addition to many other big changes which we would have to face (change of seasons, natural disasters, ecological diseases). We do not know for sure what the impact of this adaptation would be but we could lose our orientation.

We are reminded by Paul of the suffering of the creation. God's creatures suffer because of the moral decline of the world and the progressive deterioration of the planet. There is a close link between moral decline in a society and the destruction of nature and between the evil in our hearts and the overwhelming ecological problems we face (Solomon Andria in ROMANS-Africa Bible commentary Series- 2012- Hippo Books Publishers- Nairobi- p.149)

People who are living in poorer economies are the ones who suffer most from the effects of global ecological crises. This is an opportunity for the church to live out its missionary task in solidarity with the earth and also with the poor and the oppressed.

Prayer:

Lord, help us not to be too pessimistic with what science is finding but to be always mindful of the hope which we are reminded of in Romans because with You, there is always something for which to hope.

Rev Yvette Rabemila
Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Psalms 104.24-31

TOPIC: Religion and Climate Change

For our information, here are some religious positions and actions on climate change:

CWM is looking at the human contributions to the changing climate as issues of faith, justice, and ethics, and acknowledging, with grave concern, that the climate is indeed changing with devastating consequences for all life, particularly ecosystems and vulnerable people – those least responsible for it.

Catholic Church: Is excited to offer the 2017 Earth Day Programme. This is the second year Catholic Climate Covenant has produced an educational programme for parishes, schools, and religious communities to help them celebrate Earth Day (April 22nd) (<http://www.catholicclimatecovenant.org/earthday>)

Hindus: The Hindu declaration on climate change is a global call to the 900 million Hindus living worldwide to lead lives in harmony and balance with the natural world. It also asks world leaders to find long and lasting solutions to climate change at the upcoming climate negotiations in Paris (COP21) (<http://www.hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org>)

Buddhists: We have a brief window of opportunity to take action, to preserve humanity from imminent disaster and to assist the survival of the many diverse and beautiful forms of life on Earth. Future generations and the other species that share the biosphere with us, have no voice to ask for our compassion, wisdom, and leadership. We must listen to their silence. We must be their voice, too, and act on their behalf (<http://fore.yale.edu/files/Buddhistclimatechange statement5-14-15.pdf>)

Muslims: No one is exempt from the vagaries of climate change and Muslims have to accept their share of the responsibility for bringing this on ourselves (August 2015 at the International Islamic Climate Change Symposium held in Istanbul, Turkey)

There is a definite need for programmes to be undertaken to educate people within churches first and within the society at large; therefore, Sunday School curricula, theological seminary courses, etc., should include lessons on God's creation and its implications.

Question:

How can you be involved in this educational process and undertake the necessary lifestyle changes and actions?

Prayer:

Dear Lord and Father of all humankind and all creation, have mercy on us. Give us wisdom and love to care for others and for the world you gave us to live in.

Rev Yvette Rabemila
Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: 1 Kings 4.29-33

TOPIC: Let Wisdom Guide

God commanded human beings to care for and protect his precious creation (Gen 1.28; 2.15). There are factors harming God's creation: rapid population growth, enormous increase of consumption of resources, use of polluting technologies. These are affecting our lives and environment.

- Overuse of land: intensive farming results in a loss of soil fertility and soil erosion which reduces crop and livestock production and thus increases poverty
- Loss of forests: cutting down trees to sell the wood or to clear land for cultivation results in many plants and animals that live in forests becoming extinct
- Water pollution: unsafe drinking water and lack of water for sanitation and washing are causes of many diseases
- Loss of species: we are losing wild plants, animals and micro-organisms for developing new varieties of animals or crops or medicines
- Loss of fish: due to pollution, overfishing and use of fishing methods that damage fish
- Loss of earth shield: some of the chemicals we use are damaging the ozone layer in the atmosphere which protect us from ultraviolet radiation
- Pollution by chemicals: some chemicals used in pesticides and in industrial processes have long-term harmful effects and can cause cancers, birth defects, and infertility.

If we are to be obedient to God and care for his creation, we must not ignore what is happening. Christians should be encouraged to take proper care in community protection of common water and grazing resources even in their own field or gardens. Christians should also support national and international policies and laws that govern the care of the environment and the use of natural resources. (George Kinoti – in Africa Bible Commentary by Tokunboh Adeyemo and Co, Published by World Alive Publishers , Nairobi, Kenya, 2006 – p.616)

We ought to learn wisdom from King Solomon, the wisest man, who had a respectful attitude towards trees, plants and animals.

Prayer:

Lord! Help us to think twice in whatever we do and not take anything for granted around us. Give us patience, perseverance and wisdom as we consider what we do with our environment.

Rev Yvette Rabemila
Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar

13 January

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Psalms 148.1-14

TOPIC: Finding a Way

The first step is to learn more about the causes of global warming. Here are some solutions to suggest to anybody conscious of the seriousness of the matter:

- Boosting energy efficiency: the energy used to power, heat, and cool our homes, businesses, and industries is the single largest contributor to global warming. There are energy efficiency technologies which allow us to use less energy to get the same-or higher level of production, service, and comfort.
- Greening transportation: improving efficiency (miles per gallon) in all modes of transport, switching to low-carbon fuels.
- Revving up renewables: renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, geothermal are available around the world.
- Phasing out fossil fuel electricity: eliminating the burning of coal, oil, natural gas.
- Managing forests and agriculture: tropical deforestation and emissions from agricultural products represent nearly 30% of the world heat-trapping emission – Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation makes our food practices more sustainable.
- Ensuring sustainable development: financial assistance from richer countries to poorer countries to help make the transition to low-carbon development pathways and to help adapt to the impacts of climate change (www.climatehotmap.org.global-warming-solutions)

A country like Madagascar which has been most hit by the impacts of climate change would benefit from some of these solutions. For example, it is a common thing to prepare meals with charcoal, which means cutting down trees. Climate change, sustainable development, greenhouse gas emission, deforestation, and environmental impacts are much talked about in the higher sphere of Government and Non-Governmental-Organizations but for the majority of the population these remain abstract academic notions, too academic, too scientific, to fully understand.

If we are expected to praise the Lord with all creation, we must find out what solutions are most suitable and possible for us in our contexts. We have to find ways of involving our people in this long-term process.

Prayer:

Lord, we thank you that for all problems, there are solutions. Give us courage to make use of them. Help us to always remember that this is Your world and we are supposed to care for it.

Rev Yvette Rabemila
Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar

14 January

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 65.17-25

TOPIC: Time for Action

The KYOTO PROTOCOL is an International Agreement linked to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) which commits its parties by setting internally binding emission reduction targets. Recognizing that developed countries are principally responsible for the current high levels of greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere as a result of more than 150 years of industrial activity, the protocol places a heavier burden on developed nations under the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities'.

The Kyoto Protocol was adopted in Kyoto, Japan, on 11 Dec. 1997 and came into force on 16 Feb 2005. The detailed rules for the implementation of the protocol were adopted at COP7 in Marrakesh, Morocco in 2001, "Marrakesh Accords". Its first commitment period started in 2008 and ended in 2012 (unfccc.int/Kyoto_protocol/items/2830.php).

The PARIS AGREEMENT is an agreement within the UNFCCC, dealing with greenhouse gas emissions mitigation, adaptation, and finance starting in the year 2020. The language of the agreement was negotiated by the representatives of 196 parties at the 21st Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC in Paris and adopted by consensus on 12 Dec 2015. As of July 2017, 195 UNFCCC members have signed the Agreement, 154 of which have ratified it.

In the Paris Agreement, each country determines plans and regularly reports its own contribution it should make in order to mitigate global warming. There is no mechanism to force a country to set a specific target by a specific date, but each target should go beyond previously set targets. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Framework_Convention_on_Climate_Change)

These are important agreements made by leaders of the nations. Political decisions have to be taken to implement them. The ordinary people, among them, Christians ought to be aware of them. In the light of what we read in the Isaiah prophecy above, we are reminded that God in His mercy has in store a plan for renewing the whole creation. He wants to heal this broken world of ours. That is our hope for renewal if we accept His plan for us.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to be willing to implement what we have agreed to do, not only with important matters but also with little things in our everyday life.

Rev Yvette Rabemila
Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar

15 January

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 12.3 (NRSV)

TOPIC: A Place for All

I am based at the St. Peter's House Church and Chaplaincy as a Partner in Mission. The PIM relationship is between the Council World for Mission, the Presbyterian Church of Korea and the United Reformed Church. This is an ecumenical and interfaith environment. The work of Chaplaincy and Church are funded and supported by four denominations, Baptist, Church of England, Methodist and United Reformed Church. We work alongside the Catholic Chaplaincy, Orthodox Church, Quaker staff and we coordinate multi-faith advisers to look after 80,000 students and staff in three universities and colleges. Besides these activities, we have a strong link with the local community to encourage everybody to live in peace and justice.

During the welcome week at the start of the academic year, all interfaith advisers and ecumenical chaplains work hard to welcome all people and whatever they bring with them as 'come-as-you-are'. During term time, the St. Peter's House Church and Chaplaincy hosts multi-faith dialogue and banquets by organising events, 'Abram and Sara's table', 'Chant for Holy', and 'Live in your faith' etc. The St. Peter's Church and Chaplaincy provides a place for busy people to pray when rushing around from one place to the next; studying, working, and housekeeping. Particularly, it is the place of peace and justice when there are racial conflicts, terrorism and when natural disasters occur around the world.

We thank God that the St. Peter's House Church and Chaplaincy is a blessed place for everyone, no matter their religion, although it is founded by multi-denominations of the Christian faith. We care about everyone because they are all God's people. With Churches' resources, we love to embrace everyone, no matter who you are, where you come from, and no matter your religion. God's love endures forever from people to people, from church to church, from nation to nation and from St. Peter's House Church and Chaplaincy to elsewhere in the world.

Prayer:

The enrichment that can come through encountering difference is one of the most exciting things for me in interfaith relations. As Christian inter faith specialist, Creator God, grant us wisdom to welcome all people. Peace Prince Jesus, teach us to be peacemakers. Holy Spirit, lead us to embrace each encounter with others. Amen.

Rev'd Shou-Hui Chung
Partner in Mission, Presbyterian Church of Taiwan to United Reformed Church

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Romans 4:16

TOPIC: Just an Invitation?

Most people believe that all religions are guiding human beings toward goodness. Therefore, these people are not concerned with faith and they believe that being good is more than enough. As a Christian, when I read Paul's letter, he said that all mankind needs the salvation of the gospel, because no one could obtain the favour of God, or escape his wrath by their own works. No man can plead that he has fulfilled all his obligations to God and to his neighbour; nor can anyone truly say that she has fully acted on the light afforded her in Christ. Like Paul, we find our purpose and our mission in Jesus rather than in anything we can say about ourselves. Though we respect people's faith, we also encourage fellowship members to live out God's likeness and that they are to share the gospel with people around them.

Junhue, a Chinese student, came to St. Peter's House Church and Chaplaincy for Sunday service when she saw the 'Church' sign on the wall of the building. Then she became aware of all the activities taking place in the church and chaplaincy, and thus joined Mandarin fellowship. After attending a couple of times, she confessed that she is not brave enough to speak out and tell people the gospel. But what she could do is to invite her friends to come to the fellowship gathering. She hoped that she could invite two of her friends who she could persuade to accompany her. She is a realistic person.

The following year, on 3rd September 2017, Yingying one of the friends whom Junhue had invited to the church, was baptised at a Sunday service. Yingying shared her testimony by declaring that God is love, Jesus is her redeemer, and the Holy Spirit is her advocate. She also shared how Junhue had invited her to the fellowship gathering, had cared about her and had accompanied her on her faith journey. Not only Yingying but also Jueshei, another friend invited by Junhue, attended the baptism service and experienced God's love, the peace of Jesus and fellowship with sisters and brothers. Although Jueshei hasn't declared her belief yet, her faith journey had begun with a gospel seed.

Prayer:

Lord, though we are small, you are big, though we are shy, you stand for us, and though we are weak you are powerful. We pray that you will always be with us, and we shall live your way and share the gospel with others. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

Rev'd Shou-Hui Chung
Partner in Mission, Presbyterian Church of Taiwan to United Reformed Church

17 January

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Romans 4:16

TOPIC: United through Music

Romans 4:13-22 described the promise that was made to Abraham many years before the law. It points to Christ, and it refers to the promise, Gen 12:3. In Him all families of the earth will be blessed. The law brings wrath by showing that every transgressor is exposed to the Divine displeasure. God's will is for all humankind to be entitled to the promised blessings, so he appointed it to be by faith, that it might be wholly of grace, to make it sure that all would share in this precious faith with Abraham, whether Jews or Gentiles, in all ages.

Music is a special gift from God and we believe all the religions, races, and cultures can be united by musical sharing. It is a privilege to praise the Lord by singing songs, playing musical instruments and honouring His Holy name. The Mandarin choir, regularly joined Sunday worship at St. Peter's Church and provided gospel music in Taiwanese style continuously over 11 years. The choir not only sang in St. Peter's church, but had been invited to sing in several local churches of different denominations, including United Reformed Church, Methodist Church and in some special Churches. Although most of the members are quite busy in their studying/working they take every opportunity to share God's love by singing.

A particular event to mention is that the Mandarin choir is invited to join a multi-faith concert in March 2018, which is to be held at Manchester Synagogue. When the event organisers came to Manchester to visit the choir, music brought together everyone from different backgrounds. The choir members were all amazed and enjoyed the beautiful voices of the professional Jewish musicians. Although the Mandarin choir could not be described as professional, their greatest desire is to sing out loud to praise God. Everyone in the choir is looking forward to singing in the Synagogue to share God's gift.

Throughout these years, we know music is one of the best media to link everyone together, from North, South, East and West, to live on earth as it is in heaven.

Prayer:

Lord, thanks for giving us music to colour our lives. May we use this wonderful gift to share, to love, to bring all your people toward your kingdom of love, peace and justice. In your Holy name we pray. Amen.

Rev'd Shou-Hui Chung
Partner in Mission, Presbyterian Church of Taiwan to United Reformed Church

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 12:4-6

TOPIC: Encountering Love

The Taiwanese Fellowship in London (TFiL) started in 2009. The only and the most important activity they did in that year was Bible Study. In reading/studying God's words, the number of the TFiL members increased from 10 to 20. The next year, TFiL decided to start Saturday Mandarin service to worship God in addition to Bible Study and the member number grew to forty (40).

Why does the number of TFiL members keep increasing every year? The simple reason is that TFiL not only keeps good relationship with God, but with people, and all God's creation by sharing its gifts. TFiL contains a very special characteristic that is deeply Taiwanese. Everyone who joins this group loves this atmosphere and feels as if it is in their home country. Despite the great distance from their home country to London, and the different denominations to which they belong, everyone loves to come and join.

So far, the number of regular attendees of TFiL is around 80 within a list of 400. These members include students, workers and their families; the age range is from 1 to 70. With this large number of members, TFiL divides members into 3 family groups, like the cell groups which provide caring, prayer and fellowship.

By the grace of Lord, TFiL has become more and more mature. Everyone shares their gifts and contributes professional skills. Besides, the TFiL not only cares for their members, but assists Taiwanese Representative Office in London in looking after students and young workers who have special needs such as mental illness or bereavement. We believe that people who come to the UK to study or work encounter the love of God in TFiL because this love has been changed from a spark to a flame.

Prayer:

Lord, grant us patience to endure, faith to trust in you, joy to see you at work, hope to believe that all will be well by offering our gifts and ourselves. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Rev'd Shou-Hui Chung
Partner in Mission, Presbyterian Church of Taiwan to United Reformed Church

19 January

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: James 2:24 (NRSV)

TOPIC: Confessing Faith

'How that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only - not by a cold, abstract, inoperative faith. It must be by a faith that shall produce good works, and whose existence will be shown to men by good works. As justification takes place in the sight of God, it is by faith, for he sees that the faith is genuine, and that it will produce good works if the individual who exercises faith shall live; and he justifies men in view of that faith, and of no other.'
Barnes' notes on the Bible.

NL is a Taiwanese, who in 2015 came to England with his 5 year old son and his wife, who is doing her PhD at the University of Manchester. He spoke very little English when he came; he was not even able to ask for a cup of water from a crew member on the flight. As soon as NL and his family settled down in Manchester, they began to attend the Mandarin fellowship in St Peter's House and Chaplaincy regularly. He shared that although there was a lot of anxiety, he felt that God was always guiding him and his family. He participated in all kinds of activities and never let go of any opportunity to improve his English.

After 6 months trying, he got his first job selling high-end sun glasses at Selfridges and became the best salesman in the department. With stronger and stronger faith in God, he declared that he would like to be a Christian and to be baptized, for he and his family had experienced a lot of God's grace. From Taiwan to the UK, he counted every blessing of God and by doing this NL obtained more and more strength and confidence to face all the challenges. Every night, NL invited his wife and little boy to pray together and to lay down their entire burden at God's feet. Although NL's wife was a very rational scientist, she was touched and experienced the power of God. Now, not only NL but his entire family have put their trust in our Almighty God. NL testified that he has faith in God, life in Jesus Christ and wisdom of Holy Spirit and that he and his family need to be doing more to glorify Lord.

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for giving us your Son, the redeemer of all people. Help us to use our eyes, ears, hands, feet and mouths to work for your kingdom in heaven and on the earth. Amen.

Revd Shou-Hui Chung
Partner in Mission, Presbyterian Church of Taiwan to United Reformed Church



'Interfaith Dialogue', by Tomasi Domornato (acrylic on canvas).

My prayers and reflections on this week

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 4:2,3

TOPIC: Serve God and Love People

“Hi Shou-Hui, I’m a Catholic, I would love to attend your bible study. But I don’t think I will be able to attend often, as you might know the Catholic Church doesn’t have fellowship like you do.” One of the fellowship members said to me when we first met in 2009. I totally understand the different tradition of churches, and I do not intend to ask everyone to engage in fellowship if they don’t feel that they should commit to this. However, it’s my privilege to accompany people around me on their faith journey. As time goes by, I witness how amazingly God transforms people into His will.

This Catholic TFIL member became very active in leading core workers’ team by using her gifts and professional skills. She contributed her time, money and her place to welcome and look after fellowship members. Although she has to keep at least one communion Mass monthly, she was moved by Spirit to evangelise and serve the Lord even as she needs to look after her newborn baby alone. How wonderful to serve the Lord and love people in the unity of the Spirit. Now she says, the way to be closer to God is to serve Him. I believe, even if you are very busy in your work, family and other worthwhile activities, the more you serve the Lord, the more joy will fill in you.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to use wisely the gifts you have given us. All that we are, and all that we have, we give to you. All that we can do, and all that we can share, we give to you. May we live with humility, gentleness, patience to share love with one another and be united in the Spirit. Through Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Rev. Shou-Hui Chung
Partner in Mission, Presbyterian Church of Taiwan to United Reformed Church

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 1:17

TOPIC: Stand By Those in Need

A student came to me and said, "Pastor, I'm pregnant, but my boyfriend doesn't want to marry me. My parents insisted that I have an abortion, but I want to keep this child." It feels like just yesterday, however, it happened 5 years ago. As a minister and chaplain in the University, I tried to give advice and support to this Asian student while she suffered the stigma of a pre-marital pregnancy, no support from baby's father and from both of her parents. In the end, the support was from a church member who helped her to find accommodation prior to giving birth. After the baby girl was born, this young mother seemed to have had an improved relationship with her boyfriend.

However, the "sweet time" did not last long. Three years later, her boyfriend who frequently loses his temper started abusing the young mother verbally, sometimes acted violently and did not care that she was pregnant with a second baby. The council social workers stepped in to protect the three year old daughter and in the meantime, her baby boy was born. The poor young mother not only suffered from the abuse of her boyfriend, but she also lost her two beloved children. No young mother living in a foreign country, with two young children, without the help of a good family structure and emotional and financial stability could survive.

As soon as we knew of her situation, we tried our best to arrange time to give her much needed support. One of the church members helped her to find a part time job to solve her financial problem. Another member tried to help her to seek legal advice. This story is still ongoing. We do not know what the result will be. But we do know that we need to stand by someone who is in need. For we are all God's people, we should help those people who are suffering and accompany.

Prayer:

Give us an awareness of our sins, where as harsh as wire, we may be as soft as wool. Show us where we have done evil that we may do good instead. Highlight to us the oppressed, the orphaned, and the widowed: that we may seek justice and practice mercy. For the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Rev'd Shou-Hui Chung
Partner in Mission, Presbyterian Church of Taiwan to United Reformed Church

22 January

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Acts 16:25

TOPIC: Worship – A Weapon Against Injustice

It was Children's Sunday. Members of the church were encouraged to offer words of inspiration to the children. Among those in attendance was a young man who had recently become a Christian. He told the children to commit their lives to God and they would have no regrets. He also shared his story with them about his encounter with a thief, who robbed him and a few friends were robbed at gun point. Through the grace of God they were saved from harm. The young man told the children of his experience to emphasize the fact that God had saved them from imminent danger. After hearing the story, many who had been wavering in their spiritual commitment surrendered their lives to God.

Our responses to life's experiences speak volumes about the depth of our relationship with God. Paul and Silas had been imprisoned because they saved a young maiden from demon possession. However they did not allow the unfair treatment to overwhelm them with anger, fear and thoughts of revenge. Instead, they allowed trust and confidence in God to give them the courage, will and determination to exalt God in the midst of their predicament.

Paul and Silas' choice of worshipping God in spite of the unjust treatment indicates that nothing should limit us from praising God. Our praise to God can reverse the plan of the enemy and create the condition for others to acknowledge, accept and worship Him. Our dependence on God has the power to cancel the assignment of the enemy.

Prayer:

Lord you did not give us a spirit of fear but of power, love and a sound mind. We thank you and declare that your all sufficient grace is enough for us. Through it we have the power and authority to use the gifts you have given us to fulfill your purpose. Amen.

Rev. Paulette Hannibal
Guyana Congregational Union

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 63: 4

TOPIC: Disciples Worship in the Face of Evil

The problem of racial division causes many emotional and relational problems which often leave persons disenfranchised and wounded. A young lady who was married to a man of different ethnicity from herself was asked to dissolve the marriage if she was desirous of inheriting anything owned by her parents. Despite the tremendous pressure that was applied by her father and mother and other family members to get out of the union, she remained faithful to the vows she had made on her wedding day.

The couple made it their lifelong commitment to worship and praise God and God blessed them tremendously. They entered the mission field and experienced a turnaround of their lives. They brought many souls to the Kingdom through their beautiful singing and their love for God. Something happens in the spirit realm to break the power of evil when we worship. We are reminded that when we truly surrender our hearts to God and earnestly praise God we are blessed.

At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord causing demons to tremble and surrender. As followers of Christ we must exalt the name of Jesus through constant worship. Worship strengthens our connection with God and chases the evil one away.

Prayer:

Father, we honour your name and submit to your will. We come in agreement with all that you stand for and have declared over our lives. Bless and keep us under your protective care. Amen.

Rev. Paulette Hannibal
Guyana Congregational Union

24 January

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 15:2

TOPIC: Disciples Praise in a Time of War

God allows every experience in life for a purpose. Importantly, He does not impose Himself on us, but asks us to trust Him, because He will never leave us or forsake us. Although many negative things may impact our lives, sap our energy, steal our joy and shake our faith, if we go to Him in prayer, he comforts and restores our souls, thus providing the way to overcome our difficulties.

During the Nazi blitz on London in the 1940s, six (6) year old Johnny cooped up in an Air Raid Shelter, distressed with fear and anxiety sang out in a trembling voice, "Jesus loves me this I know", the occupants of the shelter joined in singing and thus a calm and peace was felt throughout the camp. Wars are not pleasant operations, they are extremely wicked and cruel acts involving physical violence or injury and also impact mental, spiritual and emotional wellbeing. Only God could intervene and bring about calm in a shelter where people were cowering in tremendous fear.

In this world of moral, social and spiritual decay, our only hope is in God who has the authority to bring to naught every conceivable plan of the enemy. God gave our forefathers victories over their difficult situation and He will do it for us today.

Prayer:

To you Lord we offer our prayer and thanks for your unfailing love for us. You have walked with our ancestors and would have helped them in their times of need. We now look to you with confidence for what you will do for and through us. Amen.

Revd. Paulette Hannibal
Guyana Congregational Union

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 68:32

TOPIC: Disciples Tap into the Source

In our society today, there are many persons with underdeveloped talents and abilities. A hearing impaired new convert sought the opportunity to witness to the love of God despite her speech and hearing defects. This otherwise abled child of God did not allow her impairment to prevent her from taking up the task of welcoming visitors to church thus offering persons love, acceptance and kindness on entering the sanctuary.

The responsibility of every believer, every disciple, is to bring others to the place to become believers themselves. God provides power and strength to those who know Him as Lord and Saviour - to execute the task of seeking out the oppressed, marginalized, the used and abused, the weak and hopeless and those on the fringe of society; the work of discipleship.

Each person was born with the potential of becoming God's messenger. For this to become a reality, there has to be a shifting away from self and an urgent desire to move toward God. God's desire for us is to enjoy life to its fullest. To make this happen, we need to acknowledge that He has already provided us with all we need. Regardless of our disability, with God's enormous power, we are enabled to serve him.

Prayer:

All sufficient God, we acknowledge that you are our source of everything. Help us to seek you wholeheartedly to access the power that you have available to us so that we can live the abundant life you have destined for us. Amen.

Rev. Paulette Hannibal
Guyana Congregational Union

26 January

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: 2 Samuel 7:22

TOPIC: Personal Encounter with Christ Drives Discipleship

Our worship of God makes declaration of who He is and speaks volumes of our relationship with Him. A personal experience helps us to better appreciate and understand the path we are called to follow and how that path is made clear through the divine intervention of God, giving us a great sense of purpose, belonging and direction.

Some three decades after an encounter at a university between two students from two different ethnic origins in which one gave the other a new testament, the one who received the testament contacted the other telling how this act helped her to find Christ. Our experiences of God will only contribute meaningfully to our lives when they are used to point the way to others.

Thus no group – gender, age, ethnicity or social standing should restrict themselves to sharing the Word to any particular group of persons. As persons called by God, we have the distinct opportunity of becoming all that God intends us to be. Let our encounter with him propel us into that realm where we are able to influence others.

Prayer:

Lord, it is your desire for each of us to have a personal encounter with you so that we can effectively carry out your mission having that experience with you. We thank you for the plan you have for our lives and the way you will use us. Amen.

Rev. Paulette Hannibal
Guyana Congregational Union

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Revelation 4:11

TOPIC: Disciples use their Gifts to Glorify God

Creation was designed for humankind's pleasure. At creation God's pronouncement was "It was good", but humankind has used and misused God's gift to fulfil their own personal and selfish desire.

Every individual is unique and endowed with distinctive attributes. These attributes are designed to be used for the glorification of God and not human beings. As children of God we have a responsibility to use our God-given talents to honour God's command to go in the world and preach, teach and baptize and make disciples of all nations. We must honour Christ, because that is the duty of human beings.

What has happened is that human beings have used these gifts to satisfy their own selfish lust. Despite the fact that we were told by God to "ask" and it shall be "given", many disregard this instruction and endeavor to do what seems right in our own eyes. It is important to ask for that which will advance God's Kingdom.

Prayer:

Lord, we are grateful that you have created us the way you did. Please help us to remain faithful to your calling, using what you have given us to carry out our duty and responsibility, as your created beings. Amen.

Rev. Paulette Hannibal
Guyana Congregational Union

28 January

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Daniel 3:23

TOPIC: Worship Brings Revelation

In everything we are told to give thanks. Our worship has the potential to release God's power to speak directly to us. In worship God is able to reveal adverse situations and gives answers to potential disaster and danger. For example, when Daniel was faced with a potentially dangerous situation, the Lord revealed the answers during worship. Daniel called on the Lord for the revelation and received a response that not only saved lives physically, but also spiritually. Many came to know the God of Daniel after he interpreted the King's dream.

It is therefore our responsibility to collectively plea for God's intervention on behalf of each other. God's provision of wisdom, makes a difference in the lives of those who believe.

As children of God we are called to stand on the promises of God and to win over the adversaries to the glory of God.

Prayer:

God of all wisdom, we are grateful for the opportunities you made available to us to be victorious over the forces of darkness. We submit ourselves under your authority so that we can continue to walk by your divine guidance every day of our lives. Amen.

Revd. Paulette Hannibal
Guyana Congregational Union

29 January

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: 2 Kings 7:3-16

TOPIC: What is Evangelism?

In the capital city of Malawi which is Lilongwe, along the bank streets, a man stands on a pillar with a Bible in his hand and preaches, 'Repent or go to hell'. Others listened, others just laughed, but many people ignored him and went their way. He believes that by doing that he is involved in evangelism. Would you call this evangelism in your context? In these seven days, we will explore 'Evangelism' as a theme. It is vital to understand the meaning of evangelism before looking at various aspects of this topic. Is your church involved in any form of evangelism?

Evangelism has been expressed as "One beggar telling another beggar where to find food". A very good example is 2 Kings 7:3-16. Note particularly verses 9-10, where we learn that it is not good to hide 'the good news' from others. The lepers were convinced that it was not right to deny others the news about the provisions of food God had granted them, though one could argue that they came to their sense after they had had enough.

Equally, one has to taste the food to be able to share it with others. One has to accept the good news that Jesus Christ is their personal Lord and Saviour, before sharing it with others. In this regard, Evangelism is proclaiming the good news of God's Kingdom and Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world. It is sharing good news with those who have not heard about Jesus Christ. It is also sharing good news with those who have gone into error with the hope of reclaiming them. It is sharing good news with those who believe that they are beyond help.

There is good news to share with others whatever the situations might be, many people are hurting in this world and need to be freed. Finally, evangelism today also means challenging whatever denies people fullness of life. In what ways are you sharing the 'food' (good news) with others? If not, what can be done for you and your church to be involved in Evangelism?

Prayer:

Our Father who created us in your image, we thank you for giving us your only Son, Jesus Christ, who came to save us from sins and all forms of oppression. Holy Spirit, help us and our churches to be authentic witnesses in our communities. In Jesus Name! Amen.

Rev. Goodwin Zainga
Churches of Christ in Malawi

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Acts 14: 19-22; 1 Corinthians 10: 31

TOPIC: Primary Motivation in Evangelism

One particular Sunday morning in June, the coldest month in Malawian, a session clerk and I set out to Lundu Congregation on the outskirts of Blantyre city. We travelled almost 5 kilometers by motorcycle without the benefit of crash helmets. You might say we were crazy to travel on the dusty roads without any protection on our heads. But what motivated us was to share the good news with our brothers and sisters in Lundu Village, and nothing else. One can't participate fully in evangelism without being motivated.

Some people feel motivated to preach the good news to those living without hope, those whose lives have hit the rock bottom, and those in need of encouragement in their faith. While merit might be found in these motivations, the best motivation in evangelism is to glorify God. One would ask, what motivated the Apostle Paul to continue with his efforts after being stoned in Lystra (Acts 14:19-22)? One might say Paul was crazy; how could he rise from under a pile of stones to set out to Derbe the following day? And how could he go to Lystra again to encourage brothers and sisters in their faith in Christ? No doubt some of his entourage would say, "Brother Paul it is too dangerous and risky to go back to Lystra. Do you remember what happened a few days ago?" According to Paul, there was no retreat no surrender.

Why was Paul so determined to persevere in his ministry? Clearly, his evangelistic fervour and all aspects of his ministry were anchored on the principle as stated in 1Corinthians 10:31, "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." A primary motivation in evangelism is to bring glory to God. What motivates your involvement in evangelism? Is it fame or a sense of prestige, or a 'Holier than thou attitude'?

Prayer:

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. We acknowledge that at times we are involved in evangelism with motives that are not in line with Your word. Forgive us, help us to preach the good news in order to glorify Your Name. In Christ's Name. Amen.

Rev. Goodwin Zainga
Churches of Christ in Malawi

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 9:35-36

TOPIC: A Model for Evangelism

Malawians in the past did not have many choices as far as television stations were concerned, but now there is an influx of TV stations. Due to changes in technology we were told that we need to move from 'analog to digital' so those clinging to old model TV antennas are handicapped. In order to watch news on TV you need a model that is digital. So too with evangelism. It is necessary to use Jesus' model in order to be effective.

In Matthew 9:35-36, Jesus not only commanded His disciples to evangelize, but also provided a model for evangelism. Jesus didn't sit and wait for people to come to Him, instead He went among the people in cities and villages. He explained, clarified, and applied the message of God to those who were already familiar with what had already been announced.

The message of Jesus was that God's Kingdom is not something that is just a future reality in heaven. He pointed out that the kingdom of God was ushered in at the appearance of Jesus. The reign of God on earth began with the life and ministry of Jesus, and will be fully established on earth when Jesus returns to earth. This is the good news.

Jesus often demonstrated His divine power over human affliction by healing people. Jesus' evangelism was filled with action. He taught, preached, and ministered to people on a regular basis; that was His model in evangelism. The goal of biblical evangelism is to actively seek the lost and share the gospel with them as passionately, persistently and persuasively as possible. Which model does your church use in evangelism?

Prayer:

Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we acknowledge you to be the way, the truth and the life. Teach us Your ways of presenting the good news in a simple but authentic manner at all times, so that people might feel Your power, in Christ's Name. Amen.

Rev. Goodwin Zainga
Churches of Christ in Malawi

1 February

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Mark 1:15; Hebrews 9:27

TOPIC: Judgment and Wrath in Evangelism

In 2002, at the end of a three-year missionary assignment with the Congregational Federation, my wife, Gloria, my first born, Pempho-Jennifer who was eight months old and I had to leave for Malawi. At the airport, the airline official told us the exact amount of personal effects to take with us. Guess what! We had to abandon excess luggage; fortunately, our church clerk, Lesley Freer of Yelvertoft Congregational Church, saved us from embarrassment by taking back our excess luggage. Airlines allocate a specific amount of goods and luggage one is allowed to take on a particular flight.

Many preachers fall into a trap of not mentioning the reality of God's judgment and wrath to those with 'excess baggage'. There is no mention of hell in many of the sermons we hear these days. The Bible clearly talks about hell, therefore, preachers need to use each and every opportunity to 'snatch people from the jaws of hell'. Journeying with Jesus means being ready to leave excess baggage; all sins, heavy burdens, selfish needs and possessions which hinder our spiritual growth. Just as the airport detection system picks up anything which might endanger the flight; in the same way evangelism needs to challenge people to recognize and deal with sins as a part of the journey with Jesus Christ.

This is exactly what Mark 1:15 emphasizes. Repentance is more than feeling guilty and sorry. Repentance is unloading the weight of sin. Evangelists ought to present the work of the cross - God sent His Son to suffer and die in our place, hence when we sin, confess, acknowledge and repent of our sins and accept Jesus' gift of dying for us and rising again to eternal life, we will be forgiven. According to God's word, "... it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Heb 9:27). The reality of God's judgment ought to be faced by every human being. Issues of judgment are shunned by many evangelists, but it is like "burying one's head in the sand" as far as evangelism is concerned. If a person comes into your church and asks: "what must I do to be saved?" What would be your response?

Prayer:

Lord God Almighty, we accept that we are sinners and have broken Your laws and commandments. We believe that Jesus' death on the cross paid for our sins. We confess our sins, and repent. We ask You Lord God Almighty to forgive our sins, in Jesus' Name. Amen.

Rev. Goodwin Zainga
Churches of Christ in Malawi

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 9:37-38

TOPIC: Prayer is Vital in Evangelism

One day I travelled on a mini bus (public transport) on my way to one of the four congregations which is assigned to me in the city of Blantyre-Malawi. Before reaching my destination, the mini bus abruptly stopped on the road because it had ran out of fuel. It took some time to start moving again because the conductor of the mini bus had to buy fuel at the nearest gas station.

As the fuel powers the car so prayer fires evangelism. In Matthew 9:37-38, firstly, Jesus saw the need to reach out to people who were like sheep without shepherd, who needed to hear the gospel. Secondly, Jesus called His disciples to immediate and urgent action and prayer. Jesus didn't say, "Look at the plentiful harvest... now go!" Instead, Jesus said, "Look at the plentiful harvest... now pray! Disciples of Jesus Christ ultimately need to go but must first learn to drop to their knees and ask the Spirit for help in reaching those outside of Christ. The specific request in our prayers should be for more workers. Praying for the harvest is biblical and important, but here Jesus instructs His disciples to pray for harvesters, not for the harvest. Jesus understood that without harvesters, there will be no harvest.

There are often two problems with prayer and evangelism. 1) Firstly, disciples attempt to evangelize without prayer. Evangelism does not work unless God is involved in the process. Evangelism without prayer is powerless evangelism. 2) Secondly, disciples pray but forget to evangelize. It is important for people to know that God's primary method to reach non-believers is through disciples who evangelize. Therefore, disciples should also get off their knees and on their feet to go with the gospel after those who are outside of Christ. Prayer and evangelism are in a symbiotic relationship and not a parasitic relationship. This is essential for all who are involved in evangelism in today's world to know. When was the last time your church prayed and fasted for evangelism? And when was your church involved in evangelism?

Prayer:

Our God and our Father, we pray for souls that have not accepted Your Son Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. O Lord, we know that the labourers in Your field are few, but the harvest is plenty. We pray that Your Holy Spirit will fill those who are willing to serve as evangelists today. Amen.

Rev. Goodwin Zainga
Churches of Christ in Malawi



Caribbean Pre-Assembly, 2016, courtesy of Karen Francis.

My prayers and reflections on this week

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 28:19-20; 2 Timothy 2:4

TOPIC: Importance of Evangelism

Recently in a Malawian newspaper there was a story of a drunken police officer in full uniform who was singing a Malawian national anthem in a mocking tone. It is believed that the culprit is now facing disciplinary actions. Many have voiced different opinions on the matter, but the common understanding is that he was permitted to drink but not in a full police uniform.

2 Timothy 2:4, says “No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier”. Churches and individuals are commanded to preach the good news to all people. Unless frequent attention is paid to Evangelism, it can become easy for churches: to focus solely on edification (equipping the saints for ministry) and benevolence (meeting the needs of destitute brothers and sisters). A church's focus should be on Jesus' command to go and preach the gospel (Matthew 28:19-29). The neglect of evangelism harms the spiritual life of the church. When evangelism ceases, Christians' focus wanes, relationship with God is jeopardized and churches are in danger of dying.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is needed for the saving of souls. Evangelism may be carried out in different ways, for example, going to other countries to preach, sending those who are willing.

Prayer:

God Almighty, we pray that you open our eyes. Help us to explore and discover new ways of telling the good news in our communities. In order to obey Your command to go and preach Your word, You promised to be with us till the end of times, in Jesus Christ's Name. Amen.

Rev. Goodwin Zainga
Churches of Christ in Malawi

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Luke 4:18

TOPIC: Evangelism Today

General Elections will be held in Malawi in 2019. Different political parties will be presenting their manifestos giving reasons why they should be elected. Evangelism is sharing the good news as contained in Jesus' manifesto. Luke 4:18 asserts that evangelism is broader than we might think. To limit evangelism to only personal spiritual conversion is a serious mistake; evangelism also promotes the message of healing and reconciliation.

According to "Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes (TTL)" in today's world, authentic evangelism is the combination of verbal declaration and visible action that bears witness to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Jesus talks about loosening chains that restrict people from attaining life in its fullness. Evangelism today involves denouncing all forms of oppression in our communities, for example, idols of wealth, consumerism, massive corruption and similar life-denying forces. It is about confronting 'Herods' of today who always think that they are above the law.

Jesus healed the lepers, overturned tables of social injustice, challenged 'temple priests' who denied those on the margins of society fullness of life in Jesus Christ. Evangelism today also, involves confronting 'temple priests' who collude with politicians for their own selfish interests.

Churches and individuals need to challenge the concept of 'empire domination' which covers geographical, political, economics, and intellectual spheres as stated in CWM's theology statement "Mission in the Context of Empire". Which forms of 'empire' are manifested in your community? And what will your church do to challenge the 'empire'?

Prayer:

Our Lord Jesus Christ who challenged wickedness in the world, help us to identify and challenge all forms of 'empire' in our communities. Help us also to be in solidarity with those on the margins of our societies, in Jesus' Name. Amen.

Rev. Goodwin Zainga
Churches of Christ in Malawi

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: John 10: 1-10

TOPIC: A Bountiful Life

A recent MTV program reported that 97 percent of fifteen thousand young adults from twenty-six nations worldwide, aged between twelve and twenty-four are indifferent to their daily lives. Malaysia topped the list with 83 percent of its youths expressing a great sense of meaninglessness in their daily life.

Forty percent of the youths said they surf the internet aimlessly often. They claimed that this activity bores them even more than studying and working long hours. MTV host Kerry Taylor noted: "This report has stunned us, for this generation of youths are assumed to be living life to the fullest, given their unparalleled access to technology and information." The question that arises is: "Are we living a bountiful life, or does life grow repetitive and dull as days go by?"

Jesus said: "...I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full". A full life means bountiful, abundant and overflowing beyond our imagination. Jesus became human so that He may give, not take. The life He provides is blessed, and holds a promise that our lives will change forever for the better. A bountiful life is an extraordinary life, it is full of joy and it is sought after by all humankind. We can make life meaningful by offering our gifts in service of others and a more just world. What actions do we need to take to help youth and children in our, families, churches, communities and nations live meaningful lives? What can enable them to experience the bountiful and abundant life Jesus made possible?

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father, I pray for your guidance and presence in my life. Help me to experience the bountiful life that you promised, and help me to be a blessing to others. Amen!

Rev. Phang Lee Choo
Gereja Presbyterian Malaysia

6 February

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 6: 25-32, Genesis 1:27 and Psalm 127:3

TOPIC: The Value of Life

Teenage suicides are on the increase. When youths face failure and challenges in their lives, they resort to ending their lives, which is a great concern. In Malaysia, approximately seven people voluntarily take their own lives each day. Most are young people.

In the recent years, young adults under the age of twenty-five, primarily university students, have committed suicide. In 2015, the top student of a famous Kuala Lumpur School jumped to his death. In Kampar, a student previously diagnosed with mental problems hanged himself. In Penang, a student from Tunku Abdul Rahman University committed suicide because of suspected stress and pressure due to studies. And recently the suicide case of a University Malaya medical student suicide case, stirred up the community.

There are multiple factors other than mental illnesses that drive people to take their own lives. The majority are unable to cope with mental pressure and the surge of emotions arising from internal conflict and stress. There are those who do it because it is trendy, and a bizarre form of entertainment. How can the church tackle such a dire issue? We believe that every human life, created in God's image, is a gift from God. We are all precious in God's sight. We, therefore, have to cherish and nurture every life.

The church needs to wrestle with topics such as suicide in order to engage all believers to allow them to express their opinions and learn more. We need to care for the people around us, support them through thick and thin by the grace and love of God, help them find a solution other than death. Most importantly, to help them to understand the grace and salvation of Christ. What actions can I do to help children and youth around me especially?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of life. Bestow upon me the courage to face everything in my life, and to cherish all who live around me. Amen.

Rev. Phang Lee Choo
Gereja Presbyterian Malaysia

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Luke 15:11 - 24

TOPIC: Who am I?

Eight teenagers were killed and another eight were injured when a car driven by a 22-year-old woman hit them while they were cycling on a highway at midnight on February 18, 2017. They were aged thirteen to seventeen. They were part of a group of thirty to forty teen cyclists crowding the highway on that night. The police reported that most of the bicycles had modifications that flouted permitted specifications. What drove them to cycling on illegal bikes at midnight on the highway? Was it excitement? Instead of sleeping at home, they sought excitement from cycling dangerously. Perhaps they wanted recognition, a sense of belonging, and praises from their friends to validate themselves.

The prodigal son is one of Jesus's most famous parables. Believers are familiar with the story and the teaching behind it. It stresses the love of God towards the people. The younger son was rebellious and disrespectful to his father and indulged himself in a wasteful and lustful life until he spent all he had. However, in grief and despair, he came to and realized the love of his father. He went home looking for forgiveness. His father welcomed him with open arms. He was once lost, but was now found in love.

God sent Jesus to earth. He came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10), because He loves them as sheep without shepherd, lost and helpless. Like the lost son was precious in the eye of his father, we too are irreplaceable in the eyes of our heavenly father.

How can we support youth as they try to establish their identities and values and as they ask: "Who am I?" How can we do that through biblical truth?

Prayer:

Oh God, You made me your child through the blood of your beloved son Jesus Christ, and granted me a precious identity. Help me to lay my life before you, and to continue to witness to your gospel to people who are lost, so that they may know your love.

Rev. Phang Lee Choo
Gereja Presbyterian Malaysia

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: 2 Timothy 1:5, 3:14-15; Acts 16:1-3

TOPIC: Inheritance of Faith

Muslims in Malaysia begin their Islamic education at three. In some parts of Indonesia, a three-year-old may begin learning Al-Quran before learning ABC. They spend an hour daily, five times a week studying Al-Quran. As if that is not enough, they spend four hours per day learning during school holiday¹. What about us? When do our children begin to study the bible? How long per day? How frequent? Is it one hour per week during Sunday school? Do we plant the seed of faith into their lives, nurture it and let it grow to bear fruits from an early age?

Timothy's mother, Eunice and his grandmother, Lois were both faithful Jewish women that loved and feared the Lord. They instructed Timothy in the way of the Lord, making him understand the teaching of the Bible since he was small. He became a man who loved and feared the Lord. As Apostle Paul continued to train and guide him, he became an example to all believers, and lived as a loyal minister on the righteous path.

The greatest inheritance that parents can to give to their children is the word of God. Trained from a tender age, the children will remain loyal to the Lord for the rest of their lives (Proverbs 22: 6). We pray that our Lord continues to provide people such Eunice, Lois and Paul in the family of Christ to lay a foundation. Children and teens often need a spiritual figure like that who mentor and befriend them, to train and guide them onto in the ways of the Lord.

Prayer:

Lord, guide me so that I can walk on the path of righteous, so that I can live to testify your name and become the example to others, especially the young.

Rev. Phang Lee Choo
Gereja Presbyterian Malaysia

¹ (Source: BeritaRakanPenabr, Jan – March 2017)

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17

TOPIC: Bless the Children

Human trafficking has been a serious issue in Malaysia and the country is listed in the lowest rank². Police reports indicate that between five to six teens are reported missing daily and eighty percent of them victims are female. Children cannot have the protection that they deserve. Laws against sexual abuse of children do not protect them girls from child marriage. There were a total of nine thousand cases of arranged child marriage in Malaysia in the last five years. Most of them happened in remote areas and traditional villages. There were nearly thirteen thousand cases of child sexual abuse between 2012 and 2016. Out of those, only one hundred and forty cases were prosecuted and the perpetrators convicted.

Some of Jesus' disciples prohibited children from coming to him. Jesus was against their action and he taught them that children were as valuable as adults. Jesus does not devalue children because they are young and naïve. He welcomes them with an open heart and even ministers to them. He blesses them like He did everyone else who came before Him.

1. Would churches reach out to the children who are sexually violated and trafficked?
2. "Do not hinder them" Jesus said. Do we create hindrances for children and youth to come to Christ?

Prayer:

Lord, help to protect children who are oppressed and suffer. Deliver them through our actions!

Rev. Phang Lee Choo
Gereja Presbyterian Malaysia

² UN Report on Human Trafficking, 2014.

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Daniel 1

TOPIC: Uncompromising Resolve

As the technology advances, access to information has become the norm. Despite all the convenience brought by technological advancement, our ability to overcome its inherent challenges has lowered. Teens seem to attain mental and physical maturity at a faster rate than their ability to analyse and utilize online information. Is this the desired outcome of advanced technology for this generation? Has the convenience become an inconvenience? Instead of our children learning about the failures and successes in human history and about developments in science and technology, they instead become preoccupied with and addicted to social media and gaming apps.

How can Christian youths utilize media in a manner that benefits not only them, but also other people around them? How can they become salt and light instead of techno-zombies?

Daniel was born and raised as a Jew. He learnt to be faithful to and fear God from an early age. As an exile, at sixteen and residing at the palace of Babylon, he stood up for his faith in the midst of temptation and formidable opposition. His uncompromising resolve to live by godly principles made him different. The luxurious life at the palace and even the unfavourable environment would not sway him. How could we nurture young people to respond with principled resolve to the temptations and challenges of the technological age? Let us pray that many would, like Daniel, be uncompromising and dare to stand firm on the biblical values.

In the face of overwhelming advancement in technology and globalization, how do we nurture youth to remain uncompromisingly faithful to God? Daniel's life was exemplary, his faith in God was evident before all.

Prayer:

Oh Lord, help us to preserve our diligence and uncompromising resolve, to stand firm on Your truth, so that we may testify to Your name in this world. Amen!

Rev. Phang Lee Choo
Gereja Presbyterian Malaysia

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 1:5-8; 1 Timothy 4:12

TOPIC: The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

Entrepreneurship has been trending in Malaysia in recent years. Many young people, fresh out of university armed with curiosity and courage, attempt to conquer the world with innovative ideas. Millennials are fearless. They thrive on challenge and delve into all manner of entrepreneurial ventures after university. Some do not even wait to graduate, right after high school, they veer from mainstream job opportunities to pursue non-traditional avenues of employment. Young adults are often regarded as impulsive, inexperienced, indecisive and rebellious by society. What is the view of the church about this development? How can the church cultivate this inspirational energy of young people?

When God called Jeremiah, he responded by stating he did not have the abilities required to serve as a prophet. He was too young and inexperienced (Jeremiah 1:5-8); he was just a shy teen, lacking the ability for public speaking. According to the Bible, he perceived inadequacies that Jeremiah cited cannot hinder anyone from serving God (1 Timothy 4:12). God had great things planned for Jeremiah. and promised to be with him always. God would guide him on how, when and what to speak.

When we are willing to humble ourselves and obey, God will greatly use us for the furtherance of His kingdom God makes us become extraordinary in our ordinary daily lives.

In the darkest times of Jewish history, God called Jeremiah, a young and loyal youth, seemingly unsuited to accomplish anything significant for God and God's people. Am I willing to obey God, and go wherever God sends me?

Jeremiah's tasks were to remove, destroy, overthrow and then rebuild and cultivate. That is what God calls young Christians of this Generation to do too!

Prayer:

Dear Lord, You look into our hearts, and You delight in an obedient heart over any talent. I surrender myself to be used by you. Amen!

Rev. Phang Lee Choo
Gereja Presbyterian Malaysia

12 February

Inclusive Communities - Disability

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 139

TOPIC: Dementia

June was a college lecturer. She had a sharp mind and a lively personality. In her late 60s everything changed. She could not remember even the most basic things. She was constantly losing things. On a number of occasions, when she parked her car she could not recall where she had left it. It was hard to see this lively, clever person change so fundamentally, as dementia took hold of her life. After a while, she could not even recognize her family and forgot their visits instantly. Her loved ones cared for June wonderfully. But it was a bewildering time for her.

About fifty million people live with dementia today. That number will double in 20 years. Every community includes people with dementia. We need to reflect on ways to respond and face the reality of dementia, reminding ourselves of the incalculable value of every person. We are created in the image of God (Genesis 1.27). Psalm 139 tells us that God knows everything about us. Wherever we are God is with us. The psalmist proclaims, "I praise you, because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your words are wonderful. I know that full well." (Psalm 139.14)

Advertisers project images of young, beautiful and successful people. The impression created is that they alone matter. But God requires us to think differently and challenges us to value everyone, regardless of age, ability, disability or circumstances.

Exercise:

In what way does your church support and include people with dementia? What could you personally do to show God's love to people with dementia? Seek out a person who is caring for someone with dementia. Ask them to tell their story.

Prayer:

Lord God our Father, we worship you because you are our Creator and who made us in your own image. Teach us to value every human life as an amazing gift of your grace, and help us to show your love to those who battle with dementia and those who support them. We pray this in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Rev. Jonathan Edwards
Ecumenical Partner

Inclusive Communities - Disability

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 18:1-6

TOPIC: Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Every parent is optimistic for his or her newborn child. They have some idea of what that child will be, but sometimes things work out differently. One parent says it is like planning a holiday in Italy and looking forward to seeing the famous sights of that country, only to arrive in Holland. Holland is a different destination that requires a different guidebook.

Our son has an autistic spectrum disorder. For a while we assumed that our little boy would engage with the world in the same way as his older sister. But he did not; he could not. Language was a mystery to him. We had to travel a different journey, with challenges and blessings, which we did not know raising his sister.

Jesus welcomed little children without discrimination. They were all welcome, and they still are. Jesus' disciples were baffled by Jesus' attitude. They assumed that Jesus would only be interested in welcoming those who could understand his teaching. But Jesus welcomed children and told his disciples to be like children in order to enter his kingdom.

Children are the model, not because they are perfect. But, children engage with life with a simplicity that adults have lost. Adults add layers of complexity to life. Simple trust and loving acceptance is gruesomely complicated. Jesus still welcomes everyone who will come to him in simple trust. His extravagant welcome is for everyone whatever their ability or disability.

Reflection:

Reflect on the children you know who have disabilities. In what ways does your church reach out to them with the extravagant welcome of Jesus? Spend time thinking about their parents as they face the additional privilege and demands of caring for a disabled child. In what ways are you reaching out with Jesus' love to them?

Prayer:

We give thanks to you for the miraculous gift of new life. Thank you for the children in our own families and communities. Help us to show them the welcome and love which Jesus extended to the children that he met. Amen.

Rev. Jonathan Edwards
Ecumenical Partner

14 February

Inclusive Communities - Disability

SCRIPTURE: Mark 7:31-37

TOPIC: Hearing Loss

Some disabilities are immediately apparent. Many are invisible. Looking at a crowd of people it is impossible to guess how many people have hearing loss. The incidence of hearing loss grows with age. Below 2% of children have hearing loss compared to a third of adults above sixty-five. Hearing loss is common and we need to be aware that we will meet people daily with hearing impairment.

Hearing loss is very isolating. What do you do when everyone around you laughs and you cannot hear the joke? How do you respond when someone speaks to you with urgency, but you cannot hear all of what he/she is saying? Asking people to repeat themselves is exhausting and cuts the flow of conversation.

Jesus reached out to people with disabilities. In Mark 7.31-37 he heals a man with hearing loss. The man could not hear and could hardly speak. Jesus placed his hands on the man's ears and mouth, and the miracle happened. Jesus still heals today. He can heal miraculously but more often his healing flows through the medical profession whose God-given ability helps people with hearing loss. For many, hearing loss continues. God is able to strengthen them as they adjust to the challenges the condition presents.

Exercise:

If you have no hearing loss, find someone who has it and ask them to explain to you what daily life is like. What do they find most difficult? How could people be helpful to them in everyday life? Explore the ways church life could be more accessible to people with hearing loss.

Prayer:

Loving God, thank you for the gift of hearing. Thank you for the ways in which our lives are enriched through relationships. We pray particularly for those who struggle to hear. Help us never to take our hearing for granted, and to offer love and support to those who do not have this gift. Amen.

Rev. Jonathan Edwards
Ecumenical Partner

Inclusive Communities - Disability

SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 13

TOPIC: Loving Everyone

Some years ago whilst we were on holiday, my family and I visited a church. I have not forgotten the distressing noises that we heard during the service. They came from a man at the back of the church. It was impossible to hear without feeling alarmed. But, the most striking thing was that no one moved. I thought people would rush to the man to comfort him, or keep turning around towards the noise. But no one did. They did not seem to be distracted.

I asked about the man. His name was Michael and he attended church regularly. He has no speech. He is well known and much loved by the church. Michael always made that noise and the church had grown to accept him as he was.

I learnt a great deal from this experience. We often want people to fit into our ways, to come to a church service and conform. Michael would never conform. The church welcomed him the way that he was. That is love.

1 Corinthians 13 is a tough chapter. That great hymn in praise of love flows like a beautiful poem, but its demands are massive. Anyone who has ever tried to love like that will know how painful and difficult it is. Loving one another with all our differences is a supernatural love. Love that “always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” flows from the heart of God.

Reflection:

How good is your church at welcoming people who act in surprising ways? What would happen if someone shouted out in your service next Sunday? Would they be ushered out or welcomed?

Prayer:

Almighty God, we praise you that in you we see perfect love. Thank you for sending your son into the world so that we could see clearly what love looks like in human flesh. Send to us your Holy Spirit so that we will learn how to show love to all the people around us, however different they are from us. Amen.

Rev. Jonathan Edwards
Ecumenical Partner

16 February

Inclusive Communities - Disability

SCRIPTURE: Luke 4:14-21

TOPIC: Sight Loss

A couple of years ago my friend, Grace, discovered she was losing her sight. It was a bewildering experience. She always had good eye-sight. The loss of sight affected everything. The simplest jobs around the house became a major challenge. Moving outside was threatening. The problem was a tumour was growing in her brain, which was pressing on the optic nerve. The tumor was surgically removed and her sight was restored. Grace comments, "It was so wonderful that I shouted out, 'I can see! Praise the Lord! I can see.'"

The World Health Organization estimates that 285 million people are visually impaired. Thirty-nine million are blind, while 246 million have poor vision. Everyday life is a struggle for these people. However, it is a shame for us all that 80% of all visual impairment is preventable. Grace was blessed to have access to effective health care. Many people live in places where such operations are impossible.

Blindness was a major challenge in Jesus' time. When he read the Scriptures in the synagogue in Nazareth, he read from Isaiah 61 which proclaims that the Messiah would bring "recovery of sight to the blind". (Luke chapter 4 verse 18). In his ministry, he reached out to blind people and restored their sight.

Today, in the Name of Jesus, the church continues to reach out to the visually impaired. Through the wonders of modern science, by the grace of God many people can improve their sight. In every community, there are people with visual impairment. They need our love, understanding, support and prayers.

Action:

Talk to someone in your community with visual impairment. Find out how they cope with everyday life. Ask them what it is like visiting your church? In what ways could you be more welcoming?

Prayer:

O God, those of us who have the gift of sight, give thanks to you for the privilege to see. May we never take this gift for granted. Help us to appreciate the gifts and sensitivities of those who are visually impaired. Amen.

Rev. Jonathan Edwards
Ecumenical Partner



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My prayers and reflections on this week

Inclusive Communities - Disability

SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

TOPIC: Wheel Chairs

I have one experience of being in a wheel chair. I was flying to Scotland after a knee operation. Airports pushed me through the terminals, and on and off the plane. The helpers were courteous, but it was a weird experience. I felt incredibly small and struggled to relate to what was happening around me. I was also acutely conscious of the looks that people gave me as if they were guessing why an apparently fit man was being pushed around. That changed how I look at wheel chair users.

In the Bible, we are encouraged to care deeply enough to feel one another's challenges and joys. The intimate language of the Body of Christ conveys this most powerfully. Paul comments that the relationship is so close that "if one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it." (1 Corinthians 12.26). A deep, costly, Christ-like care for one another is the inevitable result of love.

If our churches are to become inclusive communities, we need to use our imagination so that we may welcome disabled people with the generosity of Christ himself. We must ask the Holy Spirit to help us to imagine what it would be like to be disabled, so that we can support our fellow believers and extend the love of Christ to them.

Exercise:

Think about a disabled person that you know. What specific challenges will they be facing today? How you would face those same challenges? Talk to someone who has done the same exercise, and reflect together. How would your church welcome the disabled more generously?

Prayer:

Lord God, thank you for the invention of wheel chairs and for the blessing they are to so many people. Bless, we pray, those who are regular wheel chair users. Help us to reach out to them with love and to be receptive to the gifts they bring. Amen.

Rev. Jonathan Edwards
Ecumenical Partner

18 February

Inclusive Communities - Disability

SCRIPTURE: Romans 15:1-7

TOPIC: Words

Christians use a lot of words! Everything from the greeting at the church door, to the prayers, the hymns and the sermon are words. This is fine for the majority of people. Adults have a vocabulary of more than fifteen thousand words. Even five-year-olds can muster five thousand words. Some people have no words, and others have just a few. What would it be like to attend a church service and to understand nothing or almost nothing of what was happening around you? You would quickly feel out of place and rejected. You may never return.

This is the reality for many people. Jesus consistently reached out to the marginalized, the weak and the dispossessed. Jesus' society pushed many to the margins – children, women, lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes and others. Jesus went to great lengths to show them that they were welcome.

As Christ's representatives, we need to pass on the welcome that he has shown to us. In Romans 15.7, Paul asserts it when he says, "accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." This is easy to say, but demanding to do. In that same chapter Paul challenges his readers to look for ways to please their neighbors, in order to build them up. We are all tempted to be selfish, but Christ sets us an example of living our lives for others, so that they will experience the welcome of Christ for themselves.

REFLECT – How would you organize an act of worship for people who have limited vocabulary? How would you show them the welcome of Christ?

Prayer:

God our Father, thank you for the gift of words and the ability to communicate. We pray today for those who have few words or none, and who struggle to communicate. Thank you for them. Please show us ways in which we can communicate your love to them and receive the gifts that they are eager to share. We pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Rev. Jonathan Edwards
Ecumenical Partner

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Acts 3:1-8

TOPIC: Invisible

There is a lot of 'seeing' in this Bible passage. The man begging sees Peter and John enter the temple courts and asks them for help. Peter 'looks straight at him' and sees more than an object of charity or fear.

I wonder how people passed through the temple and only saw the Beautiful Gate. I wonder if the man begging was pretty invisible to those that passed by. If they did spot him, was he cloaked in assumptions about what beggars are like?

Those trafficked and exploited are largely invisible. Forced labour takes place in some of the most beautiful, agricultural parts of the UK. Brothels exist in residential areas and the façade of a home can hide someone who works as a slave inside. It is very much a reality that we assume happens elsewhere. However, the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (one of the provisions of the 2015 Modern Slavery Act UK) suggest that 13,000 people may have been trafficked and work as slaves within the UK. (<http://www.antislaverycommissioner.co.uk>)

Hagar was a woman trapped in a domestic setting far from home (Genesis 16:1-13). All she possessed was a promise from God. Wonderfully, she names God as 'the God sees me'. Perhaps today the people of God who sees can also begin to see? We need to look past the beautiful facades and assumptions.

Read the stories on CWM's 'Free to be Freeing' webpage (<http://freetobefreeing.org>). See the real people behind the media headlines.

Read the Salvation Army's webpage on spotting the signs of human trafficking. (<https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/spot-signs-modern-slavery>)

Prayer:

God who sees the true situation of those that suffer, give us eyes that see. Help us not to prefer beautiful ignorance over truth and justice. Give hope to those who feel totally trapped that there will be someone nearby who will see what is really happening and help to set them free. Amen.

Rev'd Suzanne Nockels
Congregational Federation

20 February

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Numbers 23: 19, Hebrews 6:18

TOPIC: False promises

Ever been the victim of a false promise? Maybe someone promised to turn up or pay you back and they never did? Maybe someone promised you a job but it never materialised? Remember how gutted and let down you felt.

Perhaps you think that you would always see through a false promise or never put yourself in a situation where you would be so reliant on someone else. However, very sensible people are the victims of scams all the time and only a cursory glance suggests that we rely on promises in the modern world as much as we ever did. I rely on the promise of my latest purchase to do what it says on the packet. I rely on the promises my bank has made not to misuse my money. I rely on the promises my government has made to care for its citizens. I rely on the promise of my doctor to seek my well-being.

Imagine that you are in a war-torn country or a country so ground down by poverty that you cannot see a viable future for yourself. Someone offers you a way out and it seems plausible and they seem genuine. Would you believe it? Wouldn't you want to believe it? Even for a brief moment the hope would be better than the present reality of where you were. Traffickers are skilled in the art of deceit.

The Bible is strict about lies and false promises – not only because they cause suffering and erode trust but also because they go against the nature of God. God is truth and God cannot lie. I take great comfort in that. When I read in the Bible that God knows me and loves me and has a plan and purpose for me - God isn't lying.

Prayer:

Trustworthy God, we ask for healing from false promises that come to nothing and forgiveness for the lies and false promises we've made and the hurt they've caused. We pray down the false promises made by traffickers, gang-masters and pimps. May those released from trafficking learn to trust others and not live ongoing lives of suspicion and fear. Amen.

Rev'd Suzanne Nockels
Congregational Federation

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 22:21

TOPIC: Exploitation

The Hebrew Bible has a special concern for the stranger. Without family ties and local knowledge, a foreigner was open to exploitation. They might not know how to access justice (Malachi 5:8) and may be denied the same rights as everyone else (Exodus 12:49). Today, those trafficked may not even know that they have been exploited or that help might be available. Their captors tell them that they have to work to pay off the debt from their journey or to pay for their upkeep. If they do escape, they may be denied the right to work in the country they find themselves and have little access to state benefits or the justice system.

It has been suggested that there is another layer to the word “oppress” which is closer to the word ‘dishonour’. The stranger may have lost of his/her status and identity in moving from one country to another. The Israelites are not to make foreigners feel even worse.

Why this unusual care for outsider? After all, history teaches us that human beings tend to ‘dislike the unliked’. The reason given is that ‘you too were strangers/foreigners in the land of Egypt’. You know what’s it like to not understand the rules, to be made to work for another’s gain and to be humiliated and dishonoured. Remember what that was like and don’t repeat it. God, after all, heard you, will God not also hear the cries of those you oppress?

Has there been a time where you’ve felt like a stranger in a strange land? Was there a time when you realised how vulnerable you were because you didn’t know how things worked? Did others make you feel better or worse? For some of us it may be experiences of moving far from home or it might be our first day at school or at a new Church. Remember that feeling. What would have helped? What small words and actions might have eased things a little.

Look around for those that might feel like that today and try to make things a little less strange for them.

Prayer:

God of all, give strength and dignity to those who feel like strangers and are made to feel like strangers. For agencies and organisations that seek to explain and assist that they may have insight to see when we add to the vulnerability of the outsider or the humiliation of those who have lost much.

Revd Suzanne Nockels
Congregational Federation

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Mark 4: 35-41

TOPIC: Dangerous Crossings

As a baby Jesus and his family fled across the desert to Egypt to escape Herod's violence. One could speculate if they had to pay for safe passage. Was someone making money out of families who were trying to escape? Was that where the magi's gift of gold went?

Jesus' ministry is full of dangerous crossings. In crossing the Sea of Galilee Jesus was travelling from a Jewish to a Gentile region when a 'furious' storm erupted and threatened to swamp the boat. Europe has seen hundreds of people dying as they attempt to cross the Mediterranean. The UN has estimated that 1 person has died for every 42 people trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2016. Do we hear the disciples' question? "Don't you care if we drown?"

Jesus showed his defiance of the waves and his strong will that the danger should cease. He takes command in a chaotic situation. We hope for the political will to stop those who will take people's life savings but have no respect for life. We hope for the political will to enable safe passage and new homes for refugees.

One could argue that the incarnation itself was the ultimate dangerous crossing. God entrusted his own Son into human hands and on Good Friday those hands did not preserve his life. What Christ did, ultimately, was create safe passage for us from the forces of death to newness of life.

Prayer:

Travelling Jesus,

We pray for those who are making dangerous crossings today; those who are forcibly moved and those who are so desperate to escape that they entrust themselves to smugglers. We ask for places of sanctuary and a level of organisation that enables safe passage. We ask your blessing upon those who patrol the seas that they may have compassionate hearts and we pray for those who live along the coastline who have witnessed a terrible loss of life.

Rev'd Suzanne Nockels
Congregational Federation

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 130

TOPIC: Big problems, Big words

There are many troubling passages in Scripture which seem to accept the existence of slavery, however, as Dr King writes 'the arch of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice' King, M.L., *Out of the Long Night*, The Gospel Messenger, Volume 107, 1958, Church of the Brethren, Illinois, Page 14

The overall biblical narrative is one of redemption. In the Hebrew Bible redemption is witnessed in the collective story of liberation from Egypt and release from captivity in Babylon. There are also passages within prophetic and wisdom literature which condemn the hold human beings can have over one another. This redemptive impulse in the Bible reaches its fulfilment in the salvation story of Jesus. Jesus comes to redeem the world and set the captives free. That redemption was a total reality- physical, spiritual, mental, economic and political.

I can't help but wonder whether we've made such a powerful truth and experience into something a bit small. It's a 'churchy' word that has lost its punch. 'Redemption' has become an inner spiritual feeling rather than out an outward social impulse. What really captivates me? What really limits my life and what am I doing about it? God redeems and sets free but I need to work on how to live in that freedom. What makes captives of others? Poverty, desperation and systematic greed come to mind. God redeems but how can we join in with God's purposes? What might redemption look like for those working in sweatshops and brothels? What might it be like to be released from fear? Not every prison has bars. Those caught up in the evil of human trafficking need big words, ideas and actions.

Guide me O Thou Great Redeemer, Pilgrim through this barren land,
I am weak but Thou art mighty, Guide me with Thy powerful hand
- William Williams

Won't you help to sing, These songs of freedom?
'Cause all I ever have Redemption songs
- Bob Marley

Prayer:

God of freedom, help us see what we need redeeming from. Help us name it and challenge it in your strength however big it is. Help look beyond ourselves and see what others might need redeeming from. When we face big problems, give us your truths that are bigger still.

Revd Suzanne Nockels
Congregational Federation

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Galatians 5:1

TOPIC: After-care

The people of God cross the Red Sea into their freedom but it is not the end of the story. Their freedom looks like a wilderness - it is confusing and scary. Forgetting how bad things actually were, some of the Hebrews began to long for the certainties of their captivity. It is one thing to be released from slavery it is quite another to learn how to be free - perhaps in unknown territory. My husband had a nasty accident three years ago and couldn't wait to be released from hospital but when he got home, navigating the stairs was difficult and his recovery was far from over.

ASHIANA (www.ashianasheffield.org, accessed 19/06/2016) and the Poppy Project in the UK (www.eavesforwomen.org.uk/about-eaves/our-projects/the-poppy-project, accessed 19/06/2016) work with women who have been trafficked. The help they provide includes accommodation, workers who specialise in uniting families, advocacy, courses to build self-confidence, life skills, healthcare and trauma counselling. They provide a lot of after-care.

We may encounter those who have been trafficked or those who have been abused in different circumstances. It may take time, patience, wisdom, a lot of practical support and after-care for that person to travel onwards in their lives. We may need to accompany them along the way and sense the moment when it's right to step back. We need to love and encourage people into their freedom without robbing them once again of their independent agency.

Questions:

1. Are our Churches ready for that? Are we ready to hear and learn from the experiences of others?
2. Do we do the sticking plaster thing and then back off when the demands get too hard or do we take too much control away from those learning how to be free?
3. How can we provide good after-care ?

Prayer:

Caring God, we lift to You someone we are trying to support through a difficult time. Give us wisdom to know when to carry them a little and when to let go so that they can take their own steps into freedom. Amen.

Rev'd Suzanne Nockels
Congregational Federation

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 13:2

TOPIC: Sanctuary Space

In the UK there is a movement called 'Cities of Sanctuary' which encourages cities, boroughs and towns to foster a culture of hospitality toward those who are escaping war and persecution.

The city of Sheffield was the first UK 'City of Sanctuary'. Today there are a number of projects across the city including a relaxed Conversation Club that takes place at Central United Reformed Church. This is a drop-in where people can learn English, practise English but also be themselves. It aims to be a safe place. Hospitality, can mean providing food or material goods. Hospitality can mean providing services and help. Hospitality can also mean creating a welcoming space. Often refugees and those who have been trafficked have no premises where they can gather with people of the same nationality or life experience as them and simply be themselves. The encounters they do have with others might be highly controlled bureaucratic meetings so free gathering is very precious.

I'm intrigued that Paul warns the Hebrew Church not to forget hospitality. Why would they forget? Why do we forget? Perhaps because we are always in a rush? Perhaps because we feel the material support is the most pressing need? Perhaps because we want to do something? Creating a sanctuary space is about stopping, listening and emptying what was there before. It's about letting others lead the conversation and perhaps set the agenda. Hospitality can be a bit of a strange paradox- we have to deliberately, intentionally not take control. Often we'd rather be the angels ourselves than be the ones who receive them.

Questions:

1. Where can you intentionally empty some time or space for someone else today?
2. Can you let them take the lead in a conversation, set the tone or have the ideas?
3. Might you discover more than you thought possible by doing less and not taking charge?

Prayer:

Jesus, host of hosts,

You make astonishing room for us in your heart. Help us truly make space for the other in our conversations, planning and lives. Help us create safe spaces where people don't have to keep up a pretence or fear of saying the wrong thing. Help us be walking, breathing places of sanctuary. Amen.

Rev'd Suzanne Nockels
Congregational Federation

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Mark 10:45

TOPIC: "Tlawmngaihna"

For the next seven days, we will be focusing on stories from the Indian context, beginning with a reflection from a tiny north eastern state called Mizoram.

Way before the coming of Christianity in Mizoram in 1894, Jesus' ethical teaching had already prevailed in Mizo society in the form of tlawmngaihna - a traditional code of social ethics which can best be defined as a social service exemplified by respect, kindness, selflessness, willingness to stand up for the common good without any hope of a reward. JM Lloyd, a British missionary who served this place, wrote in his book, History of the Church in Mizoram: Harvest in the Hills, that during the early 1940s the Mizos wanted a High School. There was no assistance from the then British administrator who thought it unnecessary for the tribes to have higher education than the primary levels. But the Mizo villagers led by the chiefs donated 2 INR each, and voluntarily laboured to build the first ever Mizo High School. This spirit of tlawmngaihna lives on and is epitomized in various forms today. One such example is whenever there is a catastrophe, Mizos will go out braving all odds to help in whatever way they can even before the arrival of the government machinery, resulting in the saving of hundreds of lives.

This ethical code of conduct corresponds with the life and teachings of Jesus which emphasizes selfless sacrifice and service for the good and benefit of others. The saving act of Jesus Christ can be set as a paramount example of tlawmngaihna. Jesus declared that he did not come to be served, but to serve. He died and sacrificed himself for others. Laying down one's life for others can be considered as the most explicit statement in the gospel of what it means to love as Jesus loves. Jesus is the perfect embodiment of tlawmngaihna insofar as he is the man for others. This concept is in synergy with a true egalitarian society. It could be a model for the rest of the world.

Prayer:

Lord, may I live a life of love, just as Christ loved me and gave himself up for me. May I lay down my life for others just as Christ laid down his life for me. May I live by faith in Christ to love and serve humanity. In Christ's name. Amen.

Ms. Lalmuanpuii Hmar
Presbyterian Church of India

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 25:34-40

TOPIC: Doing it All for Others

On the outskirts of Aizawl, the capital city of Mizoram lies the home of Thutak Nunpuitu Team (Practical Exemplar of the Truth), a voluntary organization founded in the year 1988. This Organization runs a De-Addiction cum Rehabilitation Centre (560 beds) for substance abusers and alcoholics; an Orphanage (400 beds) for orphans and abandoned children; and a Home (340 beds) for the mentally disabled. Since its inception, more than 2,500 patients and substance abusers have fully recovered. What is exceptionally momentous about this organization is that it is a non-profit organization run solely by voluntary workers. It has no regular resource or income from any party or groups. It runs on faith in God! It occasionally receives financial support and aid from philanthropists and other organizations. The sustainability of this project without any regular income is nothing less than a miracle and thousands of people are witness to this.

Jesus clearly tells us that in the last judgment, the most significant criterion will be whether one has acted with loving care for people in need. This ultimately means that when people respond to human need, or fail to respond, they are in fact responding, or failing to respond, to Christ. Those who provide food, drink, clothing, shelter for the needy, and visit the sick and imprisoned respond entirely on the basis of the needs of “the least of these.” This act or ministry is humble and instinctive. It has no thought of reward, only of helping people in need.

To serve Christ and to help all those for whom Christ died is instinctive to a believer. Therefore, the principles of service to others, economic justice, and showing unending love and mercy to the needy should be reinforced in the lives of believers each day.

Prayer:

Lord, empower me to help the lonely, the orphans, the hungry, the strangers, the naked, the sick, the substance abusers, the prisoners, and to realize that no ministry and no amount of suffering on earth is so lowly that it will not be worth the glory that will be revealed in me through my response to need. In Christ's name. Amen.

Ms. Lalmuanpuii Hmar
Presbyterian Church of India

28 February

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Acts 4:32-35

TOPIC: Meeting Each Other's Needs

On November 8, 2016, the Prime Minister of India announced demonetization of all 500 and 1,000 rupee notes freezing 86% of India's economy, a surgical strike at unaccounted cash in the economy. India's economy is heavily dependent on cash and less than half the population uses the banking system for monetary transactions. The announcement sent the nation into frenzy. Many queued up outside banks and ATMs to get their hands on valid currency, and the withdrawal of legal cash after queuing up for hours was a big achievement in itself. There were endless reports of empty ATMs, banks running low on cash, people being turned away from hospitals for trying to pay their bills with the now-invalid notes, etc. There were over 100 reported deaths across the country as a result of people's desperation.

It was said that Starbucks served free coffee to people waiting for hours in queues in front of ATMs and banks in Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore. Churches and temples opened their offering boxes after seeing the public suffering. Mizoram also responded to the situation by mutually accepting the invalid notes in shops, hospitals, and institutions for quite some time.

Biblical economics, in contrast to worldly economics, can be considered as the Jubilee economy, which gives justice for all. The earliest Christians practiced this by taking care of all who had need. They believed that they were blessed with material possessions to help others. The proceeds from the sale of possessions were laid at the apostles' feet in acknowledgment of their spiritual authority and then redistributed to other members according to their financial situation so that there was not a needy person among them. This loyalty does not derive from their education or social status, but rather it is spurred by their allegiance to the name of Jesus. God's grace came upon the community's social life so that there was not a needy person among them. No man, no woman, no child was neglected. Believers, likewise, are called to set a godly example in our desperate world today.

Prayer:

Lord, I commit myself to Christ and to helping others. In a world full of desperate needs, help me to truly love Christ and others and to give what I have beyond my necessities to help meet others' essential needs. In Christ's name. Amen.

Ms. Lalmuanpuii Hmar
Presbyterian Church of India

1 March

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6

TOPIC: God of Life

It is a painful reality that a number of people are being marginalized on certain grounds all over the world today, one such example being the tribes of North East India. There are over 400 tribes/indigenous communities in India who are faced with the problem of isolation from the mainstream/dominant sections. This began with the industrialization and economic development of the country and has been destructive of their natural environment. The government continues to take their land, denying their rights, and allowing commercial use of their land by multinationals and big business concerns. This process of modernization makes tribal people merely the objects and not the subjects of modernization.

Thus, we can ask - is God at work among the tribal people? Is God's will being fulfilled in this process of marginalization of the tribal people? Is God in solidarity with the tribal people while their very survival is in question?

The Bible affirms life rather than destruction. God is revealed as the God of liberation of the oppressed in the Exodus event who delivered the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage. God took the side of the oppressed - the people who have been denied human dignity and earth's resources, alienated, dispossessed, and oppressed. The God who saw the pain of his people in Egypt, suffered with them in their suffering, and revealed himself in the midst of their oppression, is also still at work among the tribal people. Through his Son he has given liberation to all.

Scripture has rightfully attested that God used the marginalized, the less recognized, the servants, and maids in his economy of salvation. Following this great tradition, we may say that even today the poor and marginalized groups can be the vehicles of God's revelation. We must join hands together to fight against all forms of prejudice, estrangement, domination, deprivation, marginalization, and stigmatization for a total liberation of God's people. Everyone has an equal standing in the eyes of the Creator, and therefore we must treat everyone with equal respect.

Prayer:

Lord, may my freedom in Christ be a channel to liberate those who are under physical and spiritual bondage. May the joy, peace, and comfort of being liberated be upon each individual on earth. In Christ's name. Amen.

Ms. Lalmuanpuii Hmar
Presbyterian Church of India

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Mark 10:13-16

TOPIC: Girl Child: Created in God's Image

The Indian Government declared January 24 of every year as the "National Girl Child Day" with the objective of raising consciousness to value and respect the girl child. Later on, the United Nations also adopted October 11, 2012 as the inaugural International Day of the Girl Child. The observation of the Girl Child Day supports more opportunity for girls and increases awareness of inequality faced by girls worldwide based upon their gender, which includes access to education, nutrition, legal rights, medical care, and protection from discrimination, violence, and forced child marriage.

Children in India constitute more than one-fourth of the population with the highest number of working children and one of the lowest female-male ratios with 933 per 1,000 males in 2001. The Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994 was passed (and amended in 2003) to prevent selective foeticide in order that the right of girl child to be born is preserved. However, the Indian Medical Association estimates that 2.5 million female foetuses are destroyed in India each year.

We find certain legal dimensions in the Pentateuch which directly point to the girl child such as: Protection of girls sold into slavery (Exod 21:7-11), Protection from rape (Exod 22:16; Deut 22:23), Protection from prostitution (Lev 19:29), Protection from divorce (Deut 22:13-19). A child is a part of the family, the family that God instituted in the Garden of Eden (Gen 1:27-28, 2:22-24). Jesus too makes it the concern of his disciples to welcome children in their ministry. Everyone has a role to play in promoting holistic development of the girl child; changing her "vulnerability" into "peace." All girl children are significant in our lives and their childhood should be loving, healthy, safe and cheerful. There is absolutely no blemish in God's perfect creation that should make the girl child inferior to the boy child. For the girl child, too, is loved, cherished, and created by God in God's own image.

Prayer:

Lord, you have designed the girl child's existence to be prosperous and significant and many have gone against the purpose of your creation by harming girl children worldwide. Help the people involved in fighting for their cause, and may each girl child on earth enjoy a safe and valued life. In Christ's name. Amen.

Ms. Lalmuanpuii Hmar
Presbyterian Church of India



Saplings of Freedom by Sunil Raj Philip, (acrylic on canvas).

My prayers and reflections on this week

3 March

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Luke 4:18,19

TOPIC: Good News to the Poor

One of the most prominent pictures that flashes in our minds while analyzing the Indian society is the realities of poverty. Sadly, one-third of poor people of the world live in India and 21.9% of the population live below the national poverty line. In spite of the many claims for a rapidly developing India, economists would argue that development is not to be measured on the basis of economic indicators such as GDP but on the basis of quality of life of the people in terms of health, education, housing, etc. They find that GDP growth does not represent development at all as the vast majority of Indians still do not live a healthy life.

There could be many reasons for poverty. In the beginning, God gave the earth and its resources to all humankind, but the sin and rebellion of humankind corrupted this plan of God.

However, Jesus' works bring good news to the poor. The Magnificat praises the Lord for lifting up the lowly and sending the rich away empty (Luke 1:52-53), and Jesus announces God's blessings on the poor (Luke 6:20). He clearly states his purpose for coming at the beginning of his ministry in Luke 4:18-19, commonly known as the "Nazareth Manifesto." He is to set free those who are physically, mentally, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually bruised- those who are disabled, hurting, afflicted, wounded, battered.

We, who belong to Christ, are challenged to continue in the prophetic tradition of Jesus, fight for the social welfare of all people just like Jesus did during his ministry, and advocate for an economy of life promoting religious freedoms, and a continuation of social delivery systems.

Prayer:

Pray in your heart for:

A

Better nation;

Better community;

Better society;

Better church;

Better world -

Where everyone enjoys fullness of life!

Ms. Lalmuanpuii Hmar
Presbyterian Church of India

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: John 10:10

TOPIC: Empire and Church

The church in India, since its inception, can be said to be under the clutches of empire due to colonialism. As time went on, empire continued in the form of casteism, socio-economic injustice, exploitation, thus making pluralism, fundamentalism, terrorism, poverty, marginalization of certain groups, persecution in the name of religion, and corruption as the reality of India today. The impact and challenges posed by the dominant liberal capitalist economic and commercial systems on the society are also colossal. In short, poverty, hunger, patriarchy, casteism, oppression, environmental degradation, corruption, etc. are mission imperatives for the Indian churches today.

During Jesus' time, the ruling class controlled the wealth, misused political power in the judiciary, and oppressed the poor. He lived with the poor and empowered them to resist the forces of empire. As a result, Jesus' ministry revolved around not only religious matters but also political and economic concerns of the communities. Likewise the church today ought to be focused in the understanding of its mission, be conscientious to its context, and be sensitive to the real situation. God's mission is commitment to the cause of justice, peace and integrity, and struggle against all forces of oppression.

In our fight against the empire, the church should act with immense courage to emulate God's choice for the poor and downtrodden and not be neutral in situations of injustice.

Jesus came to earth so that human beings may have life, life in abundance. Under his protection and by his gift everyone can experience the best life can offer. His resurrection brings hope and fullness of life, and the church is to celebrate God's gift of life.

Therefore, discovering the challenges of the empire in our churches and society; embracing Jesus' confrontation of empire during his ministry; and resisting the empire that surrounds us by building a life affirming community should constitute the most integral part of the church's mission and ministry today.

Prayer:

Lord, may your church's mission and ministry continue to prosper in the midst of life's challenges and struggles, and may each individual be clothed with fullness of life through Jesus to love and serve you more. In Christ's name. Amen.

Ms. Lalmuanpuii Hmar
Presbyterian Church of India

5 March

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 5:1-10

TOPIC: The first day in Tahiti

March 5th 1797, in Māōhinui, commonly known as Tahiti, the first Missionaries of the London Missionary Society arrive.

"... we saw several canoes putting off and paddling towards us...not less than one hundred of them dancing and... crying "Tayo!"(which means friend).

March 5th 1906, the United States Army use force against the native Moros.

March 5th 1970, Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty goes into effect after ratification by 43 nations.

Prayer:

"Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God."
Peace loving God,
Make us your children
That we might learn to live in peace with all creation.

Joel Hoiore
Māōhi Protestant Church



Rev. Elizabeth and Pastor William Chirwa, mission partners from the United Church in Zambia to the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands.

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Galatians 5:22-24

TOPIC: The second day in Tahiti

March 6th 1797, peculiar events took place in a harbour in Tahiti.

"Manemane, a Maohi priest, wrapped a long piece of cloth around the captain, and put a cloth over his own head. He requested for himself a musket, some shot and gunpowder. After this exchange, the captain, Manemane, and others from the ship, went on shore in order to examine a large house standing on the the extremity of Point Venus. It was called E fare no Paratāne (the British House), and it had been built by Pomarre, a Tahitian chief, for Captain Bligh."

March 6th 1820, the 'Missouri Compromise' is signed into law by President James Monroe.

March 6th 1946, Ho Chi Minh signs an agreement with France which recognizes Vietnam as an autonomous state.

Prayer:

Where some have traded in cloth whilst others export guns;
Where some have traded in peace while others export war;
Peace-loving God forgive us
And teach us to live in peace.

Joel Hoiore
Māōhi Protestant Church



Rev. Ramboanjanahary Rasolonjanahary Samoelijaona, mission partner from Church of Jesus Christ In Madagascar (F.J.K.M) to the Kiribati Uniting Church (KUC) teaches Mathematics and Science to students in the Pacific.

7 March

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 2:1-5

TOPIC: The third day in Tahiti

March 7th 1573, a peace treaty is signed between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Venice, ending the Ottoman-Venetian War (1570-73).

March 7th 1797 Tahiti brought another set of realities into religious conversations founded on friendship and diplomatic relationships.

“Manemane made a long oration with the names of the gods of Raiātea, acknowledging the British God to be the best, and that he should request O Tu (King Pomare II) to worship him, and to order the people to do the same. The ladies highly approved, and said the British custom was very good. It was resolved, the friendship and protection of Pomare I and his son O Tu was granted. The Captain and fellow missionaries were received by the young king and his wife. The captain informed them that their only inducement was to come and visit them to do good and that they would not intermeddle in wars, nor employ arms, if only but for self-defense.”

March 7th 1850, Senator Daniel Webster gives his speech endorsing a compromise to prevent a possible civil war.

Prayer:

**They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.
Where our nations plan and prepare for war; Where our neighbours fight and rage;
Where creation is ruined and destroyed; Forgive us and give us boldness
To turn our weapons of war into tools for producing food for all.**

Joel Hoiore
Māōhi Protestant Church



Dr. Razafindramary Parfaite Rakotondramasy, mission partner from Church of Jesus Christ In Madagascar (F.J.K.M) to the Kiribati Uniting Church (KUC) offers dental care.

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Colossians 3: 12-17

TOPIC: The fourth day in Tahiti

March 8th 1782, Native Americans in Gnadenhutten, Ohio, who had converted to Christianity are killed by Pennsylvania militiamen in retaliation for raids carried out by other Indian tribes. March 8th 1797, the mood of gathering and fellowship continues in Tahiti, but hosts and guests begin to ponder what they could offer each other that has significant value in order to keep the peace.

March 8th 1971, The Fight of the Century between Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali commences.

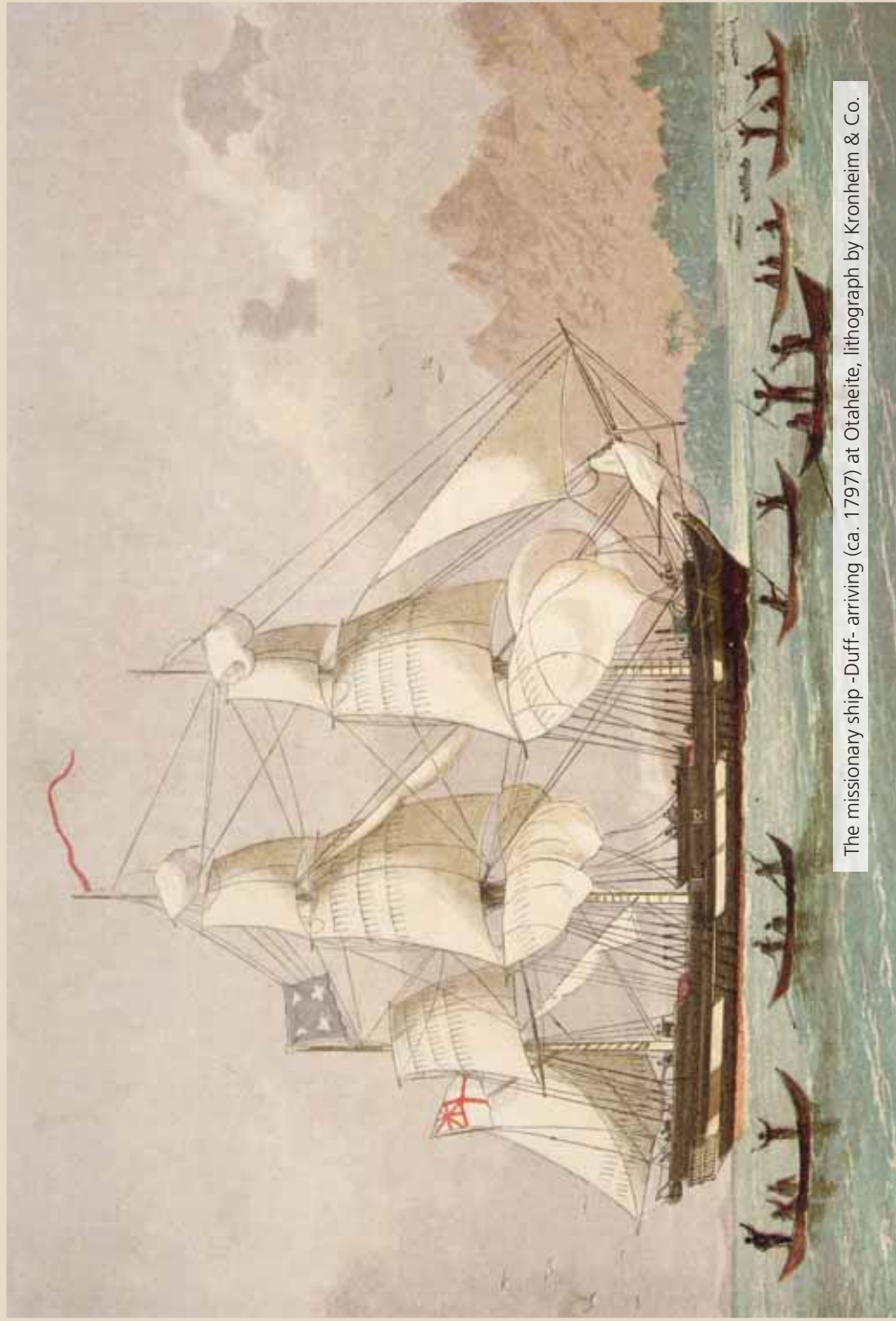
Prayer:

Wherever my neighbours and I are in dispute,
Whenever I am in conflict with my family,
Where my relationships and friendships break down,
Make me a person of peace and reconciliation.

Joel Hoiore
Māōhi Protestant Church



Rev. Dr. Sangkhuma Hmar and wife, Rini, mission partner from the Presbyterian Church of India, to the Presbyterian Church of Wales.



The missionary ship -Duff- arriving (ca. 1797) at Otaheite, lithograph by Kronheim & Co.

My prayers and reflections on this week

9 March

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: James 3:13-18

TOPIC: The fifth day in Tahiti

March 9th 1797 in Tahiti is more or less a day of sorrow, nostalgia and mixed feelings from the missionaries' side.

"Hina Matua, the widow of Ariipaea (brother to Pomare II), accompanied by two chief women, paid the missionaries a visit. Ariipaea was much attached to the English; and his widow, supposing us sorry for his loss, on entering the cabin burst into tears, and continued this expression of grief till we all sympathized with her."

March 9th 1831, The French Foreign Legion is established by King Louis Philippe to support his war in Algeria.

March 9th 1841, The U.S. Supreme Court rules in the United States v. The Amistad case that captive Africans who had seized control of the ship carrying them had been taken into slavery illegally.

Prayer:

When we do violence to someone else's identity or culture;
When we think our way of believing is better than someone else's;
When in sharing our faith story we rubbish other people's way of believing;
Come Prince of Peace and deliver us from our way of seeing and doing
So that we may see with fresh eyes, think with new understanding,
That we may live together in harmony.

Joel Hoioire
Māōhi Protestant Church



Rev. Terry Jin, mission partner from the Presbyterian Church of Korea to the Congregational Federation.

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 9:1-7

TOPIC: The sixth day in Tahiti

March 10th 1797, in Tahiti, the will to encounter and exchange continues in the usual manner of assessing yet and appreciating one another's stuff, behaviour and faith.

"Today the captain landed for the purpose of presenting some shewy dresses to the young king and his wife. On taking out the dress for the queen, she instantly alighted from the man's shoulder but O Tu thought little of them, saying an axe, a musket, a knife and a pair of scissors were more valuable."

March 10th 1909, by signing the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, Thailand relinquishes its sovereignty over the Malay states of Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis and Terengganu.

March 10th 1959, Tibetan uprising: fearing an abduction attempt by China, thousands of Tibetans surround the Dalai Lama's palace to prevent his removal.

Prayer:

Make me a channel of your peace,
Where there is hatred let me bring your love,
Where there is injury your pardon, Lord,
And where there's doubt true faith in you.

Joel Hoioire
Māōhi Protestant Church



Miss Jennifer Ayana McCalman, mission partner to the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa from the Guyana Congregational Union, served as Communications and Justice Advocacy Officer.

11 March

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Romans 12:17-21

TOPIC: The seventh day in Tahiti

March 11th 1641, Guaraní forces living in the Jesuit reductions defeat bandeirantes loyal to the Portuguese Empire at the Battle of Mbororé in present-day Panambí, Argentina.

March 11th 1797, in Tahiti, the first Sunday, guests and hosts convened together in order to enter in a rather more intense religio-theological dialogue concerning the universal message of the British God.

"The Sunday passed very quietly. The natives, with the king and queen, attending, and conducting themselves in peace and good order upon the important subject of mission it was agreed that Mr. Jefferfon should address them through the medium of Andrew the Swede. Finding the discourse directed to them they put forward extremely pertinent questions. They asked, whether the message of the British God was to the servants as well as to the king and chiefs? They were answered in the affirmative. That the missionaries were the messengers of the only true God, notwithstanding, a merciful God. O Tu was present, but his stubborn, unteachable nature seemed to be difficult for any impression to be made upon."

March 11th 1845, Flagstaff War: Unhappy with translational differences regarding the Treaty of Waitangi, chiefs Hone Heke, Kawiti and Māori tribe members chop down the British flagpole.

Prayer:

We give thanks for the sharing of the good news of Christ throughout the world. We give thanks for the Council for World Mission, CWM's member churches, local congregations and people around the world. That CWM, it's partners and colleagues might bring peace to our troubled world.

Joel Hojore
Māōhi Protestant Church



Rev. Prof. Dr. Roderick Hewitt teaches at the University of KwaZulu-Natal South Africa - mission partner from the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands to the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa.

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 11:1-9

TOPIC: Making a Name

The narrative of the tower of Babel is one of the narratives that is frequently used, especially when we talk about the human sin of rebellion against the sovereignty of God. In that perspective we see the building of the tower as a plan to reach heaven and to be like God, to be able to see all things, to make a name for themselves and to be known as being able to accomplish anything.

This narrative presents to us the biggest ever project to be attempted on record. The building of the city and the tower at the same time is one huge undertaking. We all know that the sub titles were not part of the original text of the Bible, I would rather prefer to title it the "Failed Project."

This narrative presents to me an effort for a better life, maybe to ensure safety and the security of the people. But at the same time, we can see that with such huge undertakings, a lot of preparations, proper planning and budgeting are necessary. A huge workforce is needed made of persons who are either willing to work or are forced to work. There is a clear division of the people, the majority being the labourers, then there are the planners, the overseers and the minority who make the demands and who have the power over the people. Usually those in the minority are the powerful and the rich who are the main beneficiaries of such projects.

This narrative reminds us of the main intentions behind the industrial revolution, the main force behind the globalization project, which works under the guise of eradicating poverty when the reality is for the benefit of a very few. It aims at turning the world into a global village where the products of multi-national corporations are highly promoted and sold at the expense of the lives of the poor and the marginalized. Similarly we find ourselves trying to combat the issue of Climate Change and sea level rise, which is caused mainly by destroying the environment under such greedy attitudes.

Prayer:

Lord we ask your guidance to maintain our concerns for the poor and disadvantaged in any grand scheme we undertake. Help us to be aware of how our actions affect others. Amen.

Rev Tafue Lusama
Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu

13 March

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 9:11

TOPIC: Taking Responsibility

I have been advocating in my country from community to community on the issue of climate change for many years now, and when I started visiting the communities and congregations and talking about sea level rise and climate change, I had a sense that the people were not taking the issue seriously. When asked if they believe that the climate is changing and that the level of the sea is rising, they would always respond by referring to the narrative of the flood and especially to the rainbow covenant.

It is true that this narrative has been looked at as an assurance of God's promise not to repeat the incident of a global flood that would take so many lives not only of humans but a total destruction of all living things. I would like us to re-visit this narrative and ask ourselves two important questions: "Who made the promise?" "Did Noah make a promise?"

If we read the narrative, after the flood, Noah made a sacrifice to God, which was pleasing to God, and God made a covenant not to repeat this incident even if humans deserve to be punished with such extreme measures because of their actions. God promised to withhold himself from punishing all creation just for the sins and the wrong doings of humans. Humans will have to face the consequences of their own actions. The rainbow is the symbol of God's faithfulness to that covenant. As long as we see the rainbow, as Christians we are reminded of God's faithfulness.

On the other side, was there a promise not to repeat the sins that caused the flood in the first place?

If we hold on to our belief that the rainbow covenant is an assurance that nothing of such magnitude will happen, we will end up blaming God for causing the climate to change and the level of the sea to rise and submerge islands and destroy lives.

Prayer:

Loving God, forgive us for displeasing you in our actions. We ask for your wisdom and guidance as we respond to the effects of climate change. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Rev Tafue Lusama
Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 2:15

TOPIC: Meeting our Greed instead of our Need

There are two common positions which do not agree with the original intentions of this text. There is the interpretation that the earth was created solely for the benefit of humans, and that the earth and the resources in it are infinite. This interpretation has given rise to the negative attitude that we have adopted for years towards mother earth. It gives sanctions and endorsement to the greed and avaricious attitude we have to ravishing mother earth to meet our greed.

Secondly, there is the interpretation that the creation of humans was for the sole purpose of rulership on this earth. We have been so biased in the way we relate to the whole of creation because we believe that all other things were created to the good of humans, therefore it is our divine duty to exploit and destroy the earth if it needs be for our benefit and comfort.

The above theological beliefs are endorsements for actions which have caused problems in our environment. It is clear from the text that all things were created before us, and we are placed on the earth and given the role of taking care of God's creation, to cultivate and guard it. This is the divine responsibility that God gave us as stewards of His creation. To do otherwise is to act against the divine will of God.

Prayer:

Creator God, may we be diligent stewards in preserving the environment which you have placed in our care. May we act out of love for you, instead of self-serving motivations.

Rev Tafue Lusama
Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Romans 16:17,18

TOPIC: Faith and Duty go Hand in Hand

The world is divided between people with two kinds of positions, as is usually the case in many issues. There are those who are strong supporters of Mother Earth and the environment, and there are those who preach a different message of scepticism. Where the strong activists provide facts and proof of the problem and even try to work out solutions to correct the wrong we have done to the environment, the sceptics on the other side do not need to win an argument, they just need to create doubt in the minds of the people which will lead to inaction and delays.

Paul is reminding us in the text to guard our faith very carefully, and to see that the evil one's tactic is to create division. Division within the Christian faith is very dangerous, for it will lead us to spend a lot of energy and time arguing rather than doing something helpful and concrete to reflect our faith in action. Sometimes the sceptics only create doubt because it benefits them financially, for they are being paid by the powerful to silence critique by manipulating the facts, by spreading a false viewpoint.

This influences our response to the issue of climate change. Our faith in God's sovereign rule and our Christian duty to creation are two realities that cannot be separated, they should go hand in hand. Our loyalty to the Gospel has to be reflected in our relationship with the whole of creation.

Prayer:

Creator God, forgive us for separating our faith in you from our relationship with creation. Grant us wisdom to act responsibly in demonstrating faith in you as we preserve our environment.

Rev Tafue Lusama
Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Leviticus 26: 14-16

TOPIC: Which Side will you Choose?

Throughout the Old Testament, we find a theory that lies underneath most of its teachings - a belief that if you are righteous before God you will be blessed, and if you are unrighteous before God you will be cursed. God severely punishes the sinners and abundantly rewards and blesses the righteous. This is known as the Theory of Retribution.

This theory is reflected in our chosen text for today. The writer of Leviticus saw it proper to bring up this reminder as a form of exhortation to the people. This makes sense if we relate ourselves to the holiness of our God. But it raises questions if we read it in the context of climate change and sea level rise. The rising sea level leaves some of the poorest countries at risk of losing their whole country. These most vulnerable countries are island nations with very low elevations of their lands above sea level. Most of them if not all, are under developed countries according to the United Nations categorization. They do not have any natural resources, they do not have any factories nor do they have any part in creating this problem. In other words, even though they were innocent in the face of this challenge, they will be the first to be punished for the sins of others. Why would this happen if God only punishes the unrighteous?

We have to look at the struggles that our Lord Jesus went through to understand that the vulnerable of any situation of injustice are the main focus of Jesus' salvation acts. We have to see that Jesus fought against an unjust system that undermines the rights of the people to live life to its fullness. This indicates that there are two perspectives to this issue, the oppressed and the oppressor, and Jesus is always on the side of the oppressed. We have to choose on which side we will fight.

Prayer:

Lord God, open our eyes and minds to understand not only the facts but also the feelings of humanity as we are affected by climate change. May we choose the side of justice and work for fullness of life for all creation.

Rev Tafue Lusama
Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu

17 March

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: John 3:16

TOPIC: Holistic Salvation

One of the problems that we have is the over spiritualizing of the Gospel, where we see the Church and individual Christians as having the role of sending souls to heaven rather than engaging with the reality of what is happening here and now.

John 3:16 is one of the most quoted verses from the Bible, and it is usually quoted when we talk about faith and belief in God and the passport to the everlasting life. We tend to ignore the first part of the verse where it says that God's love is not confined to humans only, but the whole of creation.

In context, we see that God's love goes beyond humans, it includes the whole of creation, and Christ's coming, was to set the whole of creation free from the bondage of slavery. The love of God which was manifested in the incarnation was a divine mission to set things right, to fight against the evil dominance of unrighteousness and injustice.

To believe and have faith in the sacrificial act of God through Christ should be a source of strength and enlightenment for any Christian to see that salvation through Christ is a holistic salvation that is inclusive of the whole of creation. Life in its fullness should therefore be viewed as a call to all to play their part in bringing salvation to the whole of creation.

Prayer:

Saviour God bring us into a full understanding of your sacrifice and may we be agents of reconciliation by affirming our correct relationship with all of creation. Amen.

Rev Tafue Lusama
Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 12:12

TOPIC: Healing the World

The analogy used by the Apostle Paul in comparing the body of a human being to that of the Body of Christ is one that shows how deep Paul was thinking theologically. The simple and obvious medical explanation used as the basis of this analogy really portrays his ability to bring home his message of responsibility and unity in diversity which should form the basis of how one Christian should respond to the other.

It is so true that when a member of the whole body is in pain, the whole body reacts in such a way that healing takes place. One part of the body cannot exist by itself, it exists for the whole body. The parts of the body, though diverse in their roles and responsibilities, unite in one body. Such should be the Body of Christ, which is the Christian Church. All around the world, we claim to be followers of Christ, to be faithful members of the one visible Body of Christ. Such claims should come with our commitment to our responsibilities to each other. The whole Christian body should react in such a way that should bring about total healing to the pain and the sufferings of members of the same body.

It is unthinkable to see Christians denouncing the struggle of members of the same body to simply survive the onslaught of the negative impacts of climate change and sea level rise. When we evidence faith in a way that undermines the survival and the assurance of life in its fullness to people, then we should revisit our faith in Christ. It is critically important to play our own roles in the healing process that formed the core of Christ Jesus' mission of salvation.

Prayer:

Loving God, help us to be consistent in living and loving in accordance with our faith. May we act in ways that bring about healing in the Body rather than pursuing selfish ambitions which deny others fullness of life.

Rev Tafue Lusama
Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu

19 March

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 5: 43 -48

TOPIC: God's Love for all People

Reflection:

There is more hatred and extreme fundamentalism in religions than before. A pastor from Iraq and his family said they are under continuous threat from his Muslim fundamentalist neighbors. Religious minorities in many nations tend to be under some kind of oppression. The hatred and violence among religions is not always because of faith but due to social, political and economic reasons. Christians may not always be aggressive, but they also hate people of other faiths and direct unjust behavior towards them. In *The Religion of God*, Riaz Ahmed Gohar Shahi said, 'God's love supersedes all religions and it is the core of all religions.'

In today's passage Jesus teaches us how to love our neighbor. In Jewish teaching neighbors are your own people. Jesus teaches us that neighbors may be outside our religion, race and country, illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). All people of the world are children of and made in the image of God. The Sun shines on all as rain also falls on everything to sustain life. Our duty is to love our neighbors, including our enemies. Jesus expects more from his followers than He does from people of other faiths and atheists. Sacrificial expressions of love unite us with Jesus Christ.

'The fact that religions, which usually have at their core a promotion of tolerance and peace, have been exploited to carry out violence clearly indicates that individuals and groups have not discovered the true "peace message" that is inherent in almost every religion.' (Cilliers, Ch. 3, p. 55 in Smock, 2002¹)

Prayer:

Almighty God, we thank you for your unconditional love for us and for all people of our earth. Forgive us for our wrong behavior and hatred for the people of other religions, race and ethnicity. Use us as your instruments to bring peace in our land and beyond. Amen.

Rt. Rev. Paul S. Sarker
Church of Bangladesh

¹ Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding, US Institute of Peace Press, 2002

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: John 17: 20-23

TOPIC: Jesus' Prayer for Unity

Reflection:

Today there are many denominations. The Church splintered through the centuries not only because of doctrinal differences but also due to greed, power, money and other interests. We talk about unity in diversity in unity but unity eludes us. We sheep-steal and harbor rivalries. We need to return Jesus, the center of the Church, the Body of Christ. Unity is a gift of God given through Christ. His earnest prayer in John 17:20-16 is for all his followers through the ages to unite as believers.

Jesus prays for the kind of unity that He maintains with God the Father. We, as children of God adopted by grace through Christ must live in unity to remain in fellowship with God and to have unity among ourselves.

Without love for our brothers and sisters in Christ, we can neither grow spiritually nor glorify God. The glory of God cannot be revealed or shine through us if we live in isolation from each other. We are not to glorify ourselves but to glorify God. Unity removes focus from us and turns it God-ward.

To preach the gospel of Christ is to bear witness to the scattered flock of this broken world. Jesus prays, 'the world may believe that you have sent me'. Only through unity can we witness to Christ. In today's world, Christians influenced by the secularism, open market economy (Empire) and international politics tend towards heroism, rather than the bond of love. Jesus' love can bring unity and peace.

Prayer:

Loving Father, forgive us for the divisions and brokenness among us. Pour your Holy Spirit upon us to renew our hearts and minds that we may be able to understand the depth of your love and come together to glorify you. Amen.

Rt. Rev. Paul S. Sarker
Church of Bangladesh

21 March

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Acts 2:42

TOPIC: Ecumenism: Unity in Prayer and Worship

Reflection:

Since the 1 July 2016 terrorist attack on international citizens at the Holy Artisan Restaurant in Dhaka, fanatical militants have threatened Christian missionaries and priests all over Bangladesh. Whenever there has been persecution, churches come together to pray to overcome such crises in Bangladesh. Prayer is the power behind the churches' life when persecuted. It is the greatest ecumenical witness for the churches in Bangladesh to present the gospel of Christ.

Acts of Apostles is a source book of the history of Christianity and early church life. Early churches were the model church of Christian life and witnessing about Christ. Another important thing is that the early church was a praying church. They were united in prayer and accepted the teaching of the Apostles. In the midst of differences, divisions and persecutions they united in prayers, which strengthened their faith and made them credible witnesses of gospel. In Acts 12, we read that the prayers of the faith community led to Peter's miraculous release from prison.

Every year from 18 to 25 January, all the global church observes a week of prayer for church unity. This is a visual sign of ecumenical relationship - the unity of churches in prayer, fellowship, love and service.

Activity:

Come together to pray across denominations. Work together on common issues such as floods, climate change and persecution that could stir up our unity and prayers.

Prayer:

O Lord bring us together as denominations to unite in prayer, love and service to the world. Help us to grow together, to face the challenges and persecution together in our day-to-day life. We pray for the church in Bangladesh and other suffering churches. Amen.

Rt. Rev. Paul S. Sarker
Church of Bangladesh

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 12:27

TOPIC: Ecumenism: Unity in Diversity

Reflection:

There is an old legend that when Jesus ascended to heaven the Archangel Gabriel said: 'Now that you have finished your work on earth, what provision have you made that it will not be in vain?' Jesus answered: 'I have left some disciples, Peter, James, John and others; they are my church.' Gabriel: 'But they are illiterate and simple men.' Jesus: 'I have given them my Spirit.' 'But what if they fail?' asked Gabriel again. Jesus replied, 'There is no other provision.'

Apart from the Church, there is no other provision to carry on the work Christ began on earth. Jesus had a physical body while on earth. While He is in heaven, God has given the Spirit so that the Church may be the Body of Christ to continue His work.

In 1 Corinthians 12:27, Paul speaks of the Church as Christ's body that holds within it the fullness of Christ who received the fullness of God. Thus, the Church is called to express the character of Jesus Christ.

Practical ecumenism, from Bangladeshi perspective, constitutes more than sixty denominations. What binds us together? We cannot find unity by attempting to reconcile denominations with centuries of historical baggage. We can only find unity by returning to the standard of faith and practice embodied by the New Testament with our shared faith and judgment as a guide.

None of us can do everything, but all of us can do something. When all the parts of the Body function properly, the many valuable parts unite by the Holy Spirit. May everything we do honor our Lord Jesus Christ.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we praise you for all our different communities who together confess, through word and deed, their faith in the risen Christ, who brings us life. May we so progress in our ecumenical commitment that we become more united both in our thanksgiving for creation and in our concerted action to uphold life. Amen.

Rev. Hemen Halder
Church of Bangladesh

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: 1 John 1:7

TOPIC: Ecumenism: Unity in Diversity

Reflection:

A story is told of an attempt at interfaith reconciliation between Roman Catholics and Jews that ended in disaster. The Roman Catholic cardinal invited the chief Rabbi to resolve the problem over a meal. Unfortunately, some of the food on the menu was taboo for the Rabbi - pork, crab etc. Every time such a dish was served the Rabbi would politely refuse and the Cardinal would insist, 'Try it, try it, it's very nice!' They got through the meal and when the Rabbi got up to leave he said, 'Cardinal that was a thoughtful meal, can I thank your good wife for having prepared it.' Deeply offended, the Cardinal said, 'But surely Rabbi you know that we are not permitted to marry?' To which the Rabbi responded, 'Try it, try it, it's very nice!'

To build trust across faiths and cultures, we must be informed about the others' practices, traditions and customs. Max Muller says, 'He who knows one, knows none.' What does interreligious understanding entail? It seeks wisdom in three ways: by going deeper into the faiths of others; deeper into one's own faith; and deeper into understanding the common ground. It requires continual engagement.

Bangladesh has experienced militant group attacks in which many people lost their lives. Religious minorities live in perpetual fear of death because of the rising of cultural, racial and religious prejudice.

Our Lord commanded us to love one another. It is only through accepting, appreciating and tolerating one another that the world will know that we are disciples of Christ. John wrote, 'But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin' (1 John 1: 7).

Prayer:

Loving God, you are in all places; fill all things and enrich all relationships across all divides. Treasury of blessings and Giver of life, come and dwell with us, cleanse us from the stain of division and separation and save us. Amen.

Rev. Hemen Halder
Church of Bangladesh

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: John 4:1-30

TOPIC: Dialogue Gives Life

Reflection:

We live in a multi-faith world. This is evident in Bangladesh. When we open the door we see more people of other faiths than Christians. We have informal and formal dialogue with them. Dialogues makes us understand and help one another.

In today's passage, Jesus dialogues with a Samaritan woman. Although the woman is, a Samaritan, Jesus has dialogue with her. The woman gradually realizes that the man talking to her is not just another man. The dialogue helps her to realize the truth that Jesus is not only a Jewish man but also a prophet and the Messiah. This happens because Jesus engages with her on her terms. In the same way when we have dialogue with our neighbors of other faiths, we affirm their life-story and encourage them to interact starting from their perspective. Many church members and I in Bangladesh have had the similar experiences. When we travel crowded city buses we sit next to people of other faiths and we have discussions. Slowly they may realize that we have different outlook and many times may ask, 'Are you a Christian?' And when our conversation flows naturally, we have found that many want to hear more about Jesus.

Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman helped her to receive salvation. In the same way by having dialogue with others, we may introduce them to Christ. The dialogue can be formal or informal. Through the passage, we understand the importance of respectful dialogue.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, lead me to have meaningful dialogue with my neighbors today. Help my church to organize formal and informal dialogue with people of other faiths in my community and use those platforms to reveal Your truth and to bring peace, harmony and mutual respect through understanding in my community.

Bishop Shourabh Pholia
Church of Bangladesh

25 March

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: John 13:34. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

TOPIC: Love is the Basis of Ecumenism

Reflection:

In 1 Cor. 12: 12-27, Paul tried to explain the Church as the body of Jesus Christ. He used the body as a symbol for unity. The body has various parts and is connected to the head. If there was no connection with head, it could not be a complete body. There is a love-connection between the body and the head and among the body parts. The head is Jesus Christ who loves the Church. Paul uses this image to teach about unity in church and to show that love binds us together as one body. In John 13:34, Jesus gave a new commandment, 'Love one another', He said.

Bangladesh has many different denominations. How can we bring unity among churches when we are so fragmented? Jesus Christ said our unity would only be visible if we love one another. When there is love, there is respect for others and when there is respect for one another, unity is possible. The unity of churches is a persuasive witness to the love of Jesus Christ in the world.

I saw a picture of many children sleeping peacefully. They were crammed in a small bed with their mother but they seemed content. True ecumenism is possible when we love God and love one another to the point of enduring inconvenience gracefully for the sake of others. Unity is built on costly love, which requires resolves and strength. Paul describes that love aptly in Corinthians 13. Ecumenism begins with the Triune God united with the whole universe as the oikos (household) of God.

Prayer:

Lord, let our life on earth mirror the life of eternal union of Father, Son and Holy Spirit that the Church may be a representation of Christ on earth. Forgive our failure to love, especially when things do not go our way. Amen.

Bishop Shourabh Pholia
Church of Bangladesh

Holy Week

SCRIPTURE: John 13: 1 – 17

TOPIC: Called to Serve

Watching news on television today leaves one wondering whether today's world has servant leaders. All we hear and see are images of war and conflict, mainly because of greed, selfishness, status, power and recognition. These issues range from political to social and religious and make it appear that leadership is more about being served than serving others.

Jesus, during the evening meal with the disciples, demonstrated servanthood when he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel around His waist. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he wore.

One would have expected somebody else to do the washing of the disciples' feet but Jesus humbled Himself to the extent of washing the disciples' feet. In reply to Peter's resistance not to have his feet washed by Jesus – He replied "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me". In verse 14 Jesus said "Now that I your Lord and your teacher have washed your feet, you also should one another's feet."

As we reflect upon Christ's call to serve, we need to remind each other that Christians are called to be servants of both God and people. It is however sad that most of us approach work, politics and life in general with the attitude of: "What can I get?" rather than "What do I bring or what can I give?"

When it comes to serving others, we often question the consequences. What we fail to realise is that as we serve others in business, family, work, church or politics we are actually serving God, especially if we do it without expecting a reward from the people we are serving.

Is it not Christians who are found working in business, politics, making decisions in government and elsewhere? Can you imagine what a world it would be - if some were to have a servant kind of attitude?

Questions:

1. How can the church influence politics with servant leadership?
2. Reflect on church leadership in relation to servant leadership

Prayer:

Lord God Almighty we bring before you leaders of all walks of life that you may transform their attitudes to be like that of Christ, as they lead people of different backgrounds so that love and selflessness may impact positively on the people they lead. Amen.

Rev. Derek Silwenga
Partner in Mission from United Church of Zambia serving in the
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

27 March

Holy Week

SCRIPTURE: Galatians 2: 19, 20

TOPIC: A Reminder to Preach the Gospel to Ourselves

Lately, there seems to be an increase in social and moral evils such as corruption, bribery and child abuse, not only outside the religious circles but within. In the case of child abuse, according to Wikipedia reports, a number of both minors and adults have come forward to bring cases of sexual abuse into the spotlight. Whether these allegations are true or not is not what is being discussed now.

The question is, are these things supposed to be heard of within the church?

The apostle Paul in Galatians 2 v 19 – 20 explains the life of a new creation in Christ Jesus “For through the law I died to the law that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me”.

As the church fights against evil and injustice the fight can only be successful if the church preaches the gospel to herself. It is time we began to preach and hear the gospel for ourselves. That the church too might be saved, love our neighbours, serve and forgive others with good news and integrity.

Reflection:

Psalm 119:105 and Romans 6: 1 – 6

Prayer:

Lord we pray that especially during Holy Week as we preach the gospel to the world, we may be reminded to always live the same gospel. That the church may be the light which shines in the dark parts of the world.

Rev. Derek Silwenga
Partner in Mission from United Church of Zambia serving in the
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

Holy Week

SCRIPTURE: Acts 2: 42 – 47

TOPIC: Sharing in the Midst of Economic Challenges

On Saturday the 17th June 2017 the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA), Moshupa Congregational Church in Botswana put to rest a dedicated woman of God who had served the Lord faithfully for more than 60 years. She died at the age of 108 years.

The funeral was characterised by speeches with great memories of her life. One thing that was gratifying was that one of the local church 'cell' groups known as 'kgalo' in local language had taken care of her last days. This included extending her house with a provision of a self-contained bedroom with toilet and shower, so that having been bedridden the family would not have to struggle to take her to the pit latrine outside. This gesture by members of the local church delighted not only the family members but also the community and of course mourners who attended the funeral. It was an act of generosity which demonstrated God's love and how the church can still sacrifice and share even in the midst of economic challenges.

In the book of Acts, the early church demonstrated God's love by the way they shared resources. They showed that the spirit of Jesus Christ was alive in them. The writer says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer". Everyone was filled with love at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Isn't this the mission we Christians are called to do? We are living in a world of economic challenges where no one is spared from the negative consequences. It is time for the church to intensify its mission towards the needy areas of society so as to demonstrate God's loving kingdom here on earth and make the gospel a reality.

Reflection:

Think of the needy people in your community and engage your church group and your family to demonstrate God's love in a more practical way. Remember that you can be part of the solution to somebody's prayer request.

Prayer:

Lord God as we reflect on the Christ's sacrificial death and his act of redemption help us to remember his expressed vision of fullness of life. In the midst of economic hardships help us to think about the less privileged and reach out to them in practical loving ways.

Rev. Derek Silwenga
Partner in Mission from United Church of Zambia serving in the
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

Holy Week

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 26: 47 – 54

TOPIC: Taking Peace to the Enemy's Territory

News carried on different networks in countries across the world includes stories of war. The situation in Syria is a case in point where many lives have been lost, property destroyed and which has sent many women and children seeking refuge, in very dangerous circumstances, to find safety in other places. On the other hand, we have big powers such as Russia and the USA supporting a side of their choice in this particular war. This international intervention brings more misery to already vulnerable people rather than peace.

In a different scenario, we see Jesus in the scripture reading, entering enemy territory with peace solutions. The story recalls Jesus being arrested in the garden of Gethsemane. Verse 47: "While He was still speaking a crowd came up and the man who was called Judas, one of the twelve was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss Him".

When Jesus' followers saw what was going to happen they said "Lord should we strike with our swords?" And one of them struck the servant of the high priest cutting off his right ear, but Jesus answered, "No more of this", and He touched the man's ear and healed him.

What a contrast, the world today is trying to solve conflict by perpetuating conflict. Jesus demonstrates love and peace by not only stopping His disciples from attacking Jesus' enemy but He goes further and heals the man.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace indeed. What an example he sets His followers who meet all manner of conflicts in family life, work and church. How do we enter such territories?

Only peaceful solutions will help the world and the wars and conflicts we experience today and that peace only comes when the love of Christ is reflected in people's lives and attitudes.

Reflection:

Reflect on the different approaches by the disciples on one hand and Jesus on the other towards the enemies in the garden of Gethsemane especially in the light of 2 Corinthians 5:16 – 19

Prayer:

Lord God help us to reflect your love and bring healing to the trouble torn parts of the world. Help our world leaders to enter each other's territories with messages of peace and reconciliation.

Rev. Derek Silwenga
Partner in Mission from United Church of Zambia serving in the
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

Good Friday

SCRIPTURE: Romans 3:25 – 26

TOPIC: Love and Reconciliation

If peace is not just the absence of war - then we cannot say there is peace in the parts of the world where there is no war.

We are living in a world of condemnation, where people condemn one another on a daily basis; they seek revenge; hatred, bitterness, and segregation are on the increase and all this is because of fallen humanity. The rate of divorce is getting higher and all this because love and reconciliation seem to fade away from people's minds. Sin seems to be governing people's attitudes and way of life.

The apostle Paul shows how Jesus has reconciled us to God. He says, "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of His blood to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate His righteousness because in His forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished". Surely, the death of our Lord Jesus on the cross demonstrated God's love and reconciliation which has brought us back to God. We deserved to die as the penalty for sin but Christ paid the penalty by dying for us as a sacrifice once and for all (Hebrews 9 v 26). We need to remember that as people who were once separated from God, Jesus provided reconciliation and brought us back into the fellowship with God.

As we reflect on Christ's love and reconciliation we need to examine our own lives. Are we trying to reconcile with other people with whom we have had differences? What about reconciling those in conflict with one another and working to bring healing where there is division? What about the unreached people of the world who need the message of love and reconciliation which Jesus brought to this world through His death on the cross?

Reflection:

1. As a part of the Body of Christ, how do you intend to reach out to the unreached i.e. the "very rich people" and the "poor of the poorest"?
2. How can we engage the church and the community in conflict management and resolution in light of the gospel?

Prayer:

God our Father, we pray that you may enable us by your grace to reach out to the unreached world with your message of love and reconciliation. Help and heal troubled families and marriages.

Rev. Derek Silwenga
Partner in Mission from United Church of Zambia serving in the
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa



Reconciliation'

In 1992, four years after the end of the Apartheid Regime, this sculpture was commissioned to mark the new beginning of South Africa.

A 1992 sculpture by Robert Broom, depicting a man in a dark, textured robe with his head bowed and hands clasped in prayer.

It is a sculpture created and built in the form of a man in a dark, textured robe with his head bowed and hands clasped in prayer.

「和解」のテーマは、アパルトヘイトの終結と南アフリカの新しい始まりを象徴しています。

この彫像は、1992年に制作されたもので、南アフリカの歴史と文化を表現しています。

この彫像は、1992年に制作されたもので、南アフリカの歴史と文化を表現しています。

Face to Face, UK 2017, courtesy of Joshua.

My prayers and reflections on this week

31 March

Holy Week

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 26:69 – 74

TOPIC: The Gospel is Word and Action

God is a God of relationships. That is why He sent Jesus, his Son, to bring reconciliation. However, in some churches, relationships only work during worship when people sing and pray and worship together. Fellowship starts and ends at church thus making it difficult to cultivate genuine relationships. Perhaps we even meet a church member we fellowship with outside church and pretend to have never seen them before.

During Jesus' trial Peter withdrew his relationship from Jesus when he was confronted by individuals. Verse 69 says Peter was sitting in the courtyard and a servant girl came and told him that he had been with Jesus. But Peter denied it, "I don't know what you are talking about". Peter denied Jesus three times.

Maybe he feared a loss of identity with others he knew. Don't we find ourselves denying what the gospel requires of us so that we can fit in with others' expectations or to make things easier? We fear shame, pain and suffering so we take the easier option. We protect our own space and comfort but in the process, miss the opportunity to create and maintain relationships with other Christians. Perhaps we give more attention and time to our own privacy than the body of Christ and so deny the gospel.

Do we preach the gospel of love by word yet disown the same with our actions? We need to reflect that we are the body of Christ whose head is Jesus Himself. Hence our relationships should reflect the gospel and not deny it. Our fellowship and relationships should be genuine and go beyond church services. It is only then that the world will truly see the body of Christ at work.

Question:

What lessons can we draw from 1 Corinthians 12:12 – 27 in terms of relationships within the body of Christ?

Prayer:

Lord God help us to demonstrate that we are part of the body of Christ in all areas of our lives by proclaiming the gospel in word and deed.

Rev. Derek Silwenga
Partner in Mission from United Church of Zambia serving in the
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

Easter Day

SCRIPTURE: Luke 4:18, 19

TOPIC: The Power of the Resurrection of Jesus

In the history of the world there has only been one empty grave whose former occupant, Jesus Christ, rose from the dead. This resurrection comes with the ingredients and power of Jesus' mission.

Beginning his ministry in Nazareth Jesus read from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me because He has anointed me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind. To set the oppressed free. To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

This manifesto was fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus Christ who demonstrated God's total mission to all creation. He met the needs of the total person; spiritually, socially, physically, etc. This was life in all its fullness!

Perhaps you wonder why this scripture is being used on Easter Sunday. Firstly, because the same Jesus who came to fulfil what was in the scripture of Isaiah - died and was buried. On the third day, He rose again with the same manifesto continuing to be fulfilled today by the risen Lord through the church. This continuing mission demonstrates the ongoing power of Christ's resurrection.

The world today is still being saved from injustice and oppression, sight is still being restored, and people are still rediscovering freedom and the ability to stand for themselves. This Easter Day we are called to walk in newness of life by our risen Lord who still transforms lives every day.

The church should be encouraged to do God's mission by demonstrating the life and works of the risen Lord who shall come again for the faithful.

Indeed, He is risen and there is power in His resurrection.

Reflection:

Reflect on the love and works of Jesus Christ after resurrection in John 20:24 – 30

Prayer:

Father, God we pray that you may rekindle your Holy Spirit in us, so that the works of our risen Lord may be evident in us and that many may come to believe.

Rev. Derek Silwenga
Partner in Mission from United Church of Zambia serving in the
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

2 April

Worship & Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 17.1-7

TOPIC: Symbols in Scripture: Water

There are many symbols used in the Scriptures to provide vivid illustrations of God's relationship to the world. Jesus used simple everyday things of life to reveal spiritual truths. In the next seven (7) days I will be highlighting a few of these symbols so that we can meditate on God's care and provision for us and give our appropriate responses through worship.

The first symbol that I have chosen is water. Water is seen as vital for all life; refreshing and nourishing. In the Scriptures it is used as both positive and negative symbols revealing the importance of its usage in the correct amount as well as dangerous in the oversupply of water. In Genesis we read the story of the great flood on the earth, destroying all life in its path except Noah and his family who were protected by God because of Noah's obedience in building the ark.

In our present context, we are experiencing natural disasters, like flooding, tsunamis and earthquakes. The industrial revolution and subsequent greed of human beings, have contributed to some of these disasters by the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. This has resulted in global warming and climate change. This effect has caused the earth's average temperature to rise by almost 1°C.

In today's reading we learn of the Israelite's need for water in the wilderness and God's liberating power with the dramatic rescue from slavery in Egypt, to the land that God had promised them. During their journey to the Promised Land, they complained to God about Moses' leadership and the lack of water. So God instructed Moses to use his staff and strike a rock to provide life-giving thirst quenching water for the people. Stories of God's divine rescue are replicated many times in the saving actions of God as one who cares for his people and provides for their needs.

Questions and actions to consider:

We have received God's salvation – healing, forgiveness and peace through Christ's ministry and sacrificial death.

1. Do we continue to trust that God watches over and cares for us?
2. How can we show our thanks and praise for God's provision of water by being good stewards of this precious resource?

Ideas - using water sparingly and not wasting it, caring for our environment to keep it clean, reduce our carbon footprint to reduce global warming, support Water Aid.

Prayer:

Loving God, 'As the deer pants for water, so our souls long after you.' We praise and thank you that you are the source of life and provide for our needs. Help us to trust in you in times of plenty and in drought as we meditate on Amos 5.24 'But let justice roll down like waters, and goodness like an ever-flowing stream.'

Rev'd Dr Catherine Ball
United Reformed Church

3 April

Worship & Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 16:1-12, 31-32

TOPIC: Symbols in Scripture: Bread

One of the homeliest symbols in the Scriptures is bread. It evokes a warm picture of someone baking homemade bread with its pleasant and inviting aroma.

In our reading today, the ancient Hebrew people have been rescued from slavery in Egypt and are wandering in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land; the land God has promised to them. During the journey they lacked adequate food and water and so complained bitterly to their leaders Moses and Aaron comparing the pots of meat and vegetables that they used to eat in Egypt with the scarcity that they are now experiencing.

It is amazing how quickly they have forgotten the abuse and heavy-handed oppression that they had experienced under the Egyptians. Their anxiety about survival and the immediacy of food had completely cancelled their long-term hope for freedom and well-being. How often do our own immediate anxieties and concerns override our trust and faith in God who is watching over us and caring for us?

God responds by saying that he had heard their cries and will provide them with food, 'bread from heaven'. With this gift God 'tests' the Hebrews in order to see whether they are prepared to receive the bread and life under different conditions. Instead of the hoarding of some which creates insufficient supply for others, they will have enough for their survival.

Prayer:

Generous God, help me in times of trouble and uncertainty, to keep trusting in your care and provision. Enable me to receive your many blessings with thankfulness and with grace that I may extend those blessing to others. Amen.

Rev'd Dr Catherine Ball
United Reformed Church

Worship & Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 5:1-7

TOPIC: Symbols in Scripture: Vineyard

A vineyard in the Middle East was a symbol of peace and prosperity. God's people had been given their promised land, but after the reign of King David's son Solomon they were divided into two kingdoms; Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. The prophet, on God's behalf, sings them a love song in which he compared both sets of peoples to a grape vine which the gardener planted in rich and fertile soil on a hill to receive the warmth from the sun and moisture from the rain. The owner waits for the harvest so that he may press the grapes to make sweet tasting wine, but the vine instead produces bitter and wild grapes.

The tone changes when the prophet, in the role of the owner, accuses the vineyard, in spite of the owner's nurturing care, of failing to fulfil its purpose. The conclusion is that God's people were to show justice and goodness, but they have instead lived by violence. God's plan for them was that they should be a society based on fairness and equity to reflect God's goodness and kindness. Instead, they became like other societies; the rich and powerful taking advantage of the weak. The results of the failure of justice and goodness are devastating. The image of the vineyard brings in sharp focus the disobedience of human beings to God's instructions as the grapes reverted to a patch of dried up overgrown briars and thorns.

In our society the gap between rich and poor continues to widen. Do we support Fair Trade and other movements to work for justice and fairness today?

Exercise:

The Lord Jesus described himself as the True Vine - the one who DID bear good fruit - the fruit of justice and mercy. In the sacrament of Holy Communion we drink wine, the symbol of fruit of the vine to remember him. Pause, to reflect on how you are bearing fruit in your life.

Prayer:

Lord, we offer ourselves to you and as we worship you with our lives in faithful discipleship, may we bear fruit, fruit that will last. Amen.

Rev'd Dr Catherine Ball
United Reformed Church

5 April

Worship & Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: 1 Peter 2:1-10

TOPIC: Symbols in Scripture: Stones

In Isaiah 28.16 and Psalm 118.22 the foundation stone is used as a metaphor to describe the true and good leadership that God will establish to bring his people security and rest. In the Gospels: Matt. 21.22, Mark 12.6, Luke 20.17 and in our reading today, this metaphor is attributed to Jesus. He is the foundation stone that the builders rejected. The builders were the corrupt religious and political leaders who had not trusted in God to lead the people with justice and integrity. Jesus is described as the 'living and precious' stone. He is not still and cold, he is alive and life-giving. He is the true leader who showed mercy and goodness and sacrificially gave of himself for others.

Then the metaphor is shifted to Christ's followers. We become living stones built into a spiritual house, where God is worshipped and honoured. Even though church life in our society is declining and depreciating, we are precious in God's sight. And Christ is our cornerstone, because the whole building rests on him and takes its design from him. The hope to which Christians belong is a living hope, and the faith that Christians demonstrate is more precious than gold. If we picture the smooth stones by the sea on Aldeburgh beach, Suffolk, we become aware that each is slightly different in shape and size, but together they make a beautiful picture of an amazing seaside.

As God's people, we have been saved and made secure in God's love by Christ's actions of mercy and self-giving on our behalf and so we as his followers are called to live responsibly, in light of that grace. This means living by different standards: getting rid of old selfish habits of malice, insincerity, envy and slander which destroy the mutual love we are to have toward each another. This type of behaviour never fails to witness to God's love and grace.

Our identity is found in Christ and the Christian community is ours. Regardless of age, culture, ethnicity or gender, we are all accepted and valued. By God's grace, we will find mercy and grace and be included in God's dear people.

Prayer:

Living Lord, thank you for being the foundation of our faith. Help me to be a true living stone, following your pattern of life and ministry, being selfless and honest and fair toward others. Help us as local churches to be people of service toward others, and work with your Holy Spirit to bring people to you. Amen.

Revd Dr Catherine Ball
United Reformed Church

Worship & Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 13:31,32

TOPIC: Symbols in Scripture: Trees

The imagery of trees is used in the Scriptures in a variety of ways, for example to symbolize life, to depict the Israelites as a family tree, and also the coming kingdom of God. Here in Matthew's gospel it is used in a parable by Jesus as an object lesson to teach people about the kingdom of God.

The mustard plant is an annual herb that has very small seeds that can produce a shrub from two to six feet in height and in exceptional cases up to ten feet. Jesus is stretching people's imagination as he contrasts the tree image with a tiny mustard seed and plant. The surprising feature is that the future tree-like glory is in continuity with the present smallness and ordinariness of the mustard plant. The presence of the expected kingdom coming in Jesus and his followers may not be particularly noticeable or notable, but the kingdom will come nevertheless. A king that rides a donkey rather than a war horse is here symbolized by a garden herb instead of a great tree.

How often do we look at the decline of the Church in the West and each of the mainline denominations in Britain, and think that the Church is dying and wonder if it will survive more than a couple of generations? Yet we can trust Christ's promise that the kingdom is coming, even if secretly and invisibly, and the 'gates of hell' will not prevail against it! This message should give us courage and the motivation to persevere in the faith, in our own personal discipleship and in our witness to others. In other parts of the world, particularly China and Africa, the church is growing, so we should take heart, as one day the kingdom will come in glory and majesty!

Prayer:

Loving God, we thank you that Jesus is Lord over all. In a world where there is conflict and suffering, give us eyes to see the work of your Spirit drawing people to yourself and transforming situations for good, and help us join in with your work in our faithful devotion to you in generous service of others. Amen.

Rev'd Dr Catherine Ball
United Reformed Church



Life - Through our hands by John Adams, (acrylic on canvas).

My prayers and reflections on this week

7 April

Worship & Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Mark 10:17-31

TOPIC: Symbols in Scripture: Money

Money is used in Scripture in a literal as well as a metaphorical way. It is usually used in a negative sense, as a barrier to discipleship, 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' Mark 10:24. It is also used in a positive way, in that a lost and found coin symbolizes the kingdom of God. In Ecclesiastes wealth is seen as a gift from God. And also in the early church, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to share their wealth with the church in Jerusalem which is needy, so that they may be blessed by their act of generosity.

In our reading a rich man is challenged to give up his wealth to become a follower of Christ, but despite his devotion to the Word of God, he cannot bring himself to accept Jesus' call and so he walks away sad. Wealth includes not only money and belongings, but also social status and power over others. It is also the socio-economic prestige that is associated with money that he cannot let go of in order to be Jesus' disciple.

We Christians in the rich West are challenged by Jesus' uncompromising words here about the love of money. Do wealth and prestige hinder our discipleship? All Christians are to think seriously about their stewardship of money and material possessions. As difficult as it is, Christians must resist the pressures of a consumer culture, which generates perpetual needs for more and newer possessions. Our excess consumption may deprive others of resources they need just to survive. How ready are we to share with others?

Prayer:

Loving God, you have given us so much - food, shelter, housing, cars, mobile phones, computers and TVs. We thank you for our many blessings. Forgive us for our accumulation of wealth, which breeds inequality and hardship for others. Give us wisdom to know ways in which we can give and be blessed in giving. For Jesus' sake.

Revd Dr Catherine Ball
United Reformed Church

Worship & Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 5.14-16

TOPIC: Symbols in Scripture: Light

Light in the Scriptures is a symbol of goodness and insight. Isaiah 9.2 "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light... For a child has been born for us who is Prince of peace... will establish David's kingdom in righteousness and justice". Jesus refers to himself as the servant describes as a 'light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind and free prisoners who sit in darkness.' Luke 4.18.

In today's reading Jesus' people are called the 'light of the world.' The primary function of light is not to be seen, but to let things be seen as they are. Israel's mission to other nations is to show God's love and justice. Now both the church of Jews and Gentiles are charged with this responsibility. Our religion today is not only personal and private - it is to be set on a hill where it can be seen by all.

How often do we think of our faith as our own personal possession and view our local church like an introverted secret club for like-minded people? Disciples are called to the active mission of letting our light shine. We are recipients of God's divine instructions to tell others that Christ has come into the world to bring healing, forgiveness and renewal. Our deeds of goodness, mercy, kindness and justice are not for our own sake, but to bring the light of God's grace to the world for the glory of God.

Prayer:

Gracious God, thank you for Jesus, the Light of the World. We thank you that he gave of himself in a ministry of teaching and healing to teach us about your love and justice. Help us as his followers to continue his ministry and may we reveal your glory to the world. Amen.

Rev'd Dr Catherine Ball
United Reformed Church

9 April

Prayers for the World

SCRIPTURE:

TOPIC:

In the face of tragedy - natural disasters and destruction and dishonouring of life caused by human action, we join the psalmist in asking:

"When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Psalm 11:3)

That of course, is making the assumption that in relation to those tragedies our hands are clean. It would make sense that the first step is introspection leading to confession:

"Have mercy on me O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." (Psalm 51: 1,2)

As we move through the stages of sorrow at the distress in so many places in the world, we ought to arrive at the place of seeking God for wisdom.

"Hear my cry O God, listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you. I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I." (Psalm 61: 1,2)

Prayer:

This week, we turn our minds to some of the points of pain in the world which have made it into the news. May our hearts not be hardened or our senses anesthetized by the preponderance of bad news. May we go to prayer to the One in whom we believe, our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

Mrs. Karen Francis
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Prayers for the World

SCRIPTURE: Romans 8: 39

TOPIC: Extreme Weather & the Caribbean

Many islands across the Caribbean have had to grapple with extreme weather conditions, and families have had to deal with personal loss. It has been reported that the island Barbuda was left uninhabitable, deserted, and empty for the first time in 300 years in 2017. What loss! What pain! What devastation! When we look at the crises that natural disasters around the world continue to create, we ask, is God truly with us in times of crisis?

Where was God when the disaster struck? Yet, in Romans 8: 39 God promises, “Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” What this says to me, is that when we go through pain, better believe it, God is in that pain. God feels everything we feel—is happy when we are happy and sad when we are sad. God is not a God who controls us, and if we take time to reflect, God is not the source of our miseries. Usually, and most likely, it is in our time of misery that we tend to call out to God; when we seek solace in God.

Yet we blame God for such disasters that devastate and destroy, such as hurricanes and floods which have left in their wake untold destruction in many parts of the world. Instead let us take a stance of doing our part to protect our ecology, to be responsible individuals who are cognizant of the environment, animals, flora and fauna.

When we see devastation, let us help our brothers and sisters in despair. Sharing each other's pain is our first responsibility, and it draws us closer to God. It means recognising the value of life and our duty of care in that very moment. Our sadness should not weaken our faith, let us use our voices and our action to uplift suffering people, and let us pray for greater wisdom in the conduct of our affairs.

Prayer:

Almighty God, we come before you with many questions even as we ask that you shield us under the cover of your wings. Grant within us the courage to persevere, help us to recognise our duty of care. Bring peace to those who've encountered loss. Cleanse our hearts and refocus our minds to be compassionate enablers of your ultimate will to build up your kingdom in love and mutual care. Amen.

Pearce Robinson
United Reformed Church

11 April

Prayers for the World

SCRIPTURE: 2 Samuel 13; Judges 19-21; Deut. 22:25-17

TOPIC: Sexual Harassment

Last year in the United States, a growing chorus of women came forward to expose and confront a high-profile Hollywood producer for his egregious and contemptable acts of sexual violence against them. As the number of his victims grew, a vast web of pain and a conspiracy of silence was revealed. Through the horror of these acts what we also see is that, when power and silence are combined, and people of good conscience do nothing, barbarism and abuses such as these go unanswered and unpunished. As a Christian in these moments I ask is the bible as silent as the accused producer's co-conspirators? Or does the bible deal directly with sexual violence against women?

What I found out is that the Bible openly addressed incidents of sexual violence against women. In fact many of these incidents either lead to wars of vengeance or acts of retribution against the violators. In 2 Samuel 13, King David's son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar. After hearing this, her brother Absalom kills Amnon to avenge her. In Judges 19-21 after a Levite's concubine is gang-raped and brutalized by Benjamites, the other tribes waged war against them after their brutality was revealed. It is safe to say the Bible takes a grim view of sexual violence. Further, it is codified in Deut. 22:25-17 (KJV): "...if a man find a betrothed damsel in the field, and the man force her, and lie with her: then the man only that lay with her shall die. But unto the damsel thou shalt do nothing; there is in the damsel no sin worthy of death: for as when a man riseth against his neighbour, and slayeth him, even so is this matter: For he found her in the field, and the betrothed damsel cried, and there was none to save her."

What the Bible lays out here is that a victim of sexual violence, even within the socio- historical context of the time was to be heard, and fully protected. The rapist on the other-hand was to face the ultimate punishment. God shield's the woman from blame and all shame and this is the model we ought to follow.

Prayer:

Lord, I thank you for this revelation, please open our hearts and mind to your divine laws and your perfect judgment. May the voices of all victims of sexual violence be heard and may your grace and comforting love be visited upon their lives. In Jesus' mighty name. Amen.

Pearce Robinson
United Reformed Church

Prayers for the World

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 42:3

TOPIC: Weeping with Sierra Leone

In August 2017, Sierra Leone experienced one of the worst mudslides and flooding in recent recorded history, killing more than 1,000 people, and devastating its capital, Freetown. In the wake of these coinciding events, many thousands were left without homes. As I reflect on this reality, it challenges me to ask the question, how do we reconcile this wanton loss of life against this question many people are asking... "if God is the God of love why did he allow this to happen?"

Reflecting on this question I was forced to look deep within and search myself. I believe that this is where personal and social responsibility become urgent. A lot of what is happening in the world is actually down to us — we, God's own people, are actually causing global warming. Human beings—individuals, corporations, nations, societies and governments need to take responsibility for the devastation that such events as mudslides and severe flooding cause.

Why does God allow this to happen?

Jesus became flesh so that we could have life; he died so that we could have life abundant. However, Jesus did not come to do everything for us; he came to show us the way. The expectation is that we would take up the responsibility of sustaining our lives and the lives of our neighbours. Jesus didn't heal everyone in Jerusalem, but he opened the eyes of those onlookers, giving them tools to continue the work he started in his time on earth.

The reality is that we all have free will- we can come to God or we can choose not to come to God. We can do things that affect the world in a good or bad way, and God allows it. If we didn't have free will, we would be robots. While we may not understand why God allows certain things to happen, we ought to recognise our responsibilities towards each other and choose a path that is meaningful and helpful, instead of selfish and destructive.

Prayer:

God of love, many in your world are suffering. You have equipped your people with many gifts and it is down to us to use these gifts to help others and to be your hands, feet, eyes and ears. We pray for all displaced people who require refuge, protection and healing. We ask that you strengthen those who have volunteered and provide them with the resources that they require. We ask that you help us to be compassionate neighbours. Amen.

Pearce Robinson
United Reformed Church

Prayers for the World

SCRIPTURE: 2 Chronicles 7:14

TOPIC: Rohingya

Over 700,000 Rohingya people (men, women and children) were forced to flee their homes in Myanmar's Rakhine province to Bangladesh. They fled rape, torture, extreme violence and genocide. This crisis is a major humanitarian catastrophe and it was born out of fear of difference, and indifference on the part of those charged with the responsibility to lead. Authoritarian military leaders in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society like Myanmar, who run the executive, have lost their way and appear to be leading the country down an uncertain and deadly path without an understanding of the benefits of diversity, maintaining peace and ensuring the safety of all people.

As an onlooker, it is clear that the Rohingya people are struggling, and have been struggling for decades and this ignorance eventually boiled over into something very ugly and unfathomable. As Christians, not just at the level of the global church, but at the level of the community and the wider congregation, have we done enough?

The account as obtained in 2 Chronicles 7:14 says: "If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."

What this crisis calls for is a Christian response to human suffering, it matters not where these people are from, their religion, race gender or status. As Christians we are called to respond as our brothers' and sisters' keeper. That is what Christ has showed us.

Prayer:

O Lord, we are the nations, and the day will come when we too may be struggling to overcome oppressive systems and prejudices that affect us personally. When we look at the world through an earthly lens it's sometimes impossible to be thankful for the positive impact that people's differences bring to our lives. I pray that one day we, the people of all nations, would begin to see the glory of God in each other. May we make an effort to be intentional about searching for the Imago Dei in each other's' difference. O God, we come before you to pray for the healing of the nations and for your glory to be reflected in those who have suffered atrocities, torture, and extreme violence. And let that glory shine through us Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Pearce Robinson
United Reformed Church

Prayers for the World

SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 10:13; John 3:16-17

TOPIC: US Opioid Crisis

A public health emergency was declared in the United States, which faced an opioid crisis in 2017. With over 60,000 deaths caused by drug overdoses in the 2016, the country braced itself for an increase in addiction and deaths as a result. Synthetic opioids account for more deaths of Americans under 50 than any other cause. In fact the opioid crisis in that country is causing more deaths than the HIV/AIDS crisis at its peak. Apart from applicable measures to bring down these heartbreaking numbers, Christians also have an obligation to help individuals deal with their addictions. 1 Corinthians 10:13 states: "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."

We must encourage our sisters and brothers in Christ, they must know that even as they struggle with addiction and drug abuse God is faithful and will not leave them to suffer alone but will guide us through even the darkest and heaviest of trials. More importantly we need to address the true root of this problem which lies in an unfulfilled spirit yearning for a deeper connection with a higher power but does not know where to point. John 3:16-17 reveals what we need to share with them to open them up to a life beyond addiction: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

God's love for his people is not conditional but is freely given and is eternal. We only have to outstretch our hands and accept it. No matter how deep into our addictions or temptations the Lord is here to bring us through and comfort us as we go. So as we face a serious crisis we also know the Lord has never and will never forsake us.

Prayer:

Lord, you are a God of comfort and wisdom, we pray for both as our brothers and sisters deal with life-threatening addictions and temptations. We pray that you comfort them in their time of need and that you give us the wisdom to help them effectively and lovingly. Lord we pray that your grace will be upon us, You are a sovereign God and we ask that your will be done in our lives. In Jesus' precious name. Amen!

Pearce Robinson
United Reformed Church

15 April

Prayers for the World

SCRIPTURE:

TOPIC:

"Why my soul are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God." (Psalm 42:5)

Prayer:

Lamentations:

God of hope in the face of despair
We turn our eyes to you
Desperately seeking your wisdom
We lament.

God of justice and righteousness
Our hearts bleed at the indignity of suffering
The perpetration of evil
The callous disregard for life
We lament.

God with the wounded hands
We weep for the broken body
The stained memories
The years which the locusts have eaten
We lament.

God of grace and abundant love
We catch a glimpse of peace
The promise of restoration
The taste of healing
We hope.

Mrs. Karen Francis
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 127: 3-5

TOPIC: A Gift from God

The 2015 Synod of the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands passed a resolution to develop a Child Protection Policy for the church. It was perceived as a policy that would protect our children and at the same time protect our leaders, most of whom are volunteers. For the United Church the formulation of this policy is more than just writing a statement or providing guidelines. It is a powerful commitment - a totally new strategy of engagement - the stated policy of a church that values its children and young people and therefore strives to protect them at all times.

The United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands is fully aware of the realities that face our children and youth and as a church community we are ensuring that we take appropriate measures to protect our children's rights and promote violence-free communities. In this, we are committed to work with the Governments of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, both societies' agencies, community groups, institutions, parents and families, to protect all our children.

This week as we focus on Youth & Children let us remind ourselves that Children are indeed 'a gift from God' and that we must value our young people and enable them to grow "in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and all the people" (Luke 2:52). In this we will allow them to experience the fullness of life that Christ came that all might have, including our young.

Jesus valued children and rebuked those who would not allow them to come to Him. Jesus used a child who was considered weak and dependent and without status and influence to teach His disciples about humility and sincerity of heart. Jesus also had strong words for those who would turn children away from faith in Him. (Matthew 18: 2-6)

Questions:

Reflect on the following:

1. What are some of the ways in which we deny our young fullness of life?
2. Do we truly embrace our young as gifts from God?
3. Are we valuing the things our young can teach us or are we despising them?

Prayer:

Lord, remind us that our children and youth are special to You and should also be special to us. Help us to love and care for them and provide them with opportunities that are life-affirming. Protect them physically and spiritually and may they recognize and appreciate their own value and worth. Amen.

Mrs. Rose Wedderburn
United Church in Jamaica & the Cayman Islands

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: 2 Samuel 13: 1 - 22

TOPIC: Am I Safe with You?

Hundreds of children and adults alike from the Southern Regional Mission Council of the UCJCI gathered on Sunday April 9, 2017 for the Children's Synodical Rally under the theme 'Am I Safe with You?'. Children and adults from several congregations marched through sections of the town shouting, 'Say No to Abuse'. The issue of child abuse has been a topical one for years, and while the children's agencies have managed to make headway, the number of abuse cases is still increasing. Guest speaker at the rally from Jamaica's Office of the Children's Registry made a call for persons to come forward with the information they have. "Today, we just want to support the United Church in this children's rally, encouraging the members to speak up and to speak out against child abuse, while encouraging the children to report to a responsible adult any forms of abuse towards them or their friends."

In the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 we note the following against which we can draw parallels today:

- I. the abuse was carried out by Amnon, her own brother, a trusted family member. Many children & young people today are abused by trusted family members or family friends and are trapped in silence. Many are damaged physically and emotionally, denied fullness of life, for life.
- II. Absalom her brother, even though he was aware, said or did nothing, until two years later. Absalom communicated that it didn't matter, it's a family matter. It is still happening today in families where sometimes the children are accused of lying when they report abuse. A bigger issue is that the mother is often dependent on the abuser for economic sustenance/survival and does nothing in order to maintain the status quo.
- III. King David, Tamar's & Amnon's father, did nothing about the abuse even though he was in a position to do something. Similarly and regrettably today persons who know of abuse and can intervene, keep silent and look the other way. It happens even in the Church.

If you are aware of abuse happening in your family, church or community act now, be the change.

Prayer:

May your church be a place where children and young people can feel safe, not just the physical space but the people called the Christian community. Help each one of us to examine ourselves to determine if we can truly answer YES if we are asked the question - Am I safe with you? Amen.

Mrs. Rose Wedderburn
United Church in Jamaica & the Cayman Islands

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Micah 4:1-8

TOPIC: From Wishing to Working

The headline was as frightening as it was unavoidable. Stretched across the page in bold faced type "Murdered...student was prospect for Head Girl". The report recounted the ghastly murder of a 17-year old student by gangsters. Her name: Mickolle. She was filled with potential but her life was snuffed out callously. As usual, the powerful and those in positions of authority were quick to issue condemnations and promise swift justice. Of course, we have heard many such statements before. We were not impressed. The evil occurrence that befell this young lady reflects the ultimate peril that many of our young people in Jamaica face in a world fraught with violence, where regard for human life is an afterthought, and where the pursuit of power is deemed pre-eminent.

The biblical picture that Micah 4 paints for us invites us to imagine another world, another way of living. It paints a picture of a world in which the will and ways of God are exalted above all else; where weapons of war are turned into tools of work, and where disputes are resolved amicably and peacefully. The world envisioned is a world in which the weak, vulnerable and marginalized are given space and place. It's a world where young lives are not snuffed out, but nurtured and nourished so that they can flourish and be fruitful.

Given the current reality in many places this might seem like wishful thinking. For followers of Christ, however, this is not merely a wish. Rather, it is our work. In an age of imperial powers that utilize and promote violence, people of The Way have an obligation to pray and work for peace and justice, at both local and global levels. This is our unavoidable responsibility, our inescapable duty, and our divine vocation. Resisting the forces of evil and promoting that which builds and enriches life is the Jesus Way. Let us embrace it, wholeheartedly, for the sake our children and young people.

Prayer:

Gracious God, stir us to action, move us to respond and equip us for your service. Open our eyes to the needs around us and show how we can be used as the answer to our own prayers. May the example of Jesus inspire us, may the establishment of your righteous reign be our goal, and may your glory be our sole motive. Amen.

Rev'd Anthony Chung
United Church in Jamaica & the Cayman Islands

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 37: 1- 10

TOPIC: Family Accord or Discord

The devotion engages and reflects on some of the issues faced by children in the context of family and the impression made on young minds and lives when the familial relationships are in disarray. The issues that arise in the life of Joseph include favouritism, deception, attempted murder, false allegations, suffering, famine, provision, human trafficking, empire and its tentacles and imprisonment inter alia.

The inter-relationship between Joseph and his family mirrors in vast ways many of the situations faced by children around the world today. The twelve sons, including Joseph had the same father but different mothers. These mothers were wives and helpers and one gets the sense of the intense rivalry and ownership between the women.

Joseph's father loved him more than the other boys. His father gave him a special gift that made his brothers hate him very much. The coat of many colours has become the symbol of sibling rivalry because it reminded the others of the special favour shown by Father to one particular child. Joseph reported his brothers to their father Israel and through the presentation of his dreams, spiritualized his space and place in the household. It would seem that Joseph's superiority and his tattletale nature created strife within his family. He was an irritant some would say to both the siblings and some adults.

When we cast our minds through the entire story and life of Joseph, we are forced to interpret God as designing Joseph as Provider for not only his family but for the salvation of his nation. Joseph endures several harsh treatments from his brothers and from some of those he encountered later in his life. Joseph seems always to emerge in a good and positive space in spite of the dire state he finds himself in from time to time throughout the story. The

story of Joseph eventually demonstrates God bringing greater good from the apparent evil of the brothers.

Questions:

- What happens to children born under these circumstances?
- Explore what could have been some of Joseph's thoughts and feelings
- How can we help children to cope when faced with challenges?

Prayer:

Lord, we pray for our children especially children who live in challenging family situations. We think of those who have no control over their circumstances, yet daily are abused, falsely accused, neglected and trespassed against. Lord, keep them safe, surround them with Your presence and grant them Your grace. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Yvette Noble-Bloomfield
United Church in Jamaica & the Cayman Islands



Training in Mission, New Zealand, 2015, courtesy of Phil King.

My prayers and reflections on this week

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 11: 1-6

TOPIC: What Really is Faith?

The United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands is committed to a vibrant and life-giving youth ministry. This requires us to be relevant while sharing and celebrating Christ with youth so as to foster commitment and growth in their discipleship. Opportunity must also be provided for them to share their perspective as part of their spiritual development. The views below and in the following devotion come from two of our young people as they explore what faith and integrity respectively mean to them.

“What really is faith? It is one of the most common questions to ask especially in times of trouble and distress. It is said that faith is confidence or trust in a person or thing: a belief that is not based on proof:

I can remember countless times in which I had my own faith experiences, Once I struggled to write an accurate conclusion to a physics topic, and as I struggled I began praying and as I prayed and waited, it finally came “there is only a little amount of grams in a cubic centimetre but a lot of kilograms in cubic metre”. For me that was faith in what I thought and faith that this was God’s answer to my prayers.

Faith is like the trust we have in someone knowing that something good will come out of them someday, even though today they are not so good. That is faith.

Like a vine dresser who goes into his vineyard and prunes his grape-vines, he prunes them down to near nothing and sits back with that great knowing and anticipation that it will grow back and it will flourish. That is faith. Faith is not an emotion or feeling but an action of trust without proof.”

Joel McConnell - 15 years

Timothy’s mother and grandmother, through Godly parenting, communicated their strong faith to him (2 Timothy 1: 5), which he embraced and made his own. Paul with confidence spoke of Timothy’s trust in the Lord and referred to him as “his son in the faith”. Our youth too, with guidance and Godly example will embrace faith in God.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to nurture the faith you have placed in our children and youth. May they be emboldened to face life in the assurance that you are with them, and to know that with you all things are possible. Amen.

Mrs. Rose Wedderburn
United Church in Jamaica & the Cayman Islands

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: 1 Timothy 4:11 - 16

TOPIC: Integrity

Integrity, according to the dictionary, means possession of firm principles, moral uprightness and steadfastly adhering to high moral principles.

The 11th chapter of Proverbs verse 3 says “the integrity of the upright shall guide them, but the perverseness of transgressors shall destroy them”. Integrity in my opinion therefore means high standards which cannot be shaken when all around me might be going wrong.

We frequently think of a person of integrity as being honest and trustworthy but integrity is more than that. It's the measure of one's true character, that is, what the person would do if they knew they would never be found out.

We live in a society where high moral standards are on the decline, it's whatever I want to do that counts, but to be someone of integrity we should try at all times to do the right thing when nobody is looking. There are too many people who think that the only thing that's right is to get by, and the only thing that's wrong is to get caught.

If we as a Church want to be transformed and renewed we must let integrity and uprightness preserve us, we must walk daily in an upright manner, live in such a way that you would not be ashamed if you were caught off guard. Proverbs 10: 9 says “Whoever walks in integrity walks securely.” How sure is your walk?

Action:

Each day take one of these character traits mentioned in Philippians 4:8, “Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, think on these things”, and watch the transformation and renewal that will take place in your life, and in the life of the church and the community. And like the Psalmist in Psalm 26 you will be able to say, “I have walked in mine integrity therefore I shall not slide.”

Garnet Smith - 16 years
Hyde Park United Church

Prayer:

Lord, we thank you for young people and the gifts and talents that lie within them. Strengthen them to walk in integrity and to be an example to their peers and others. May they be bold in doing what is right even in the face of those who would look down on them. Amen.

Mrs. Rose Wedderburn
United Church in Jamaica & the Cayman Islands

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: 2 Kings 22

TOPIC: Doing The Right Thing

The 2016 Burger King Prep and Primary Schools Debating Competition was won by a school owned by the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, St. Andrew Preparatory. They opposed the moot "Be it Resolved that Social Media is Harmful to the Development of Jamaica's children". The team supporting the moot argued that "Social media encourages children to sit for hours playing games and being unproductive and encourages cyber bullying. It has a dark side inhabited by paedophiles and can impair physical and mental health". St. Andrew Prep agreed that technology does have a dark side but argued that "parental guidance and adult supervision are essential to protecting children while allowing them to enjoy the benefits of social media".

There are many good things about social media but it also presents the opportunity for our children and youth to do the wrong thing. Many of our young have access to smart phones so it's easy to do the wrong thing in the absence of supervision, trust and obedience.

Josiah was a child king at the age of eight who had to be guided and the scripture tells us he "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord", following the example of David his ancestor. Josiah knew that doing right was honourable, and must have come to this understanding through the guidance and nurture of his parents. Doing the right thing is a choice many people do not make; it is often counter-cultural in today's "what's in it for me" society. However, this is exactly what the Lord requires of us, even the young. Children, if guided in the right way can learn obedience to parents and to God to do the right thing. Josiah in his early years got the right foundation which he used in later years when he was older to reform Judah. The consequences can be devastating when we choose to do wrong. Let us nurture the young so they will do the right thing. Proverbs 22:6 reminds us "Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not leave it". Let's do what is right by our children.

Prayer:

Lord help us to guide our children in the way they should go so they will have the hearts and minds to do what is right even as they think about the pleasures of life. Help them to want to please you and to do right in your sight. Amen.

Mrs. Francine Dennis Lewis
United Church in Jamaica & the Cayman Islands

Inclusive Communities

SCRIPTURE: 2 Kings 5:1

TOPIC: Those We Don't Expect

We are going to explore one text through the coming week: the story of Naaman and Elisha. Through its characters and drama, we can see something about inclusive community in the context of Empire. Our story is set against the political and military plans of Empire, as the Kings of Israel and Aram (Assyria) battle for territory and control. This story unfolds just before the Northern Kingdom of Israel falls captive to the Empire of Assyria and we find here many of the tensions and fears in the community at that time.

The story introduces us first of all to Naaman. In Hebrew Naaman means 'pleasantness'. This is the first of a series of unpleasant ironies about Naaman and about Israel. The author tells us 'Naaman-Pleasantness' was the commander of the army of Aram; the army which has been raiding Israel and invading its territories. 'Naaman-Pleasantness' was a great man and in high favour with the King of Aram because these victories are giving success to King of Aram and thus to the Empire of Assyria. But these victories have been given to 'Naaman-Pleasantness' not by Ishtar, goddess of war, but by Yahweh, the God of Israel. But not just God of Israel; the power of God includes all lands, peoples and Empires.

The text tells us the obvious, Naaman was a mighty warrior, in order to underline the ridiculous: 'Naaman-Pleasantness' was also a leper. A community that was sure of its purity and exclusivity was about to learn the unpleasant ironic truth about how inclusive God is in His mission of building a life-affirming community. This 'Hero Leper', 'Untouchable - Warrior', Foreign Agent of Yahweh, is an instrument to reveal the new life Yahweh is creating in the midst of Empire.

We see Israel's concerns to be a pure and exclusive nation being subverted, at the same time as its claims for their own God are radicalized and extended to include all of the nations, and not Israel alone. This is to challenge the King, not just of Israel, but of Aram, Assyria and beyond.

Prayer:

Lord as we open ourselves to be more inclusive of the people you call who are just the opposite to us, we ask you to free us from arrogance and pomposity, that we may be ready for the new thing you can do through those we don't expect.

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Inclusive Communities

SCRIPTURE: 2 Kings 5: 2 - 3

TOPIC: Seeing the Hidden People

The ironic unwrapping of power and authority continues in this story, all this talk of Kings and commanders, their power, prowess and male egos, is set aside in favour of a slave girl. She is the true Israelite; hers is the testimony that brings the change and transformation that God intends through her, through Elisha and through Naaman-Pleasantness. The change and transformation we can call inclusive community.

The text has introduced us to the second character we might easily ignore, overlook or exclude. This girl has been the victim of war, trafficked across borders by a raiding party, and forced to work as a domestic worker, at risk from the rages and desires of her mistress and master. She is perhaps the most vulnerable figure in the story, but she speaks with boldness and confidence and reminds us to look again at our communities, to see the hidden people and hear their voice.

According to the International Labour Organisation there are 67 million domestic workers around the world. 87% of them are women. The ILO suggests an estimate of a further 21 million people are illegally trafficked for forced labour. There are nearly one million low-wage migrant workers where CWM is based in Singapore. They make up about 20% of the total population and are mostly employed in construction, shipyards, sanitation services, manufacturing and domestic work. According to support groups, such workers face exploitation and racism. Transient Workers Count too has produced research which shows 68% of construction workers work illegally long hours. 59% of domestic workers do not get a weekly day off.

Questions:

1. What might the testimony of these migrant workers in Singapore, or in any of our countries tell us?
2. What changes in our communities, economies, homes might follow from listening to their needs, respecting their rights and treating them with dignity?

Prayer:

Lord, we lament the trafficking of people in our world and communities. We pray for the change that people like Naaman's slave girl, the construction worker on our street, the cleaner in our office, sex worker in our red light area long for and would set us all free.

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Inclusive Communities

SCRIPTURE: 2 Kings 5: 6-7

TOPIC: Justice and Mercy

Our story is set in a rigidly hierarchical community structure, with slave girls at the bottom and Kings at the top. The writer gives the reader privileged entry into the courts of Kings to show how useless and ignorant kings are! What a fascinating sub text for a book entitled the Book of Kings! While it seems to be about the action of Kings, it is an invitation to join in the 'view from below', (the Slave girl's perspective) and 'above', (Yahweh's perspective), which measures their action not in terms of power and wealth, but justice and mercy.

The King of Aram decides he can simply write to the King of Israel and organise the healing of Naaman-Pleasantness, with some pleasantries and some cash. The King of Israel receives the letter from the King of Aram about Naaman-Pleasantness and falls into a state of despair and terror. Israel's King thinks this is a trick, a thinly veiled attempt to create an argument that might justify all-out war. Israel's King knows exactly who this Leper is, but he does not know the power he represents, which is not Aram but Yahweh.

The King of Israel moans: 'Am I God, to give life and death?' This is yet another irony in our text, because this is exactly what Kings believe they are and can order. Newsweek magazine reported that in March 2017 President Trump ordered airstrikes on Iraq and Syria (Naaman's home) in which 1,484 civilians were killed. In his first nine months of office, Amnesty International and the Guardian Newspaper reports that Philippines President Duterte has sanctioned the extra-judicial killings of over 7,000 alleged drug dealers. The Hindustan Times reported in 2016 that crimes against Dalits have risen fivefold under the leadership of the BJP and President Modi. It's as if the King of Israel, of all people, is asking 'Who can change the rules?', who can create a culture in which the leper can be healed? A king asks this. But a slave girl tells us how. Listen to the prophets, include them in your vision of what is possible.

Prayer:

Lord, we see how power is used in our nation, community, church and ask you to turn us upside down and inside out to make room for those who can lead us into justice and mercy.

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Inclusive Communities

SCRIPTURE: 2 Kings 5: 9

TOPIC: A Community Which Lives by Love

Is an inclusive community a place where anything goes? Where there are no boundaries? Often those who feel threatened by opening up to the new, or the strange, or to the ones zealots have taught us to despise, fear for the loss of recognisable comfortable order. They fear a kind of libertarian anarchy. But an inclusive community is simply a community of persons who live by love.

'Naaman-Pleasantness' comes in full force to see the Prophet Elisha. Horses and chariots were the weapons of the superpowers. It is all reminiscent of the Exodus; when Moses and the Hebrew slaves were pursued by Pharaoh, it was with all his horses and chariots. They were the supreme show of force and they chase down the slaves to the edge of the sea. Once the Red Sea opens, Pharaoh's forces, his horses and chariots become stuck in the mud and all their power and might counts for nothing in the face of the one who includes slaves as his people (Exod 14:25).

Elisha is the gateway into a new community. Thus, all Naaman's power and weaponry have to be left at the door. He must humble himself and enter this community not in force, but in peace and mutual need. This new inclusive community is not for him to dominate, not for him to use for his own purposes and discard once met. Elisha is the gateway to a relationship to God and a community with others in which all who come, including Naaman-Pleasantness discover a new life.

As we imagine our churches as inclusive communities, it is to make them places where all discover, offer, honour and share peace and healing. This peace and healing are not the possessions of one group to control / budget / distribute / demand. It is something that can only be discovered by each when all are included. And it arises when we realise all need to change, not just some. Exclusion in this way becomes the means to reject being transformed by God's Spirit who yearns to even include us.

Prayer:

Lord, I offer you myself, as I am, without power or pretence. I invite the change you will bring, even as it comes through those I have told myself to fear or reject.

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Inclusive Communities

SCRIPTURE: 2 Kings 5: 11 - 13

TOPIC: Beyond Differences and Diversities

Many of the churches' discussions about inclusion seem to stir anger and rage. It can be about the leadership of women, respect to people of colour, the recognition of different human sexualities or identities, the needs of refugees, the rights of peoples with disabilities, the claims of indigenous peoples, the inclusion of children or young people. In addition to our diverse ways, identities, gifts and backgrounds, the human community is always striving around issues of status and power and this can easily be threatened when a settled community seeks to be more open. We find a moment in our story where these issues of pride, status spill into misunderstanding and rage. It could easily have destroyed the possibility of Naaman's healing and the more inclusive community God seemed to be inviting through Elisha.

Naaman-Pleasantness feels acutely uncomfortable having to come to an alien enemy place and make himself vulnerable in front of those he has frequently fought and defeated. It hurts his pride and he is already on edge before his arrival in full battle dress and formation. He quite rightly feels Elisha is treating him disrespectfully, and is belittling his power and authority dealing with him by a messenger alone. Thus, Naaman shows us his unpleasant side and goes off in a rage and huff. So, the servants have to once again assist in the bringing of transformation. It was the trafficked girl in verse two and now it is his other servants. They have to calm him and soothe him and keep him open to the possibility of the change he seeks.

Thus, inclusive community can become a lesson in being the peace-building community Jesus called us to be. It is an exercise in respecting our differences and diversities, but more importantly persisting beyond those categories until we begin to relate to people as people. Yet as we imagine Elisha's pride and Naaman's rage we should wonder what makes religious attitudes become so hard so quickly? Why do Christian communities find it hard to live in peace with themselves, let alone others?

Prayer:

**Lord if you were to come to my church, would we be willing to welcome you?
Would we welcome the challenge you bring to be more open or would we turn
away in anger? Lord help me to turn in peace and love to all my neighbours.**

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Inclusive Communities

SCRIPTURE: 2 Kings 5:16

TOPIC: A Generous Community

There are so many miracles in this story! A slave girl who is brave enough to speak up in front of her mistress. Servants who placate the heated rage of their violent master Naaman-Pleasantness. A proud and vulnerable man who humbles himself in the face of his chariots and fellow warriors. A moment of healing in which a leper is cleansed. And then surely almost the most miraculously of all, Elisha refuses payment or reward!

Naaman-Pleasantness was a very wealthy man and he had come with all the signs and show of that. He had his symbols of military power and his coffers of gold and silver. And he was extraordinarily grateful to be healed. Elisha could have made an enormous amount of money and found himself the head of a very profitable business. Bottles of Jordan Water could soon be sold with his name on it.

We live in a world that honours money and profit above all other things. The consequence of this is gross inequality as the rich get richer at the expense of the poor, the ordinary person and the planet. Our economic and ecological crises flow from a love of money and a desire to make more and more profit. Churches want money. Members are asked to give money for the life and work of the churches. CWM is in a position of being able to give money to its members for mission projects. And there are those who seek to prosper through healing, who, in return for miracles, demand payment, and promise blessing only to those who give even the little they have.

Poverty is exclusive and excluding. Churches are called to discover different ways to live and share together, to be more like the early church in Acts 4 that shared its gifts and skills in a spirit of love and equality. An inclusive community is a generous community. It has power over money and discovers the richness of people through sharing rather than charging.

Prayer:

Lord, all the world is yours and you have no need of money. Help me to give the thing you prize most, which is myself, and learn to value the giving of others in the same way.

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Inclusive Communities

SCRIPTURE: 2 Kings 5:19

TOPIC: No Healing Without Inclusion

Naaman-Pleasantness has been transformed. A man of power and authority has learned to heed the counsel of the poor and powerless. A man of wealth and riches has discovered a treasure which cannot be bought, only shared. A man of pride and machismo has let women and foreigners lead him to new insight. A man who was leprous and unpleasant has become healed, pleasant and at peace.

The encounter Naaman-Pleasantness has with God, and Elisha, God's prophet, signifies the will of God to include all in the healed and healing community of his people. In fact, there can be no healing without inclusion, no community of God's which cannot make room for those who are strange, difficult or different, no arrival at peace without passing together through suspicion, fear and enmity.

Any reader of the story must wonder what happens to Naaman-Pleasantness after this. The story suggests that he has found faith in the God of Israel, but he returns stating he will continue to worship in the temple of Rimmon. He returns as a General of Syria, with his chariots, horses and warriors, will he return then to his duties leading armies to invade Israel? One wonders what will happen when he next sees the trafficked slave girl who sent him on this journey? Clearly there is more healing, change and transformation to be worked out in Naaman-Pleasantness beyond this moment and encounter. And Elisha's response to these issues is a blessing and a command, 'Go in peace'. Work these things out by going in peace.

Elisha's blessing and command is a familiar phrase for Jesus to use. He uses it for the healing of the sinful, the hurting and for restoring the disciples. In our own wrestling with being a community which makes room for others, the problems, fears and changes we face are best transformed by going through them in peace. Not using such moments to inflict pain or impose authority but to anticipate the peace of Christ we will find in inclusive community.

Prayer:

Bring to mind the people you find hard to like, or even feel are not part of God's people. Gather them into a moment of prayer, and bless them, saying 'Go in peace'.

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

30 April

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 2:1-10

TOPIC: A Papyrus Basket and a Refrigerator Truck

Reflection:

Seventy-one migrants headed for Austria from Hungary in a refrigerator truck died of suffocation. A migrant-smuggler-gang led them across the Mediterranean. When the smugglers discovered the dead bodies, they ran away leaving the truck behind. Hungarian police arrested them the following day while leading another group of migrants. Refugees who cross the Mediterranean leave their countries with a hope to settle in Europe as their only lifeline. They give money to smugglers and entrust their lives to them.

The Israelites suffered repression in Egypt were in a similar situation. They cried for help in vain. Then a Levite man and woman married and had a son. They could not bring him up because of oppressive Egyptian laws. They regretfully put the baby in a papyrus basket and left him in the river. An Egyptian princess found the baby and adopted him as her son. His name was Moses, which means 'pulled out of water'. Moses was a refugee from birth and he left Egypt as a young man to hide from Pharaoh. He later returned to his own people. Moses, saved from the water by God's help, saved the Israelites from Egyptian oppression and led them to Canaan, the land of life.

Moses from a Papyrus basket survived but the refrigerator truck refugees did not. The Israelites cried for help and got it, but refugees cried for oxygen and did not. The Hebrews settled in Canaan, but refugees heading to Europe went to their graves. The Israelites served God with thankfulness, but refugees still cry in agony. Despite the harsh situation of refugees, Christians and churches look on with folded arms. We are accomplices in human trafficking.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, please do not turn your face away from the refugees who are cry out for help. Help us to care about those who cross borders at the risk of their lives. May we not be accomplices in human trafficking but good Samaritans to them. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Chun-Ung Park
Presbyterian Church of Korea

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: John 5:2-10

TOPIC: The Pool of Bethesda and the Salt Fields of Korea

Reflection:

Five colonnades surrounded the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem, near the Sheep Gate, where disabled people - the blind, the lame, the paralyzed – lay in wait for the water to move. One man had been there for thirty-eight years. Jesus asked him, “Do you want to get well?” He replied, ‘I have no one to help me into the pool so I cannot get in.’ Jesus’ question implied, ‘Why are you just sitting there when the water is stirred.’ Jesus gave him a simple solution, ‘Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.’

A blind man has worked in a salt field for a year and half without pay. Another intellectually handicapped man works in the same place. They are without wages, proper meals and sleep less than five hours a day. They cannot not rest even when ill. This is the plight of some homeless people in Korea. Their ‘employers’ keep them indebted and force them into drunkenness and prostitution to enslave them. Their disabilities prevent them from escaping.

The man who had been ill for thirty-eight years might have been able to walk. He might have drawn a conclusion that he could not walk and did not try to walk due to the memory of failure in the past. He remained disabled at Bethesda because of a defeatist attitude. The two salt field workers might have escaped from slavery if their neighbors in the area who knew about the injustice at the salt field did not choose to remain silent. They even informed the owner when one of them tried to escape. The violence imbedded in the community is what prevented liberation.

Prayer:

Lord, where, in my community are those who cannot pick up their mat and walk away from oppression? Help me not to shift blame to others for the injustice I live with – in my own life and that of others. Help me to rise and walk for hope.

Rev. Dr. Chun-Ung Park
Presbyterian Church of Korea

2 May

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 37:25-28

TOPIC: Joseph: Child-Trafficked by His Brothers

Reflection:

There are about 218,000,000 child laborers worldwide, with 10,200,000 working children and 100,000,000 'street' children in China. Vietnam has 1,750,000 child laborers, 67% of whom work on farms. Romanian judicial authorities reported that children aged between six and eleven years work for thirteen hours a day in toy factories. In Nepal, children work under harsh conditions, underpaid, denied toilet breaks and work fourteen hours a day. In Indonesia, ten-year-olds work on tobacco farms, left vulnerable to nicotine addiction. Children work in cobalt mines under intimidating supervisors. Cobalt is a raw material for batteries. It causes respiratory diseases and dermatitis.

Today's scripture is a story about Joseph who was a victim of human trafficking and child labor. When Joseph was still young, his brothers threw him into a cistern trying to kill him. A caravan of Ishmaelites passed by and the brothers sold him for twenty shekels of silver. His own brothers sold him for child labor. In Egypt, Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, bought Joseph as a slave.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) enacted World Day Against Child Labor on 12 June, 2002, celebrated annually. Child labor means 'labor by minors aged between five and seventeen'. Despite that, Bolivia permits poor children aged above ten to work. In Myanmar, children aged between thirteen and fifteen can get a permit to work if conditions are not extreme and the work does not harm their health.

We can only solve child labor at regional and national levels. Some people boycott certain products to combat child exploitation. Even though Joseph grew up to be influential in Egypt, the child trafficking that happened to Joseph should not be justified. The church should act to root out the problem of child exploitation as well as child poverty.

Prayer:

Lord, have mercy on the starving children in the street. We pray that child labor due to poverty would not be justified anywhere. Let us be guards to protect future of children from enslavement as cheap labor.

Rev. Dr. Chun-Ung Park
Presbyterian Church of Korea

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: 1 Samuel 17:38-45

TOPIC: Children Must Flourish, Not Die in Combat

Reflection:

No one should force children to serve in war. In some Asian and African countries where there is war, adults convert children into soldiers. According to the UN Security Council, in 2016, there were 300,000 child soldiers in thirteen countries. About eight to ten thousand children are killed every year. Child soldiers are coerced into drug addiction to turn them into tools for murder, rape and other atrocities. Indoctrination turns so-called “Children of Caliph” into suicide bombers.

In today's scripture, David becomes Israel's hero when he bursts on to the scene as he brings food to his brothers at the battlefield. He sees Israel in retreat from the Philistines and decides to fight against Goliath. King Saul gives him his armor, helmet and sword but David refuses to wear them and stands against Goliath with his sling and five stones. Goliath despises David saying “Am I a dog that you come at me with sticks?” However, David beats Goliath through faith in God, which brings great joy to Israel and makes him a hero.

We should not read this story uncritically today. It might seem unfair to compare David with “children of Caliph”. However, we should not use it to justify sending children to battlefields. We should stop luring hungry children with food and money in order to recruit them as child soldiers. We have to be careful not to conclude, based on the passage that the outcome of a war only depends on God not military power. If we interpret this literally, it might mislead us to justify alongside those who recruit child soldiers for jihad in North African and the Middle Eastern battlefields.

Prayer:

Lord, we pray that there would not be child soldiers like David in this world. We hope and pray that this world would become a place where children are carefree, enjoy their childhood and flourish. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Chun-Ung Park
Presbyterian Church of Korea

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 19:4-8

TOPIC: Women are Not for Sale!

Reflection:

Survival can make women commodify themselves. International human traffickers lure women with false job offers to traffic them for sex. Their traffickers make them indebted and compel them to sign exploitative contracts. Girls with intellectual disability are objects of sex trafficking. Some people recruit and procure girls through internet sites and chat apps. One survey revealed that 532 out of 1,050 people interviewed had experienced the sex trade at least once.

For the Samaritan woman who had many husbands, the significant issue is not about her. What made her live that kind of life? She was a disadvantaged woman who, in her culture, could not live without male protection. Some good women today objectify themselves and resort to prostitution.

In today's text, two angels stayed a night at a Lot's house in Sodom. All the men asked for them for sex. Lot answered, 'I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.' When Lot said, 'You can do what you like with my daughters'; he permitted the sexual abuse of his daughters without their consent. His good intention to protect the two angels does not justify putting his daughters at risk of sexual violence.

Some countries acknowledge prostitution as labor. The seller can contract clients. However, the chance of a sex worker registering as a social service provider is only 0.01%. In wealthy countries, female migrants are the face of sex work. The sex trade is exploitative. If we look at sex workers as our kin, it would be harder to judge them.

Prayer:

Lord, we pray that woman would not be bought and to satisfy desire. Prevent us from turning desire into crime and become accustomed to social evil. We pray for this and other societies to be warm enough that no woman needs to sell herself to live.

Rev. Dr. Chun-Ung Park
Presbyterian Church of Korea

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 20:1-16

TOPIC: Guaranteeing the Basic Rights of the Weak

Reflection:

One migrant worker died and another was wounded while working at a casino construction site. They did not have visas and the owner deserted them for fear of law enforcement. The wounded man also died. The company dumped the bodies at sea. Another worker reported this case to the FBI and the crime was exposed. The two men entered the country with a tourist visa and a broker received a \$10,000 commission per person.

The number of migrant workers is growing. Those who cannot find jobs in their countries cross borders. There are about 150 million migrant workers globally. Migrant workers often do not receive a minimum wage in host countries. Those who cannot get work visas are degraded to illegal migrants. Long-term illegal residents have problems. Their children do not benefit from social welfare including national health insurance and education. Female migrants often become objects of the sex trade or sexual abuse. Migrant workers work long hours without matching wages. When accidents occur at work, there is treatment and no injury benefits.

Today's text advocates for protection of workers' basic rights. The worker who came early in the morning and the one came later were equally remunerated. One worked for only an hour, because he could not find a job all day. The landowner paid him a wage to protect his right to live. How do our nations guarantee the welfare of the unemployed?

Migrant workers are often denied basic human rights. Like the worker who died at a construction site, many of them do not receive any aid. Migrant workers who live under cultural discrimination and prejudice are the same beings as us made in the image of God.

Prayer:

Lord, remind us that all human beings are related in God. Teach us not to discriminate against migrant workers and to give them an opportunity to work and guarantee their basic rights. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Chun-Ung Park
Presbyterian Church of Korea

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Leviticus 24:14-19

TOPIC: A Levitical Human-Trafficking-Prevention Protocol

Reflection:

The Bible teaches us how to protect the disadvantaged. Leviticus 24 is about rules and regulations to protect the economically and socially weak. Ancient Near East was an extremely patriarchal society. Wives were subordinate to their husbands. Husbands could easily desert wives. Moses put a brake on this immoral custom. Leviticus announces protection of the disadvantaged in the community. A certificate of divorce would be required to divorce a woman. The possessions of the weak could not become surety. Wages would be paid daily and be economical to strangers, orphans and widows guaranteed.

Today the UN and the international community have laws to protect the weak. Protocols to control trafficking in persons, especially women and children were adopted on 15 November 2000. It became international law after the treaty was ratified by 170 countries. Trafficking in persons consists of recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring and receipt of persons by means of threat, violence, pressure, kidnapping, fraud or deceit. Human trafficking could be sex trade, sexual exploitation, slavery, exploitation for labor and organ trade.

The laws in Leviticus are for the protection of the weak. It is the basis of the UN's Prevention of Trafficking Protocol or a modern interpretation of the weak protection law in Leviticus. We need to pay attention to Leviticus to understand the intention of the Bible.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to uphold international laws that aim to protect the disadvantaged. We pray that the cartels that exploit the weak and violates human right would stop. Please give us strength to fight for the marginalized and keep us strong. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Chun-Ung Park
Presbyterian Church of Korea

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Mathew 19: 13 - 15

TOPIC: Providing Opportunities for all Children

Today millions of children around the world will attend school. In a remote village in Papua New Guinea, Dad Kila, has decided that his two school-aged boys should go to school, but not their two sisters. They will help mum Noka raise their domestic animals and make gardens to sell at the local market which is a day's walk away, and sell pigs for their brothers' school fees. Mother Noka was not consulted on why her two girls could not go to school. The school was located in a village too far from their village. The safety of the girls was high on the father's priority. The wife recognised the husband's leadership and was not about to question him, as he was the Village Chief.

A year later, local education officials visited the village explaining that the Government has a new policy for enabling school-aged children to attend formal schools, with little cost to the parents. The Government, promoting Gender Equality, wants more girls to attend schools.

Among the Government delegation that visited the village was a female pilot. She caught the attention of the Village Chief. For the first time, Kila and Noka saw the need to send their girls to school.

Often in developing nations, geographical, economic, and security reasons prevent young children, especially female children from obtaining a decent education. What can we learn from our reading today? Jesus welcomed the children when they were brought to Him, with these very words, "Let the children [both males and females] come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Let us not be a hindrance to our children.

Question:

As parents and guardians of children, what can we do to empower them?

Prayer:

Lord, help me to be like you, praying for children and point them to you as their Educator, Master and King. Amen.

Mr. Kali Sete
United Church in Papua New Guinea

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:52

TOPIC: Harnessing our Young Generation

Pastor Charles Lapa works and resides in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea. His ministry is located in one of the most notorious suburbs of Port Moresby. Pastor Charles reaches out to youths rejected by the education system and parents. The “rascals”, as they are commonly known, steal, fight, rape and simply create disharmony and havoc in the society. Individuals and organisations rallied behind Pastor Charles to bring hope to these young people. Even a former Prime Minister became a Patron of the “Half-way Ministry.” The power of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ has given eternal meaning and destiny to hundreds of young people at the Halfway House.

Today’s reading points to the care and nurture of His earthly mother and father, Mary and Joseph. The Bible tells us that, “...Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and people.” The Lord seemed to have grown like any other boy - he grew physically, spiritually, and socially.

Parenting is a very important aspect of the Christian Church in this generation. Caught up with the corporate world and heavy Church responsibilities, mums and dads can be easily steered away from their primary family responsibilities. One day I received a call from my son who was locked up in our suburban Police Station. Police alleged my son and his friends were pushing drugs. I was horrified. I phoned my wife and told her about our son’s situation. We switched our problem into prayer. I explained to the police that I work with the Church and we care for wayward young people. He was released later in the evening with an admonition from the Police to care for our young people as well.

Action:

Find time and model after the “Marys” and “Josephs” by investing in our young people so that they can grow in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and people. Find a young person and invest in him/her.

Prayer:

Lord, help me to invest in young people who will grow up like the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of trying times. Amen!

Mr. Kali Sete
United Church in Papua New Guinea

Inclusive Communities (Gender Justice)

SCRIPTURE: John 8:3 - 11

TOPIC: Advocating for the Oppressed

In my society women are often considered dirty, unclean, and weak. In spite of these derogatory descriptions, women are given away in marriage with high bride prices in parts of my country. At a recent workshop titled, "Ending Violence Against Women," a question was asked, "Why place a high bride price on women when you consider them dirty, unclean and weak?" There was total silence.

The woman in our reading today was considered unholy and a lawbreaker. Jesus dealt with two types of people - the accusers and the accused. From the oldest to the youngest, the accusers left when they could not respond to Jesus' question, "if anyone of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her (vs. 7).

Jesus confronted the accused woman about her lifestyle. She responded to Jesus' question, "Woman where are they? Has no one condemned you? (vs.10). "No one sir," she said. Jesus responded in the next verse, "Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin."

We can walk away from Jesus' question like the accusers, and do nothing about the problems we create, or we can listen to Jesus and do something about our sinful lifestyle. The Bible does not say whether the woman had forsaken her adulterous lifestyle - the same for the accusers. We do know however, that both the accusers and the accused lived under the Law of Moses at that time. We need to ask the question, "what happened to the man who committed adultery with the woman? Why was he not brought before Jesus?

Action:

Let us look for ways to change laws that discriminate against gender.

Prayer:

Lord, help me to find ways to free those who are under extreme oppression.

Mr. Kali Sete
United Church in Papua New Guinea

10 May

Inclusive Communities (Persons Living with Disabilities)

SCRIPTURE: John 5:1-15

TOPIC: Loving the Disabled

My maternal aunty is partly disabled, and is consistently accused of being a part of a witchcraft clan. Her new-found faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is just growing from strength to strength. "I am aware of my physical limitations", she would be heard talking to her womenfolk. "I have supportive relatives who clean the bush for my gardens, and I am happy," says Aunty Cecelia.

She is very much aware of this Bible story, and comments, "I have full healing from the Lord Jesus Christ. He has given me eternal life." I have not seen her miss any of our Annual Village Evangelistic Bible Studies since 2012.

Our reading shows that the Lord is not only interested in our healing, he wants to partner with us in our journey of faith. Our faith is an action faith. It requires us to "get up", carry our mats and walk, just like the man in the story. Faith without action is dead. We must live right, especially when we are healed by the Lord. He doesn't want us to live in sin, because he warns us, "See you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you (vs. 14)."

Our faith requires us to speak up for the Lord, "The man who made me well said to me, pick up your mat and walk." (vs. 11). It is spiritual injustice when we do not speak up for the Lord, when we are supposed to.

The Church is the voice of the voiceless and those who are disabled. We must provide an environment where members of our communities with disabilities are supported to have a sustainable livelihood. In my Church there is a serious move toward making sure that the needs of people living with disabilities are identified and addressed. This is a start in developing a needs-based ministry.

Action:

Consider members of your communities living with disabilities and find creative ways of meeting their needs. Take practical steps to go out on the streets and find a person living with some form of disability and have a conversation with that person.

Prayer:

Lord, people living with disabilities are part of us. They have the same rights - to life and all its benefits. Make me a willing person to reach out to those living with disabilities. Amen!

Mr. Kali Sete
United Church in Papua New Guinea

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 96:12-13

TOPIC: Let the Trees Sing for Joy and not be Destroyed

Before extractive industry was introduced to my Island, I could wander into the hills and be at peace with the deep forest island jungle. The birds sang in the trees, the cool flowing creeks provide clean and safe water for human beings and animals. Butterflies fly freely from branch to branch. Noise from the heavy machinery operated by a gold mine on my island caused many birds to leave the islands. I no longer see young children run after beautiful butterflies which were once our living aeroplanes. Chain saws were introduced to encourage local business development. The deep forests have lost their natural beauty and ecosystems destroyed forever. Ten years later we have the birds return to their natural habitat. But they are not the birds the locals once knew. These birds now ravage their fruit crops.

How can we let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them?

How can all the trees of the forest sing for joy?

How can the trees sing for joy before the Lord?

When the Lord comes, he will come to judge the world, including those who are supposed to be stewards. We have a lot for which to account.

Action:

We have the opportunity to reclaim what we have destroyed by planting trees wherever they can grow and protecting them from unnecessary human destruction. We have the opportunity to sing for joy to the Lord. We have a Government Minister, who is a Christian and many other groups around who are supporting tree planting as a national policy and initiatives.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for creating the forest to sing joy before you. Forgive us for taking that privilege away from them because of our greed and carelessness. Help us to play our part in protecting our forest and environment from unnecessary human abuse and destructive ways. Amen!

Mr. Kali Sete
United Church in Papua New Guinea



Kenya, 2015, courtesy of Nina Foo.

My prayers and reflections on this week

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Sustaining Our Eternal Hope

TOPIC: Luke 24: 13 - 49

Last year my wife and I made a short trip from Papua New Guinea to Australia to celebrate in the Memorial Service of a long time Australian missionary who spent over 31 years building airstrips in PNG. These airstrips not only opened for economic development and opportunities, but supported education and health services, and people movement. It was at this Memorial Service that I met with my Sunday School teacher, another Australian who served as a pilot. Dave Early taught about the bible and its application to young students in 1977. I was one of them. I told him, "those bible studies, with pancakes and honey helped me on my journey of faith." We hugged each other, shared tears and told stories.

What has been sustaining you all these years? Perhaps good times of fellowship with close friends, good sermons, timely advice and genuine discipleship. I think the bible discussions on the road to Emmaus soon after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ gave the two disciples a very good start for sustaining their eternal hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" (vs. 17). They stood still, their faces downcast. Cleopas told the Lord about the recent events (vs. 19-24). Then the Lord gave them the other side of the story [about himself - vs. 25-31]. The two disciples said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (vs. 32).

What burns within you? What excites you? Are regular bible studies and discussions part of your waking moments? Oh may His Word burn within you, burning away the dross.

Action:

The Scriptures have become very accessible in our generation. Be deliberate in finding a friend to study the Word of God together. This will sustain you for eternity.

Prayer:

Lord, I am very aware that your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. For my spiritual journey, may the Holy Spirit sustain me to hide your Word in my heart so that I might not sin against you. Amen!

Mr. Kali Sete
United Church in Papua New Guinea

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Leadership Leading to Justice

TOPIC: Romans 12:8

Papua New Guinea held elections in 2017 to elect our political leaders for the next five years. Church leaders got together and called upon the Christian Church to fast and pray for 40 days. Leadership is a gift according to the grace God has given us. Leadership used and exercised in the fear of the Lord brings about justice, and right living and peaceful communities.

Today's reading is very plain, if your gift is leadership, then you are called to govern diligently. We should not put our hands up to lead if we are not gifted as leaders. We may be in the right place for all the wrong reasons.

Careful and calculated leadership led by the Holy Spirit is the hallmark of godly leadership. Leaders live for others and are not self-serving. What do leaders do? They have authority over resources and their wise use for the common good of the citizens.

Leaders have authority over other people. They make laws setting out guidelines and also set limits to what can and what cannot be done.

Leaders speak up and advocate for the rights of the underprivileged. Leaders carry heavy civil responsibilities and often have to make hard decisions. Standing up and speaking up for the right issues can make leaders unpopular.

Not all of us can be leaders, but as faithful disciples we can lend support to leaders who watch over our affairs, keeping them accountable and helping them serve us better.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for enabling people with leadership gifts. We pray for sustained godly leadership in all aspects of our society. We pray for leadership that results in justice, peace, prosperity and mercy. We pray to the glory of your name. Amen!

Mr. Kali Sete
United Church in Papua New Guinea

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: John 4: 4-6

TOPIC: The Mission Place

I didn't like the look of the bar on the dusty African street or the sound of angry talk or the unwelcoming smells of beer mixed with those from open sewers, but I was tired and desperate for a drink. Everything stopped as I walked in, everything but the smells. Everyone turned and looked. I wasn't one of them, that was clear by the colour of my skin. What was I doing in their place, in their public space? I was just thirsty for peace and it seemed God had sent me to this place, at this time and then someone offered me a drink. That was my first real African friend who made me feel welcome and invited me to share why I was there. I was tired of so much conflict in the world and thirsty for peace so there I was....

You can't make peace with an enemy from a distance by telephone or email. You won't make peace by crossing borders with an army ready for battle. Introductions can be made through internet dating, but a relationship is made in the coming together and the meeting of eyes as conversation is shared. You don't sneak across borders in the cover of dark to avoid being seen if you want to talk peace, but appear in the light of the day to meet with people who might not trust your motives for being on their land.

Our mission of intent is to loiter where people will come and engage in conversations which can reconcile people in the love of God and grow new relationships of trust and respect. Our mission and ministry can take us through dangerous places where we don't know who we will meet and what sort of welcome they will give. This is where Jesus is.

Prayer:

Lord, I know I can find comfort in the company of my neighbours but lead me to the places where I am challenged to make friends with strangers.

Rev'd Richard Becher
United Reformed Church

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: John 4: 7-15

TOPIC: The Power of the Bucket

We had a job to do -- and we needed water to do it. We needed water for cooking and for washing; for drinking and for building. The water came from half a mile away so women would walk and collect it in buckets they carried on their heads. Time and time again they would make the journey because without the water we could not complete our mission. Mostly they would do it in the cool of the morning, but sometimes they would do it in the heat of the day and were grateful for the opportunity to earn a little more money. With their bucket they had the power to feed, clothe and educate their children, often in the absence of a father to help. The bucket was their source of life and provided the water we needed for us to do our work.

When the strong demand what they want or think they have all the answers, the weak will either be broken or encouraged to fight back. When the strong ask a question of the weak, it can be the beginning of a conversation and a new relationship of peace in which people can heal and grow. Today a woman in the West Bank of Jerusalem might be heard saying: "You are a Jew and I am a Palestinian so how can you ask me for a drink?" It is her response to a thirsty man who asked a question of her rather than demanding what he wanted and it is through our questions that dialogue is opened. When we see value in people they will be more willing to share what we have to give.

Prayer:

Lord, may I receive from someone's bucket of humility before giving from the cup of power that I hold in my hands.

Rev'd Richard Becher
United Reformed Church

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: John 4: 16-18

TOPIC: The Biblical Gossip

Every day a woman sat at a dusty roadside on a dirty blanket with a few pieces of fruit to sell. Every day for 12 years or more she sat there watching and hoping, patiently waiting, for someone to come. She was the woman with fruit she must have stolen from an orchard and couldn't be bothered to do more with her life than sit at the roadside. Some people said she was selling more than fruit from the trees, but who really cared what she did with her life? On the other side of the road was a children's home and one day she walked through the gates and asked for her child. For years she had lived with the guilt of being raped on a street, abandoning her baby because she couldn't cope, then watching each day the growth of her child. She wasn't the woman people thought she was, but was a broken hearted mother whose life fell apart when she was raped, abandoned by her husband and not able to support her own child.

Having lived with six men doesn't make her a sinner, but it does suggest her life had been falling apart until she meets a stranger who helps her put it together again. A bit of good biblical gossip has given the woman a shameful past she wants to hide, but she could be like many women in the world today who feel their world is falling apart as relationships fail, loved ones die and they try to pick up the pieces as best they can.

Whether she has sinned is not the issue because the message of the story is that however bad the past has been there is a future of great potential if we can be encouraged to see it.

Prayer:

Lord, help us look beyond the gossip of history and hear the truth behind each person's story so we can learn from the lessons of the past to build a better future.

Rev'd Richard Becher
United Reformed Church

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: John 4: 19-26

TOPIC: The Mirror Doesn't Lie

The old man looked in the mirror and what he saw made him so sad that he wept. It would need more than a brush of hair, a quick shave and a change of clothes, but he is determined to restore the image in the mirror to its original beauty. The mirror shows a changing face which is sometimes black, sometimes white; sometimes male, sometimes female, young or old and with changing moods between sad and happy, calm and angry. He doesn't recognise himself as people of different faiths look back at him in prayer. So many faces in one mirror, from one image, looking a mess but all with the potential to reflect his great beauty. God is the old man looking in the mirror and will make what he sees as good as it was many years ago. Humanity is God's mirror and once when he looked it was all so good, so very good, and he will make it good again.

The best place for worship is not on a mountain top which is difficult for many people to reach or in the temple in Jerusalem which has been built by human hand, but at the heart of human flesh and bones. God has chosen people to share the truth they know with those who don't know it so that everyone can worship in spirit and in truth. God doesn't live in buildings of wood and stones, but comes alive in the heart of humanity when we show the image in which we were created. God created all of us who follow different religions, but people made the religions that divide us but the day is coming when hearts will unite in spirit and truth.

Prayer:

May your Spirit dance in our bodies of flesh and bones to reveal what is hidden in our buildings of wood and stones.

Rev'd Richard Becher
United Reformed Church

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: John 4: 27-30

TOPIC: Too Quick to Judge

A customer was visiting a bank and asked the black person behind the counter if he could see the manager. "How can I help you?" was the friendly reply. "Get the manager for me please!" the white man repeated. "What do you want?" he was asked. "I told you, I want to see the manager," the man said more firmly. "What would you like me to do for you?" the black woman asked in a gentle tone. "I said I want to see the manager so can you go and get him!" the man demanded angrily. "He is a SHE and I am the manager," said the black woman very calmly. The white man walked out without asking the manager for what he wanted!

They didn't say anything, but how they looked said everything. They saw her and judged her without even knowing her so she just ran from that place as fast as she could. She didn't judge him by his followers because he was so different to them and we shouldn't judge Jesus by the people in Church. He made her feel like a new person as she was filled with the Spirit and was able to leave her old self behind and take back to her community something much greater than water in a jar. His followers just saw her as a Samaritan with a bucket who must want something from him, but he had asked for something from her. If they had understood who they were following they would have known better than judge people without listening to their story. If looks could kill the disciples could have murdered a whole village, but his words gave them new life instead.

Prayer:

Lord, may I not judge by the pictures I see, but stop to listen to the stories of need.

Rev'd Richard Becher
United Reformed Church

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: John 4: 31-38

TOPIC: The Bread of Life

When a translation of the bible became available in their own language for the first time many women of Turkana in Northern Kenya walked for two days across dusty desert sands to the main town of Lodwar to obtain a copy. "When we are hungry and have no food on our table we will now always have the word of God to give us strength," one woman said. So when the people of Turkana pray "give us our daily bread" it is always there to be shared with plenty left over for unexpected guests.

The will of God is for people to receive hope and healing so Jesus found his food through the Samaritan woman. He was doing what His Father had sent him to do so by engaging in conversation, he was sharing bread with her and sowing the seeds for a new harvest among the people of her village. This is our ministry: to eat round the same table with a world in need. Bread alone is not enough, but the Word of God is our food for life.

When justice refuses to be silenced, the will of God is being done; when love seeks no hiding place, the will of God is being done and where the will of God is being done, the Kingdom of God will come. Jesus died doing the will of God, not because it was God's will for him to die. Doing the will of God was what sustained him and will do the same for us however hungry we might be.

Prayer:

Lord, I do not ask for a miracle that will turn stones into bread because bread alone will not be enough. So may the words I live be the food from you to be broken and shared.

Rev'd Richard Becher
United Reformed Church

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: John 4: 39-42

TOPIC: Culture Shock

She never felt like a guest in my home because she was the servant and my house the place she worked. She felt uncomfortable as a guest but when I accepted an invitation to visit her she was in control as the host. In her home she could be her true self; in my home she was being who she thought I expected her to be. In the modesty of her home she gave me all she had, but from the plenty of my home I made her work for what she got. In my home she sat alone, in her home we sat together; in my home she was my servant, in her home I was a guest. In my home she did things my way, in her home it was a different way. Not until I went to her home and crossed the boundaries of her culture did I learn to do things a different way!

What a culture shock this must have been for the disciples to have to stay two days in a Samaritan village. TWO days among people they didn't trust or like; two days of being guests of people who do things so differently to them; two uncomfortable days in a strange place with strange food and strange habits while Jesus does what he always does and convinces the Samaritans that he is the Saviour of the world.

Amazing really that he could do it with words, and words alone, while the disciples were still hoping for miracles. They had got used to him encouraging women, but this was a Samaritan woman and she did what they couldn't do -- transformed a whole village. That's what happens when you cross the boundaries of faith and culture by accepting hospitality.

Prayer:

Lord, help us follow you across the boundaries of faith, race and culture to make peace between people.

Revd Richard Becher
United Reformed Church

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 2:8, 15

TOPIC: Keeper not a Destroyer

“And the LORD GOD planted a garden eastward in Eden.... And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.” (Genesis 2: 15 KJV)

It is clearly explained in the Creation Story, that God already prepared everything for man and set them all before He created him. As in verses 29 and 30 of Genesis chapter 1, God showed the man what was there for him for his survival and happiness.

God is the provider here. God, who created the man and knows his frame, knows that the man needed to engage in purposeful activity for his physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Tilling or dressing and keeping a garden can be pleasant work.

The Lord God puts man in the garden for life, not for laziness, but for labour. “To dress it,” that is to cultivate the soil, tend and prune the trees; “to keep it,” that is to defend it from damage by animals, or from the evils arising from unchecked luxuriance. In other words, he is first given work to do (1) to improve his surroundings, (2) to provide for the necessities of life, (3) to protect from waste or loss that which is committed to his care. This work will exact abundant physical effort; it will exercise his powers of observation and judgment; it will furnish him with food for his body, and with thought for his mind.

Notice, that the garden requires to be dressed and kept; it is not a place of unplanned perfection. Man in the garden is to work, and to exercise care and compassion for the objects of his toil. ‘Paradise’ is not a place for idleness and self-indulgence but a place of happiness and rejoicing.

Friends, we are to know that we are keepers of God’s garden, but not the destroyers. Let us continue to work together to dress it and to keep the garden in which God put us. We must always remember that our Divine mandate, is to care for God’s Creation because we are part of it.

Prayer:

Thank you Father for being mindful of us. Thank You for putting us in this beautiful Garden of Yours so that we can dress it and keep it. I pray that You will continue to remind us that we are the keepers of your garden, and not the destroyers. Teach us to understand that everything in the Garden belongs to You, so that we can apply our mind to wisdom and take a good care of Your Garden.... In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Rev. Richard Lealofi
Partner in Mission from Congregational Christian Church in Samoa serving in the
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 2:4-7

TOPIC: Negative Response

We must always remember that it is neither by chance nor accident that we are living in this beautiful world in which God put us. He made everything beautiful for us all so that we can live happy and enjoy the good times that we have here on earth. So, what is our response to His goodness and His faithfulness?

The Bible tells us about the nation of Israel experiencing a time of wandering. They had escaped the bondage of slavery in Egypt and had crossed the Red Sea into the Sinai wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, but they weren't there yet. In fact, they were to wander in that wilderness for 40 years. However, God led them into a country which was so fruitful that they could eat and enjoy themselves before they continued their long journey. This country is called Carmel which is explained in the Book of Deuteronomy 8:7-9 as a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills, a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees...a land of olive oil, and honey; a land where they would eat bread and not run out and a land which would lack nothing.

So in verse 7 of Jeremiah 2, God told Jeremiah to tell them that what they were doing on the land was not good; it was not a positive response to God's goodness. Instead of a positive response, they did what was not pleasing to the Father. God said; "And I brought you into a plentiful country, to eat the fruit thereof and the goodness thereof; but when ye entered, ye defiled my land, and made mine heritage an abomination." (v. 7b KJV). The Israelites, instead of giving back to God the praise and glory which they were supposed to do, turned their backs on Him by opening themselves to sin.

This is the problem we have these days friends. God has been so faithful to us, He has been so good to us however, we respond to Him in negative ways. God can turn our situation into the unexpected. He led us into the Land of Promise so that we can be comfortable and be happy. What is our response? We must be obedient and love Him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. Give back to Him what belongs to Him...Amen.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for Your goodness and faithfulness. You are an awesome and a merciful God. Father, we pray that You will take control of our mind and life so that we will be obedient to Your Word. Forgive us for being so disobedient to You. Teach us to know not to just be happy with what You have given us, but to know how to give back to You the praise and glory that belong to You... In Jesus' name, Amen.

Rev. Richard Lealofi
Partner in Mission from Congregational Christian Church in Samoa serving in the
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 121

TOPIC: In Times of Troubles, Keep Looking To God

What is your reaction when trouble comes? Throw in the towel and give up; or are you going to keep looking on to God?

We all understand what is happening in our world today. You might compare the present to the past and you might say, "Maybe God is not doing anything about it." Even when we look at our environment, we can tell that something strange is happening. When we realize these things, then worries and troubles start to arise and we forget that God is in control of everything. We must never allow these spirits to take control of our faith. We must never forget that there is always hope in times of trouble. That HOPE depends on how strong is our faith.

May I remind you that we are pilgrims in a strange land? Our pilgrimage began the very moment that we received Jesus as Lord and Saviour and it will continue until we step out of this life and into eternity. Along the way, however, there are dangers waiting. There are thieves that would rob us of peace, joy and victory, sins that would quench the fire of God in our souls; problems that would strip us of the glory and power of God. I have been through these difficult times myself; times when dangers surrounded my life and I wondered where my help would come from. You might be there today. If so, then allow me to encourage you with this Psalm. In troubled times, keep looking to God.

The Psalmist knew that his help would not come from the hills. (In times past, the hills had been places of idolatry and false religion). The Psalmist turned his attention to the Lord. He knew that the real source of his help was the Almighty God, the Creator of the universe. The idea is this, "If God can make this world, then surely, He has the power to take care of you and me!" What a truth! Our helper is none other than the very One who stood on the edge of nothing and made everything with the Word of His power. He is able to help you and me.

Our God is bigger than our troubles and our problems. He is bigger than the world where we are living and that is why we must lift up our eyes to the hills where our help comes from.

Prayer:

Creator of heaven and earth, we thank You for reminding us that there is nowhere else in this world we can find help in times of troubles. We pray that You remind us that when trouble comes, we must never give up but we must look up to You. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Rev. Richard Lealofi
Partner in Mission from Congregational Christian Church in Samoa serving in the
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 23

TOPIC: In the Valley of The Shadow of Death

Psalm 23:4, which reads, “Yea, thou I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” (KJV), is one of the most well-known verses in the Bible. The message of Psalm 23:4 is one of comfort. We do not need to fear. God is with us, and His presence gives us strength and hope.

However, ‘valley of the shadow of death’ is possibly not the most accurate translation of the original Hebrew text. Some translations such as NIV and others; translate the phrase as “darkest valley,” resulting in Psalm 23:4 reading as, “Yea, though I walk through the darkest valley” The Hebrew word for ‘shadow of death’ is sal-ma-wet, which means ‘darkness’ or ‘dark shadows’. It contains the same root as the Hebrew word for ‘death’ (ma-wet), so it is easy to see why some Bible translators include the mention of death in Psalm 23:4.

In addition, the concept of darkness fits much better in the context of Psalm 23. Verses 1–4, use the language of a ‘shepherd and his sheep’ to describe our relationship with God: “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters.... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:1–4). Sheep do not understand the concept of death. They do understand, though, that entering a dark valley can be dangerous. The point of Psalm 23:4 is that, even when we might have reason to be afraid, we do not need to fear, because God is with us, and He will take care of us. He, like a shepherd, knows what He is doing and has our best interests in mind.

Friends, I believed that many people fear death, and those facing death certainly feel as if they are in a ‘dark valley.’ But even in death we do not need to fear, for God is with us, and He will protect and comfort us through it all. Let us remember that when we are ‘in the valley of the shadow of death’, we must never fear, because our God is the God of the valley and He is also the God of the mountain who will never leave us helpless in that valley.

Prayer:

God Almighty, we thank You for Your Word today. Thank You for being a Good Shepherd to us. Continue to be with us in our valleys to lead and to guide us so that we can be able to overcome them. Strengthen our faith so that we will not fear when we are in the darkest valley of our journey. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Rev. Richard Lealofi
Partner in Mission from Congregational Christian Church in Samoa serving in the
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 24:1-6

TOPIC: The Empty Earth

This is not what the Creator wants the earth to be. As we know from the creation story, God created everything good and He fills the earth with different kinds of good things; "And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good..." (Genesis 1:31). God doesn't want us to live in an empty environment where there is nothing we can rely on for survival. He wants us to be happy while we spend few days or few months or few years on this earth.

However, friends, to maintain the beautiful and fruitful earth, we need to keep our relationship with God close. The great temptation for Christians as well as for the Jews is to take God's grace for granted; even worse, to feel a sense of superiority, because we are God's chosen people. The way to overcome that temptation is to remember that with the privilege of being God's people comes the responsibility to remain faithful; to allow God to be God in every part of our lives.

That was the thing that the people of Judah had forgotten. They forgot that God's covenant with them required them to be faithful. The other problem is that they ignored God's laws and did whatever they wanted. They allowed sin to take over their lives instead of God. That is why God sent Isaiah to tell them that they would face the consequences of their sin and no one could escape from it. Verse 6 speaks about what would happen to the earth and they that dwell in it as it says; "Therefore, hath the curse devoured the earth; and they that dwell therein are desolate, therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men left."

Friends, we must be careful of how we live. We must not take God's grace for granted. As a matter of fact, we are serving a merciful God, but remember that He is a jealous God. We are told over and over again that we must persevere, stand firm, and remain faithful to the God who called us. When we do that, we will receive the crown of glory at the end...In Jesus' name.

Prayer:

Eternal Father, God of mercy and love. We thank You for another chance that you've given to us. Thank You for Jesus Christ Your Son who died for us, and the hope that is before us if we remain faithful. We are blessed Lord by Your Word today. We pray to You O God, to help us to know that we must allow You to be our God in every part of our lives. Teach us Lord to live right with You and to keep your commandments ...In Jesus' name, Amen.

Rev. Richard Lealofi
Partner in Mission from Congregational Christian Church in Samoa serving in the
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 46:1-5

TOPIC: God is Always There

There are times when we encounter problems in our lives, that we tend to question the existence of God. It seems to me personally that we only expect good times instead of thinking that there are bad times as well. Our journey can be rough sometimes, but we need to know that even in the midst of calamities, God is always there.

Psalm 46 is a well-known psalm. It is a psalm of prayer and praise designed for personal interaction with the Almighty. It was written specifically to and about the Jews in Jerusalem. They are called to be confident that God is always with them, no matter what circumstances they are facing. Verses 3 and 4 speak about some calamities that can cause people to fear like earthquake, volcanic eruption, and tsunami etc. When we read verse 4, we can see that the focus switches from trouble and fear to references to the city of God, the place where the Most High dwells. There is no other place than heaven or the New Jerusalem, the place of which the psalmist said in verse 5 "God is in the midst of her, and shall not be moved".

Friends, we see what is happening to our world today. The weather is not the same as it was, wars in some part of the world and violence everywhere however, we are reminded today that whatever happens in our journey, we must never lose focus. God is our refuge, He is our strength and a very present help in times of trouble. If we know that the presence of God can calm our situation, then we will neither fear nor be afraid when we are in the midst of these challenges of life. One song writer wrote "If Jesus is in the vessel we can smile at the storm, smile at the storm, until He takes me home." Only Jesus can rescue and save us when we are in the midst of calamity.

Prayer:

God of Heaven and Earth, You are our refuge and strength, and a very present help in troubles. Help us to know that there is no one like You. Allow us to know more about You Oh Lord. Help us to understand that in the midst of calamity, you are there for us. Increase our faith so that we won't lose our focus when we face trials and challenges in our lives. Thank You for who You Are, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Rev. Richard Lealofi
Partner in Mission from Congregational Christian Church in Samoa serving in the
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 1:26-31

TOPIC: Called to be Stewards of the Earth

News just released by NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies in New York states: "October 2017 was the second warmest October in 137 years of modern record-keeping"! The previous month (September) was not significantly different either. This rise in global temperature is caused by human activity, which has changed the chemical balance of our atmosphere. The culprit in all this is Carbon Dioxide, the build-up of which traps the sun's radiation within the earth's atmosphere, causing the earth's temperature to rise.

God appointed us humans as his stewards upon the earth (Genesis 1:28). Unfortunately, there are some for whom this verse means that, as human beings, we stand outside of nature, and because of this, we possess absolute authority to exploit nature as we see fit. But, far from legitimizing the exploitation of nature, this verse is actually saying that we are all accountable to God to whom all creation belongs. Nature must be given its proper place in the covenant between God and ourselves through the practice of economic justice. Failing to do so will only result in the gradual destruction of our planet.

Already, we are beginning to see this happening! Sea levels are rising and our weather patterns are becoming more extreme. This means that some Pacific islands could simply disappear beneath the oceans; there will be more heat waves and wildfires; more intense major storms; more rain followed by longer and drier periods of drought, which could wipe out agriculture in some regions of the world and displace millions of people.

We must begin to see that global warming is the result, not just of large corporations who heedlessly emit tons of waste each year into our atmosphere and waterways in the name of profit-making, but also from the individual lifestyle choices you and I make each day. It all adds up. Did you know, for example, that each one of us produces 11 tons of Carbon Dioxide every year, simply by the choices we make?

So what can we do? Well, we can begin by walking short distances instead of driving. We may also want to consider changing the conventional light bulbs in our homes to energy-saving ones. When you next go to the supermarket, why not take along grocery bags made of cloth, instead of using plastic bags, which take roughly 500 years to decompose, thereby creating further problems of littering. These are just some of the many simple ways in which we can take care of our environment and preserve it for future generations. Be on the lookout for more ways to cut down on your carbon emissions, and reduce pollution. By so doing, you will be helping to save our world from further devastation. Why not start today?

Prayer:

O Lord, forgive us for the ways in which we have abused, raped and exploited the environment for selfish gain. Help me to do all I can to love and care for the environment as you would. Amen.

Rev. Norman Francis
The United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 37:1-2

TOPIC: Disciples Survey the Situation

When life changes or is presented in an unfavourable manner we are often uncomfortable. We want the situation to change but sometimes we want that to happen on its own. If we want change we need to know what needs changing. Before we can shape a better future, we need an assessment of the present situation and get the details of the issue. We need to be in touch with a situation before we can think about impacting it for good. We need to have a sense of what the ideal would be. Sometimes we are out of touch with our context which needs us to impact it.

So God places Ezekiel in the middle of the issue that needed change. Some of our towns/cities are in trouble but we avoid trouble by taking the route that will distance us from the ills and problems. Ezekiel not only saw the state of the bones, but recognized that they were many. 'A great many bones' symbolizes the whole community. The phrase 'very dry' makes the situation appear far beyond the reach of resuscitation.

In order to know the magnitude of the issues that need changing we need to get up close, inspect and assess. The bones were representations of his land and people; an indication of the situation. Like the context of Ezekiel 37 many communities reflect devastation, brokenness, despair, dryness. There are microcosms and representations of the bigger and wider issues around us that we need to notice.

Question:

1. As a disciple of Christ how would you go about assessing a situation which obviously requires action for justice?
2. When you recognise the enormity of the problem, how would you apply yourself to making a difference?

Prayer:

Almighty God, open my eyes to the adverse and unacceptable issues in my context that need my critical assessment of it. Let me not be insular and blind to my context. Help me to see the issues that I might have been skirting/ avoiding instead of being smack in the centre of things. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Rev. Margaret Downer-Messias
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 37:3

TOPIC: Disciples See Possibilities of Transformation

God wants to confront us with the situation and our role in its transformation. "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." God's question, "Can these bones live?" is a question about the possibility for renewal, restoration and revival. This is a question of hope. When we look at our lives, our Church, our nation, our world- this question of possibility must be asked. Can there be a transformation, a turning around of the present circumstances?

The sovereign Lord asks this question of the mortal one. We would probably ask God this question ourselves but God turns the question to us humans. If we are in a situation of decline and we do not ask this question, it is either that we do not recognize a problem, we do not care or we have already given up hope. We have to see the possibilities of transformation; we have to possess hope if we are to be relevant to our context.

If Christians are distant or see no possibility of hope then we cease to be relevant in this world as we are called to be salt and light. If we lose the passion and the concern then we would not be serving our purpose in this world. God asked the mortal if the bones which are many and very dry can live to confront us with the situation but also for us to check our attitude and perspective of hope and concern. If we can see a glimmer of hope, possibility- God is willing to work with us.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, help me to examine my heart to see if I still have hope for community, country and world. I pray that I might hope and dream for new and fresh possibilities of transformation and healing, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev. Margaret Downer-Messias
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 37:4

TOPIC: The Solution lies in Action

"He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, "O Lord God, you know."

It is the usual approach to seek God's help and that is good. But what if in the midst of seeking God's help we realize that we are called not just to pray and leave it 'all up to God' who will somehow solve the problems of the world without our input and action? Note how it is the Divine who asks the mortal the question. Why does God need our input, our view or participation? God expects us to be agents of change.

Often we pray not expecting that we will play any part in the answer to prayer. Can my home, city, country be better? This question is to spur us to action. It forces us to do something. Forces us to dream, hope and to act to transform what might have died or is dying. We often say, "If only God would just do something", not realizing that the solution is within our grasp. The solution has already been deposited within us by God. The solution may be dormant within us but is ready to be awakened for action.

Question:

1. Think of situations you or others consider hopeless. How could a changed perspective as an active part of the solution make a difference in the situation?
2. What can you translate your hope for change into action for transformation?

Prayer:

Gracious God, help me to see what you have deposited within me to address situations around me. Help me to see that I cannot distance myself from the solution to the problems around me. Thank you that you want to partner with me, your disciple, for healing and transformation of this world, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev. Margaret Downer-Messias
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 37:4

TOPIC: Disciples Set Out to Action

Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

It was not God who prophesied but rather God commanding the mortal to prophecy. Whereas it is God who is the Source and Power to transform bad situations, God considers us as agents of transformation. We are called to be partners with God. God wants us to be engaged with our context and take action. We have been blessed with abilities to act upon our situations. We have to take action while we are empowered by God.

We ought to hear in our desperate situation the command of God to "Prophecy to these bones". The command to impact upon the situation; the command to take action with God having our backs. The command to the mortal to prophecy speaks of our participation and role in renewal and transformation. When we pray to God for transformation, God equips and says now you go forth and act upon the situation. We are being given the command to be agents of transformation therefore our action has God's blessings. We cannot sit around inactive waiting for God to use some means other than ourselves. God allows us to share in the mission of transformation, "...you prophecy".

The Church is said to be 'Apostolic', which means sent ones. But the word 'prophecy' also indicates that God has a word for the situation of dryness. The word of God is vital to renewal; It is the word of hope that with God all things are possible; the word of God that we are not forsaken or forgotten. The command to prophecy indicates God's confidence that what is dead can live.

Action:

Think of a situation which is in need of transformation. Be deliberate in your time of prayer in asking God to lead you to His Word to be spoken in that situation.

Prayer:

Almighty God, I pray for your enabling power to equip and strengthen me for the mission of transformation. Reveal to me the situations that require me to speak or otherwise act upon. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev. Margaret Downer-Messias
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands



My prayers and reflections on this week

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 37:7,8

TOPIC: Staying the Course

“So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.”

In response to the prophet's words, the bones are re-membered, bound by sinews, re-fleshed, covered with skin. However, they lacked power to move into action. This reminds us that renewal and transformation sometimes happen in stages. The first step of the transformation process entailed the laying on of sinews. The bones have become bodies but, Ezekiel observes, the bodies are lifeless, for there is no breath within them.

Sometimes we need to be patient; but also we need to seek the right source for our renewal. Here is where we can get discouraged and not stay the course to see transformation to its completion. Here is where we can expect that things should immediately fall into place the minute we set out to do God's mission.

Question:

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you acted with conviction of God's will and yet did not see your expected outcome? How did you handle it?
2. How could you encourage someone who is having a similar experience?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, forgive me if I have become impatient with the pace at which God is moving. Help me to remember that this is your mission and that you are in control of the outcome. Help me to remain faithful. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev. Margaret Downer-Messias
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 37: 9,10

TOPIC: Sourcing the Power

"Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude."

Note that at this stage of the renewal process the bodies are there but with little effect and cannot impact their surroundings. There was no renewal until the Breath/ Spirit was in the body. There is no renewal of Church without the wind or breath of God. It is not by our might, nor by power, but by God's Spirit that the mission of transformation will be accomplished. This keeps us humble and focused knowing it is all God.

Without the Spirit we are merely existing and not living in the power and victory that God has in store for us. We can have standing structures but no vitality or effectiveness without the Spirit of God. We can have programmes but fail to be effective without the life-giving Spirit. It's not only our bodies that need life-giving Spirit but our ministry as well. The Spirit and Word are needed in combination for effectiveness.

We too, like Ezekiel, must summon from the four corners of the earth, the life-giving Spirit of God. The phrase in Ezekiel for "breath in" is the same word found in Genesis 2 to create a living human being. We need the life force, the Spirit of God to enliven us. Just as God created in the beginning by breathing the breath of life into humanity, God wants to enliven us again.

Prayer:

Gracious God I pray that your Spirit and the Word will permeate me and the ministry to which you have called me. Help me not to attempt renewal on my own. Grant me the focus as only you God can enliven the mission of transformation. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev. Margaret Downer-Messias
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 37:11-14

TOPIC: Setting Things in Perspective

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

God outlined the full situation to Ezekiel. God gave the prophet an overview of the reality of the situation. We need to have a correct perspective of the situation around us. We cannot embellish the situation but face its glaring realities with all its pain. We are called by God in this text to carry the message of hope to those in despair. We have been given the mandate to work in the ministry of transformation and renewal. God gives us glimpses of, not only the adverse conditions but also, the plan to transform things.

God gives us hope of a reversal of ill fortunes. This is a glorious promise that God has seen the situation, that God will equip us for the task of renewal; and that God will help as we become partners in the mission of transformation, healing and revival. God will get the glory, "then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

Prayer:

All powerful God, I rejoice that you have not forgotten us in our plight. I praise you for your promises of a brighter tomorrow. Thank you that the present adverse condition is not the last word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev. Margaret Downer-Messias
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 3:1-12

TOPIC: Liberation then Worship

'Let my People Go so that they may worship me'.

This was the theme given for a year to meditate on as a theological community in our seminary. In the very first day of the academic year, as soon as I entered the chapel I saw the theme, I felt that the theme is telling or teaching me something without expecting that I am ready to listen to or learn something. But the message was strongly piercing my thoughts that, 'one cannot worship God when s/he is not yet liberated from her/his bondage.' This lesson led me to further question myself as a theologian:

Is the church really liberated enough from all its bondage to worship God as a faith community?

If yes, then why is church still a place where all kinds of dominant ideologies are being imposed by the dominant forces over the marginalized community in the society?

Why does the church continue to fail most of the times in proving its solidarity with the communities in need?

Why is the church's mission agenda not concerned about its own imperial ideological bondage but instead tends to proclaim the salvation or liberation of the world?

The given text for today's meditation is the salvation/liberation story of the Bible, and it is the core of the salvation history. It demands our faithfulness to God to be tested once again to determine whether we are really liberated from our bondage which is preventing us from encountering God. God told Moses: "when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God" (3:12).

Question:

Am I liberated in fact? If yes, from what?

Prayer:

Lord, I want to worship you as a liberated one, with all my mind, soul and heart. Thank you for reminding us that we cannot worship if we are not liberated from all our social, cultural, religious, and imperial ideological bondage. Liberate us and help us to worship only you. Amen.

Vedha Kani
Church of South India

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: John 4: 19-27

TOPIC: The Hour has Come

Once a trans-gender woman asked a question to the group of Pastors, "I want to love and worship Jesus, but why does the church not accept me with full dignity? Can Jesus point out anyone whose worship is not acceptable?" Yes, Jesus did. He told the Samaritan women that the traditionalized, particularized and institutionalized worship has problems (v.21). God seeks his worshipers to worship "in Spirit and truth" (v.24) for God cannot be confined within a dogma, denomination, religion, theology or concept.

Unfortunately, in the process of becoming politically and economically stable, the Israelite community had a shift in its nature of being a worshiping, liberated, nomadic community to temple/religious-centred and monarchy/dominion-oriented community. Consequently, encountering and experiencing God was constrained and limited by and within the dominant body of the religion. Jesus is sharing the need of the hour (v.23) to a woman who is eliminated from the community by these religionized tyrannical ideologies.

It is the woman who was thrown out by the religion or worshiping ideologies and systems, who can and should proclaim the Messiah who is promising salvation. God of life and salvation cannot be proclaimed or worshiped by the oppressive community. Therefore, it was the Samaritan woman who proclaimed the Messiah; not the religious authorities or even the called ones - the disciples, but the one who is not called by the church and instead was named as defiled and illicit to preach the good news, the Samaritan woman.

Question:

How can Christ be seen outside confined religious beliefs?

Prayer:

Vulnerable God, thank you for love that was shown in Jesus' vulnerability. You make the vulnerable community as the channel of liberation. I want to worship you in Spirit and truth. Help us to journey with you beyond our religious and doctrinal ideologies and traditional understanding.

Vedha Kani
Church of South India

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Job 29:11-17

TOPIC: Worship is Becoming!

The church is known as the community of Disciples of Jesus. The society where we live in discriminates by caste, colour, class and religion, and these social evils are not yet challenged by the church or in other words, our faith or our gospel has not yet questioned them with social commitment. While being a community of worshipers, and claiming ourselves as a community of disciples of equals, experiencing these evils among the Christian societies raises a serious question, whether worshipping God is a religious act or lifestyle?

It is very interesting to read Job's lamentations in which he claims his religiosity not by rituals but by his faithfulness to the needy who were around him. The text clearly demonstrates that he was found and testified as "righteous" by God because he was becoming one among the poor, destitute or disabled persons. It is "becoming like" one whom we worship, who has sent his Son to become a vulnerable one. Faithfulness to God is not in uttering God's name or doing religious duties, or just praying, instead it is

"To become an eye to a blind; feet to the lame; a father to a needy; champion to the stranger's cause; delivering the poor; affirming life to the widow; destroying the power of the injustice" (29:11-17; Chp. 31).

If, our faith is not requiring us to become vulnerable with the vulnerable and to fight for justice then it has to be questioned. Of course, our faith will be questioned not by God, but by the poor and marginalized, whose justice is not realized.

It is more disturbing to know that the Christian community has understood charity as what the Bible expects us to do for the needy. The social view of the poor and marginalization may be understood as a manifestation of economic inequality and social discrimination. So the Christian communities are supposed to show solidarity with them in their struggle to get back their identity and dignity.

This may require us to give away our privileges and resources. That is what Jesus taught us in the Gospels. Are we ready to lose them?

Prayer:

Let's pray that God may give his strength to have a "becoming" faith not a preaching faith, and let our commitment lead us towards "becoming" community instead of being a religious community.

Vedha Kani
Church of South India

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 3:7-12

TOPIC: Losing Identity and Gaining Identity

Today's world is witnessing a war for identity and it is a world of identity politics. It may be a social (caste, class, colour), political, national, religious, linguistic, military or economic power identity over other nations. Every nation, kingdom, department wants to rule over the other in order to establish its own space and identity in the society at large. Even God when he disclosed himself to Moses, He was talking about, who he is and, what his name is. (Exodus 3:13-14).

Likewise, Jesus, in the time of his earthly ministry, was imploring his disciples again and again with one question: "Who do you say I am?" and "Who do people say I am?" Jesus was longing to be discerned as "Messiah" by his followers. Identity is very significant in anyone's life, whether God or human or any kind of creatures. Interestingly, the Scripture indicates that God revealed (became known by his people, gained) his identity by losing his identity of being "God." For instance, God said to Moses, "I have come down to deliver them" (Exodus 3:8). By coming down and dwelling among the people who were made slaves, God was revealed as "I Am who I Am." It is the same with Jesus who was known or made known as Messiah by the people who were under Roman subjugation. He emptied himself from being one among the Godhead and, incarnated and dwelled among the mortals.

This profound theology of identity of God and Jesus in fact challenges us to lose the identity which we have gained by exploiting others and nature and by exploiting ideologies. It is emphasized that in order to gain our identity in Christ we need to lose what we have now which doesn't have any space in our relationship with God and the community of God. It is not at all possible to be a disciple of Jesus without getting rid of the old.

Exercise:

Make deliberate attempt to lose some of our identities which we have received out of our privileges (colour, gender, caste, class, nationality, religion), and try to experience vulnerability. Make sure that, it is genuinely attempted.

Prayer:

Lord may we be willing to be vulnerable so that we can identify with those to whom you have sent us. Amen.

Vedha Kani
Church of South India

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Acts 3:1-11

TOPIC: I Have Only the Name of Jesus

If anyone from outside the church asks a question of Christians: What do you have? then what will be the church's or a disciple's response? The answer is likely to be, "We have silver and gold, even properties and business in the name of Jesus, but we don't have Jesus." There is an economic or social disparity, where Jesus cannot be part of the community. The context of the text (Acts 3:1-10) is the same in the 21st century in which the marginalized communities are excluded from the church. The text shows, they were not included within the worshipping community as they were considered "outcasts." But when the religious norms and laws were against the underprivileged societies, Jesus' disciples challenged those religious structures through Jesus' name.

Jesus' name was not just a name for the community of disciples. It was an alternative identity through which the followers of Jesus were able to challenge the dominating and oppressing, privileged group's socio-economic ethics. This was the name through which disciples were able to perform life-affirming activities and promise liberation to the poor, children, gentiles, and women. Besides, Jesus' name was an identity of community which was inclusive in its nature as everyone could experience the realization of the kingdom of God without any differences.

'Self-emptying' is an important milestone in the journey of becoming a disciple or a community of disciples. Only then will worship be possible with the joy of salvation (vv. 8-10).

Question:

To the worshipping Community:

1. Can we hear any noise of joy by the liberated person or group in our worship?
2. Can the church boldly say to the distorted world that I have the name which will empower you to challenge the empire/privileged groups?
3. What do I have, as a disciple of Jesus? Silver, gold or Jesus?

Prayer:

Lord, guide us to look within ourselves and to see whether we truly honour and value the name of Jesus above the material resources, the identities and positions we hold. Help us to be willing to empty ourselves and worship you joyfully. Amen.

Vedha Kani
Church of South India

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Galatians 4:19

TOPIC: In the Pain of Childbirth for Christ to be formed

Can everyone go through the pain of giving birth to new life irrespective of gender? Once a preacher told the congregation of the culturally-biased and traditional misogynistic church that they were quoting Paul often to stop the women from taking an active part in the church. However here Paul says that he is in the pain of giving birth. The preacher continued to say that every disciple of Jesus has to have the pain of giving life to the one who is on the edge of her/his life.

Our commitment in worshipping God is taking on the struggle and pain in order to manifest the teachings of Jesus in our community. It is also our commitment to create worship discourses to form Christ in the core of the community life and ethics. This is ultimately against the powers and forces that spoil the life of humanity and the natural environment.

It is the mission of the church growing as a community towards matured spirituality to affirm people's life (the little ones - v.19) by making Christ the centre. We can worship God in truth by forming the Christ among those who are made weak, destitute, and have lost hope in life.

Question:

Self-realization: To what extent have I suffered or taken pain for other's sake/ to bring hope and justice to the needy in my spiritual journey?

Prayer:

Lord, hear our prayers of confession for empty demonstrations of worship and discipleship which do not honour you.

Vedha Kani
Church of South India

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 24

TOPIC: The Earth is the Lord's

When a question was raised by a congregation in the church regarding commoditizing the natural sources, the church answered that "It is the Government's issue." Can our daily life be divided into the spiritual and secular? Does not our faith challenge these kinds of issues?

Our God is the God of Creation, and the Scripture shows that God is often mentioned claiming the creatures as his own; because creation reflects his image. If all creation is God's own, then how can it be commoditized? Nature is a life-giving source and it shouldn't be controlled by any force. In this concern, even the church and Christian theology have played a major role through theology and interpretation which have always been against the concern of nature. However, the most disgusting reality is that even our faith is not questioning this issue, though it is very much against our basic faith affirmation of God as the Creator of all and the One who owns what he has created.

The psalmist beautifully calls upon nature to praise and thank God along with him (Psalm 148). Worship is something which can be experienced more when we worship God with all creation. God's manifestation and revelation are more connected and expressive with nature. Even the salvation history of the Old Testament begins its story of God's revelation with the narrative of burning bush (Exodus 3).

If our spirituality is strong enough to affirm the life of all creation then our theological and doctrinal claims will encourage the faith communities to challenge the profit-oriented economy and the imperial ideologies which just devastate the natural sources by turning it to resources for their own kingdom. We, as a worshipping community, witness our God as the God of Justice, who will do justice to his creation when it is misused and of course, it has been groaning in labour pains for liberation (Romans 8:22).

Action:

Practice our interpretation of the word of God with nature not only with the spiritual realm. Teach our children how to worship God along with nature; affirming nature which in turn will affirm the human life.

Prayer:

Creator God, help us to recognise that you are the Source of all life and that we must live in harmony with all creation. Help us to challenge faulty thinking about the care of creation both in our worship and our discipleship.

Vedha Kani
Church of South India

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Luke 9:49-50

TOPIC: Forge Solidarity to Evangelize

On June 13 2017, the Hindustan Times published an article on the strategy of dominant castes to strengthen their hold on Dalit communities in North India by erecting statues of Raja Suheldev, Rani Jhalkari Bai and Lakhan Pasi whom they remember as heroes. Although these figures have no historicity yet they serve a useful purpose. Rajesh K Mishra, a sociologist, is of the view that “Dominant groups try to woo communities by highlighting the role of their icons.” The strategy for raising alternative heroes is an attempt to break the cohesiveness of the community by igniting a debate that could potentially alienate a section of that community. In other words, it is a mischievous strategy to divide and rule.

However, when we share the good news of Christ, the aim is to build community not to divide people. For disadvantaged communities like Dalits, the key response is solidarity. In the text, Jesus dissuaded his disciples from creating a rift between them and those who were engaged in a similar ministry as theirs. The lesson in this for us today is that we need to forge relationships of solidarity with those who share our vision to resist the tyranny of the dominant. The act of strengthening community ties among the disadvantaged people is an aspect of evangelism that should not be underestimated. Christians should get involved in building solidarity in ekklesia as well as with other struggling communities as a way of lending solidarity to them in their struggle against injustice.

Prayer:

You desire O heavenly Father that under your care all should live as free and equal people; grant us the wisdom to build bridges of friendship and solidarity with those who struggle to resist the tyranny of the dominant in our communities. Amen.

Dr. Fr. Monodeep Daniel
Church of North India

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Luke 13:31-32

TOPIC: To Disclose the Truth and Not to Retreat

"Women may break track records by serving in army and flying aircrafts, but nurturing children will always be their responsibility," said Chandrakanta at a women's training camp held in June 2017. She highlighted the role of Indian women as "nurturers" and "nation builders". To the question why men as fathers do not have the same responsibility, she referred to the mythological "Mahabharata" in which Abhimanyu learnt the art of warfare while still in the womb. "The youth do not know history. There is historical evidence that children learn things while still in the womb. How else did Abhimanyu break the chakravyuh¹?"

It is an example of metamorphosing myth into history to justify the subordination of women. Mythology overrides reality and democracy gets distorted. In the newspaper clip cited above, the subordination of women is reinforced. It makes them support war games perpetuated by men to enhance their feeling of false pride under the guise of patriotism. A deliberate sly and cunning rationale is applied to justify the scenario.

In the text, Jesus uses the metaphor "fox" used by Jesus, which aptly challenges that kind of cunning rationale that appeals to a nationalistic sentiment as a strategy for subjugation. Herod used that kind of tactic, as did the Pharisees and they thereby subordinated others. They could not bear the truth. As Christians, we have a responsibility to disclose the truth. We face the threat of the "fox" in evangelism. But evangelism is not manipulation or subjugation of people. In the midst of wickedness, we are called to speak the truth. The question is, "Will you stand for truth in the face of threat?"

Prayer:

You have given us the gift of life, O Lord our creator. What more can we ask for? With gratitude and courage, we commit to speaking the truth in love and to standing with those who are subordinated by the powerful. We will not retreat at any cost. Amen.

Dr. Fr. Monodeep Daniel
Church of North India

¹ Chakravyuh (English: "Squared formation") is a 2012 Indian political drama film directed by Prakash Jha.

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Mark 9:41

TOPIC: Do Not Deter Others to Serve You

During his summer hunting expeditions, Firuz Shah Tughlaq (AD 1351-1388), who later became the king of Delhi Sultanate, became very thirsty. His company had run out of water. At that moment he spotted a pretty girl on the road carrying water. Apparently, she was lost. The prince requested for a mouthful of water and she complied. After quenching his thirst, the prince fell in love with her. After he became the king, he gave her his grand hunting lodge nearby. Later she turned it into an inn, the ruins of which are called Bhuli-Bhatiyari-ka-Mahal today, named after the Bhatiyara community she belonged to.

The Bhatiyara, occupy a low social status and are expected to serve the dominant higher castes. By attending to Firuz, the young woman fulfilled her duty to serve which other Dalits cannot because they are of low caste status. The pollution laws that govern the caste system prevent them from even serving water to people of other castes. Taboos about untouchability are horrendous and deep rooted because they have a long history in India. Abolishing the caste system requires a re-orientation of the worldview of the Indian society.

In the biblical incident at Jacob's well, the woman initially refrained from giving water to Jesus due to Jewish ceremonial laws that deemed Samaritans untouchable (John 4). Jesus changed her worldview by affirming her worth and taking her point of view into consideration in their conversation. After the encounter, she went to her village and brought others to meet Jesus. She set an example for evangelism by bridging Jewish and Gentile cultures. She did not create a private niche for Christ. She reached out to evangelize. In what ways does your culture deter you from serving others?

Prayer:

Gracious heavenly Father, you sent your Son Jesus to us. When He was thirsty and asked the Samaritan woman for water, he crossed a forbidden cultural barrier. Grant us the same humility to ask others to help us when we need assistance. Remove from us culturally-bound traces of arrogance, superiority and ego. Amen.

Dr. Fr. Monodeep Daniel
Church of North India

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Mark 12:14-15

TOPIC: The Dilemma of Wonder and Futility of this World

The Hindustan Times issue of June 14, 2017 reported the dilemma of farmers in central India. The bumper onion crop did not have adequate demand in the market. They were, forced to sell it for a rupee per kilo - a great loss. The government decided to bail them out by buying it at eight rupees per kilo. The farmers found standing in long queues at state procurement centres distressing. Ran Singh, an exasperated farmer said, "The farmer is caught between two boats: should we plant the next crop or stand in line to get paid for the current crop?"

In the text, the Pharisees and Herodians thought Jesus faced a similar dilemma with regard to paying imperial taxes. Should he pay or not to pay tax? Jesus' responses confounded his detractors.

Life is full of dilemmas and it is difficult to attempt a solution without reasoning. In the same way, we need to apply reason to situations we encounter when evangelizing. What is good news for a farmer who has to make the difficult choice between staying in the queue to sell his crop and planting the new crop on which his/her livelihood depends?

Just as logos pertains to God, reason pertains to humans. The ability to analyze and synthesize helps us to develop ideas and create categories, compare and contrast for problem-solving. In this way we continue to prayerfully build a deposit of knowledge and collective wisdom that we can tap on for the complex life-situations and dilemmas we encounter in evangelism. Education is a lifelong process. How are you continuing to educate yourself?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, you are the source of knowledge and understanding. Grant me wisdom in the light of Christ so that I may see the wonder, the futility of this world and the limitations of my own mind. Help me to rise above the dilemmas of life with your illumination. Amen.

Dr. Fr. Monodeep Daniel
Church of North India



My prayers and reflections on this week

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 1:27

TOPIC: God's Dignity is Wrapped in Human Dignity

The Times Of India carried a dreadful report in the mid-June issue about sanitation workers in Udaipur who in a bid to shame women defecating in the open tried to photograph them. Khan, a local man, intervened in the intense argument that had ensued. Khan told the team that the women had no other option because their homes did not have toilets and the community facility was out of order due to lack of maintenance. The argument turned ugly. The sanitation team thrashed Khan, badly wounding him. He was taken to the hospital where he later died.

This is a case of brazen violation of human rights. The sanitation workers failed to see their negligence in maintaining the public toilets. The large population of Dalits live in congested areas, in thatched single-room houses, with no space for toilets. When public toilets malfunction they have to resort to using open areas. The general attitude is that the dignity of Dalits is inconsequential.

The biblical injunction "You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and her daughter" (Leviticus 18:17) indicates clearly that God desires the respect and protection of women's dignity. Because women have the splendor of God's image in them, to respect a woman's dignity is to honor God. For that reason, a woman deserves justice. Each day we have to resolve prayerfully to honor the splendor of God's image in all people, especially those who are considered to be the least among us: women, strangers, people of other faiths or no faith. Such a deed is an act of evangelism.

Prayer:

Lord, you provided Adam and Eve garments of skin to uphold their dignity; your dignity is bound up with human dignity; grant that I may protect the dignity of all woman. If need be, give me the boldness of your Son Jesus who protected the dignity of the women from their bloodthirsty accusers. Amen.

Dr. Fr. Monodeep Daniel
Church of North India

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 20:12

TOPIC: Elderly People need God's Love

A Hindustan Times report estimates that 20.8% of the elderly people in India are abused, compared to 43.7% in Egypt and 0.2% in Britain. Most elderly people in India live with their families, so they know their abusers. The abuse is mainly psychological such as demeaning name-calling, and public shaming which undermine self-worth in the elderly. Other abuses include deprivation of basic needs, such as food, housing, clothing and medical care. Family members may also destroy their property, and seclude them by preventing contact with friends and family. The elderly are considered a burden because they are past their productive years.

Discriminating against and neglecting the elderly happens in every society. Even so, the elderly, like all other people, have the right to respect and love. "Rise in the presence of the aged and honour the elderly; in doing this you will honour God" is the Lord's command (Leviticus 19:32). We do not have to go too far to meet an elderly person because they live with us. If the basis of evangelism is love, then to reach the elderly with the good news of Christ we need to bring them cheer by greeting them, conversing with them and being mindful of their needs. Simple things like getting and providing painkillers, hot water bottles and balms for their aches and paying attention to their complaints and grumbings are important. Showing love in this way and making these little efforts are delightful to the elderly and are means for them to experience God's love in a tangible way.

Prayer:

O Lord our God, you are the rock of refuge in our old age; grant us faith in your promises and hope in eternal life and love for all that is true, good and beautiful. Amen.

Dr. Fr. Monodeep Daniel
Church of North India

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 9:23-24

TOPIC: Gift of Hope

The Times Of India carried a comical report of a thirty-year-old man called Kush Chaurasia, who was discharged from a hospital in Agra city after being successfully treated for a snakebite. Before he got home, a police officer went to his village to inform his family that Kush had died. Kush's family took the police officer at his word and were utterly distraught. An hour later, Kush walked into his home. He explained to his delighted family that he had stayed a night with friends in the city. This incident triggered an investigation by the hospital authorities. It so turned out to be a case of mistaken identity. An elderly person with a similar name had died at the hospital.

This reminds me of a friend who went to see a football match at a local school. When he sat down he asked one of the boys what the score was. With a smile he said, "They are leading us 3-0." "Really", my friend said, "But you don't look discouraged." He responded with surprise, "Discouraged? Why? The referee has not blown the final whistle." The match ended with a 5-4 score in favour of the boy's team.

These incidences teach us not to get discouraged by setbacks in life. Many people blow the final whistle for themselves by giving up hope. But as long as we have life, we can overcome our setbacks. We evangelize to create communities of missional action nurtured by enduring hope.

Prayer:

Lord give me the gift of hope that I may finish the race of my life without discouragement. Help me to realise that in the race, my foot that is ahead is as good as the one behind and in the stride, both would soon change their positions. Amen.

Dr. Fr. Monodeep Daniel
Church of North India

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Mathew 15: 20-28

TOPIC: Overcoming the Violence of Silence: Listening to Unheard Youth

Are we as churches listening to the unheard voices of young people?

Senthil Kumar, a Physics scholar at Hyderabad Central University, Bal Mukundh, a final year MBBS student at All India Institute of Medical Sciences, and Rohit Vemula, a Science and Technology scholar at Hyderabad Central University all committed suicide due to caste discrimination in institutions of higher education. It highlights the plights of young people in India today. These young people's cries for justice were unheard and their pursuit of destiny abruptly ended.

Jesus gives a political answer with a shade of philosophy in response to the cry of the woman in today's text. He tells her that his jurisdiction was Israel and the lost sheep therein. The woman did not give up, until Jesus heard her voice, and in desperation, she knelt and perhaps more loudly, asked Jesus to help her. Jesus used the occasion to interpret his earlier theological answer. He asked her a question using a day-to-day example of taking bread from a child and throwing it to dogs. To this, the woman replied boldly, extending Jesus' analogy, by saying 'even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.' She made it a point to let her voice be heard at any cost. Her strong voice for healing and her cry for liberation challenged Jesus. Jesus finally responded to her in the affirmative, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.'

Are we hearing the voices of our young people? This is a challenge to us all. We need to convert and hear the voices of youth, whom we have sidelined and forgotten in our churches and societies.

Prayer:

God, who in the form of a young Jesus attended to the unheard voices of his day, give us ears to listen, a heart to make room for youth's voices and to promote youth leadership in church and society. Amen.

Rev. Raj Bharath Patta
SCM India

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 1: 26-27

TOPIC: Sexuality as God's Gift

Rey Asis is a human rights activist in Hong Kong. He is gay. Currently, he is working for the rights of migrant workers. He belongs to an inclusive Church, where he feels welcome. Rey says, "I and my sexuality are created by God and I affirm God's creation. If anyone has a problem with my sexuality then please ask God".

Rey's statement is a reminder to revisit Genesis 1:26-27. God created human beings in God's own image that includes our sexuality. God created whole beings and intends for our diversity. God deemed diversity to be very good (Gen1:31). God's creation inspires awe. Each of us is unique, wonderfully crafted. The Psalmist sings, "for it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Thus, any discrimination based on sexuality is a desecration of God's creation. Many have committed that offence and violated our relationship with God by not respecting diversity in God's creation.

Faith communities and religious institutions including many churches discriminate against the LGBTQI community calling them "sinners". The Pharisees and teachers of the law accused even Jesus for socializing with "sinners". Many churches exclude young people, who affirm their sexual diversity as God's creation. Such judgemental and homophobic attitudes of many congregations divide the house of God. We should join young people to envision an inclusive faith community, where all are welcome to celebrate communion without any prejudice.

Question:

1. What is your usual interpretation of the Bible on sexuality?
2. Should we judge people on based on their sexuality or leave that to God their creator?

Prayer:

Creator God, grant us wisdom to affirm the gift of sexual diversity. Give us a compassionate heart to be inclusive, embracing difference and celebrating diversity. Guide us to live according to the example of Christ, to share the power of your love to all with whom we live with their diverse identities.

Sunita Suna
World Student Christian Foundation

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Mark 5:41

TOPIC: Talitha Cumi

Yogita, the first-born infant daughter of an Indian couple lived only forty days before her father, who wanted a son, killed her (The Indian Express, June 11, 2016). Indian families prefer sons to daughters. Girls are considered a burden. They either abort them or kill newborn girl-children. The practice has caused a sharp decline in sex ratios. There are eight hundred and eighty-seven girls to every one thousand boys (The Hindu, December 1, 2016).

Mark narrates a life-affirming story of Jesus raising a dead girl. Jesus decides to visit the family knowing she is just a little girl and a dead one! With that act, he affirms life! The parents and disciples witness the miracle of life as he proclaims: Talitha cumi - "Little girl, I say to you, arise". Instantly, she comes back to life, stands up and begins to walk in the presence of Jesus, her family, and community!

In India girls cannot standing up for their rights. Soon after reaching puberty at around age twelve, there are restrictions on their freedom. Jesus demonstrate how to nurture the girl-child. When he asks her parents to give her food, Jesus is by extension directing us to nourish the girl-child. Many are malnourished because of discriminatory practices favour boys. Women of Jesus' time didn't enjoy equal rights. Jesus conveys a broader message by giving life back to a girl. His life-affirming action is a challenge to Jairus, a Synagogue leader to take life-affirming action for women seriously. In the same way, Jesus calls us to protect and affirm life. He reminds us as parents, communities and churches to create violence-free environments so that the girl-child has dignity and the right to enjoy her life in abundance!

Prayer:

God of life, as we remember millions of India's missing girls grant us courage to stand against violence against girl-children so that another Yogita does become a victim of patriarchal norms. Help us to affirm life.

Sunita Suna
World Student Christian Foundation

21 June

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 18: 12 -14; Luke 15: 1-7; John 10:11

TOPIC: With God – We are Never Lost!

Every year thousands of children go missing or lost across the world. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported that in 2016 - 465,676 children were reported as missing!

Children may become missing due to being taken away by non-family members or by family members. Children may become missing as a result of running away from home. Children may also become missing for other reasons such as becoming lost or injured.

Have you ever lost something you valued? A favourite toy or cellphone perhaps? How did you feel? Did you immediately start looking for it? Did you ask for help in finding it? Imagine if one of your friends got lost? Have you ever wondered if you got lost how your parents or guardians would feel? Imagine wondering if anyone would find you or if they would soon forget you...

The verses teach us that we are like sheep and sometimes stray away from God. Just like some of the times we do things that make our earthly parents sad. Those things make God very sad too, but he never gives up on us. He keeps searching for us and calling to us. Children are precious to God - each and every one of you - yes you!

Many people where Jesus lived were shepherds. They understood the value of each sheep. The verses also tell us that the shepherd rejoiced when he finds his one lost sheep - even though he had ninety-nine others. That one sheep is just as important as the others.

We are God's children and we are all important to Him. He even sent Jesus, his only Son as the Good Shepherd, to seek and save those of us who are not faithful to Jesus - to save any of his children who are lost.

Isn't it good to know that God loves us and that he will keep looking for us, when we stray, and return us to his loving arms and care? Aren't you glad that God doesn't give up on us/ his lost sheep? Aren't you glad that it's part of Jesus' job to seek and save every child?

Prayer:

Dear God and Father: We pray for all children and adults reading this prayer. If they do not yet know you as Lord and Saviour - that they will ask to be forgiven of all sins and for you to be in charge of their life from this minute and forever. May this prayer of salvation help them to know that as God's children our future is secure in Christ.

Ms. Jennifer Britton
Guyana Congregational Union

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 4:29

TOPIC: Use your Status as Ministry

We live in a time when technology is emerging faster than the church can comprehend, balance, or integrate. For many, the rush of new technology, especially as it pertains to social media (social networking sites, message boards, microblogging, YouTube, and Instagram), is speeding past our ability to critically evaluate our communications and apply biblical standards.

Social media's very public nature can serve as a good sign when something is amiss or not going well with someone. If we can login, pay attention, and listen with heart and mind as people share their innermost feelings, we will soon become aware of things we would not know otherwise.

Too often - the tendency is to keep scrolling in somewhat morbid fascination through the lives of our friends - looking for the next status 'fix' rather than listening with heart and mind. It is very possible that time and again, we miss a real opportunity to behave as Christians should. What about us as Christians? What do our status comments say about us? Are we using it to keep the 'spotlight' on ourselves? Are we using this as part of our Christian Ministry or just joining with the crowd to sow discord or to openly send an unkind or crude message? The Bible tells us that "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" - Proverbs 18:21. In literate societies, tongues include hands that write, type, paint, or sign.

Action:

Thank God for the good gift of the Internet and social media. Ask for God's help to discern with all wisdom our thoughts, words, and actions as well as the words and actions of others while on social media as we relate to others God has called us to love.

Prayer:

Pray that youth (and all persons) who know you as Lord and Saviour - that our heart's cry will be to glorify you and proclaim Jesus Christ through every message, tweet, blog post and status. Help us to spread the Gospel message through the Internet and social media, proclaiming the glories of Christ and reaching many in this generation.

Ms. Jennifer Britton
Guyana Congregational Union



Legacies for Slavery, South Africa, 2017, Courtesy of Lynnette Li.

My prayers and reflections on this week

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: 1 Samuel 3:2-18

TOPIC: Welcoming the Uncomfortable

During my father's funeral we were gathered at the graveside. This point in the farewell experience tends to be very emotional and quite difficult for members of the family. In fact it was the moment I dreaded the most.

As we stood in the graveyard of Meadowrest Memorial Gardens, the heavy silence was punctuated only by the sound of the shoveling of dirt and the mixing of cement – both reminding me of the stark reality of why we were standing in the beautiful gardens on that Saturday morning. Beside the sniffles, those were the only sounds until...until my five year old nephew looked up to the sky to the passing airplane, took a deep breath and yelled "Airplane!". That seemingly uncomfortable outburst which could have been considered completely inappropriate for the somber moment was unwelcome for many who quickly expected my nephew to be reprimanded. Not me. I hugged him tightly and whispered, "Thank you baby". He had given me the gift of joy in the midst of sorrow. He caused me to take my mind off my 78 year old deceased father to whom I was saying goodbye and reminded me of the life and hope which continue in his descendant...my 5 year old nephew.

When God called Samuel he was not even aware of the voice of God. Eli coached him, and helped him to understand how to listen and how to discern the motive and intentions of the voices he would hear as he grew. We too play that role in our Sunday Schools and with our youth groups. We guide and coach our young people. But how willing are we to hear the things they have to tell us? How often we become uncomfortable with the things they say to us from their perspective of youth?

If we are to be an inclusive community which affirms and values young people and children, we must be prepared to welcome their input and often to receive that which makes us uncomfortable. Often, in that uncomfortable speech we find nuggets of truth which call us out on inconsistencies in our life as community. Often in that uncomfortable speech we find a fresh beckoning of Christ which we would not have normally discerned because we would have become set in our routines. Could we dare to welcome the uncomfortable from our children and young people?

Prayer:

Loving God, give us the patience and genuineness to live in authentic relationship with children and young people. Help us to take the time to listen to them but also to truly hear what they are saying. May we be humble enough to receive their wisdom and to recognize that you can speak through anyone.

Mrs. Karen Francis
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Proverbs 13:24; Proverbs 19:18

TOPIC: Spare the Rod?

The phrase “spare the rod and spoil the child” is a proverb which refers to the principle that if one does not discipline a child, the child’s development will be negatively affected.

In October 2017 news broke of a video clip of a woman in Jamaica beating her child using the flat side of a machete. The incident is purported to have taken place in November of the year before. This resulted in a firestorm of condemnation, commiseration and pontifications on corporal punishment with references to the vestiges of slavery and accusations against Christianity with scripture references in Proverbs referring to beating a child.

One could either take the position that it is sometimes the case that children should be beaten in an effort to enforce discipline or to go to an opposing position that a child should never be beaten in an effort to enforce discipline. Most agree that there is too much indiscipline in our Jamaican society, and others may also speak similarly about the prevalence of indiscipline in their own societies. What is required is collective reflection, discussion and action on how to engender discipline in a way which affirms the dignity of all individuals (children and adults) while effectively correcting disobedience.

In other words, listening carefully to those who lamented the plight of this single mother who they described as ‘coming to the end of her rope’ and ‘losing it’, it is clear that there is need for far more support for parents who struggle with the reality of feeding their children, who lack coping skills for dealing with stress, who were never offered alternatives to physical punishment as a means of successfully parenting their children. However we must also never lose sight of the children who are the recipients of this physical discipline – many of them subject to severe physical abuse. We are stewards of these young lives.

Children and Young People

How do we find an answer? It is not to be found in brutalizing children especially in anger, and it is certainly not to be found in pompous declarations which fail to acknowledge the fact that many parents are not equipped with parenting skills.

Churches have tremendous opportunity to engage these target groups not only in discussion but by creating parenting support groups, introducing robust family life education, providing practical support, nurturing children and young people- all in an effort to improve family life which will ultimately positively affect national life.

Prayer:

Loving God, here we find ourselves again in need of you. We make bad decisions and people suffer. Our hearts bleed at the children who suffer from poor decisions by adults. Help us Lord, for we have so often failed. May we go to the Rock which is higher than we are and seek your wisdom as we live in community. Amen.

Mrs. Karen Francis
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Inclusive Communities - Human Sexualities

SCRIPTURE: Micah 6:8

TOPIC: Objectivity & Otherness

Several years ago, a seminarian grappled with the challenge of Inclusivity and Human Sexuality. After wrestling for a while, the seminarian declared, "I'll address this sexuality debate when the issue of race is finally addressed." The issue was tabled by the seminarian. That seminarian could easily be you or me. As we move toward wholeness and hope, we as members of CWM declare that "... inclusive communities fulfil the realization of the values of the Kin-Dom of God. Values of love, justice, mercy, for this is what God requires of us (Micah 6:8)".¹

This invites a thorough (re)examination of our concept of inclusivity, even in relation to human sexuality. We must explore the nuances of margins, power, inclusion and exclusion as we move toward Life in Abundance for all.

During the 2016 CWM Assembly, Dr Jennifer Leith invited participants to consider ... people who are minorities with respect to sexual orientation and gender identity, but also others whose mattering come into question ...²

This week, we're invited to re-think ... the extent to which we affirm and/or submit to the authority of a G*d who traffics in and/or mainly operates with regard to questions like: "who may live and who must die" or "who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not."³

¹ CWM Global Mission Agenda: Inclusive Communities p. 7

² Jennifer Leith CWM Bible Study p. 6

³ Ibid p. 12

Inclusive Communities - Human Sexualities

Perhaps this is a Kairos moment; one where we might prayerfully and honestly reflect and examine our own prejudices, fears which mitigate in our exploration of inclusivity:

- How have I been socialized at home and in church to address human sexuality?
- Within the context of human sexuality, who is it that is disposable, who matters (Who is Othered)?
- Can I see a correlation between Jesus' call for abundant life and human sexuality?
- What is the biblical/Christian basis which supports my belief?
- What are the social/spiritual tools which are most helpful for me presently?
- Am I truly ready to embark upon this journey?

Having answered those questions honestly, let us earnestly engage this week's reflections.

Prayer:

Merciful God, open our eyes to You and to the other. Help us to remember, engage, include and honour. May our journeys reflect the ways of Christ – opening doors for love's sake.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Inclusive Communities - Human Sexualities

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 25:31-46

TOPIC: Ready or Not ... the Talk has Begun

Whether the church is ready for the arguments for openness about human sexuality, the rest of the world has been totally exposed to the issue through the media as well as through legislation being passed in developed and developing countries around the world.

The following animated movie offers much food for thought. Try to discern what makes you uncomfortable about the themes highlighted in the sketch: <https://youtu.be/ePlriYalzPY>

The Galatian church, influenced by the restrictions on the Jewish people of the Way were cautioned about imposition of cultural restrictions on their members, for that was deleterious to unity in Christ.

CWM reminds us, "Jesus, ... calls us to be a broken people who live in diversity and communion with all." This invitation to recognise gifts based on a person's individuality rather than their dis/ability or orientation also affirms the move toward life-affirming communities. What does such a community comprise?

Who is it that sets the Christian agenda on gender roles and how do we socialize our worshipping communities to respond to same? In Matt 25:31-46, Jesus speaks to the challenge faced by persons seeking entry in God's inner courts. The criteria for welcome in Christ's inclusive community cited in verse 40 is scarcely concerned with sexuality, as it is interested in how we treat with those who are on the margins.

Inclusive Communities - Human Sexualities

Further, is it the church which influences society on matters of human sexuality or the society which influences the church? Is there justification for some of the gender stereotypes which we hold dear? Some argue that it began with the wearing of gender neutral clothing (women's pants and shirts) and was exacerbated by the ordination of women. Others have been exceptionally concerned with the schism within the Anglican communion borne of the ordination of homosexuals.

Action:

- Try to engage a believer who has an opposing viewpoint on Human Sexuality.
- Listen keenly to their arguments supporting their response. Can you appreciate the person's perspective?
- Is there merit in engaging the other viewpoint? Why/Why not?
- How might our conversations on human sexuality be life affirming?

Prayer:

Holy God, may our ears and hearts be open as we lead your children toward life in abundance. Grant creativity to also produce our own stories of inclusivity and wholeness in You.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Inclusive Communities - Human Sexualities

SCRIPTURE: Song of Songs 2:7; 3:5; 8:4

TOPIC: Whose Beat?

One complaint some individuals register about human sexuality conversations is exposure and timing. There is little consensus on the best age to expose our children to gender roles, and how much exposure we wish to allow for sexuality-related matters on the whole. Sexually inclusive arguments would argue that it is fine to display diverse family structures as the norm of family now includes same-gender parents (at least in some European contexts). They further assert that there is no negative psychological impact on those children. Others contend that such behaviour is abhorrent and homosexuality should remain punishable under the buggery laws, and yet others are ambivalent on the matter, provided these norms are not passed on to our children. Deeper than the family structure debate however, is the argument that children should be exposed to human sexuality without prejudice or rancour, and there have been several moves to introduce it in the public schools.

Solomon's (alleged) Shunemite lover recommends, I charge you: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires. (Song of Songs 2:7; 3:5; 8:4). This seems to be in direct opposition to one group of animators who laboured for three years to produce their take on human sexuality, gently introducing the topic to all ages and stances

<https://youtu.be/2REkk9SCRn0>

What is the theological/biblical premise of this movie?

https://youtu.be/_iDwRbV7F1U

https://youtu.be/uV0fTUPyA_Y

Inclusive Communities - Human Sexualities

Questions:

- What was your response to the movie? How did your peers respond? In what way/s are your reactions similar/different?
- Would you consider this movie guilty of awakening love before its time? How would you prepare for a conversation with children responding to this movie?
- If you/your congregation were to create a short movie on human sexuality, what would it look like? What would the core message be? Where would you centre your theological premise? With which biblical lens?

Action:

Consider having a conversation about producing your own film on human sexuality with your tech-savvy members (youth/young adults). After the conversation, allow your voice to be heard – make the movie. And, if feasible, share it with CWM.

Prayer:

Lord of Life, hope and justice, grant us boldness and clarity to be heard amid the cacophony of the other voices which dis/agree with us along the way. Help us to find ways of making our voices count.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Inclusive Communities - Human Sexualities

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 11:6-9

TOPIC: Watch us while we ... Pray!

When wrestling with the issue of human sexuality we need to examine our responses to persons found guilty of misconduct. Sometimes, we find that the disparity in responses to the issue of sexuality is a church problem. The 21st century dawned with increased reporting of clergy sexual abuse cases across the ecumenical spectrum. Unfortunately, there seems to be little signs of the violence and abuse abating.

(Read more at: <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/outlook/20151101/spotlight-sex-abuse-clergy>
<http://www.bishop-accountability.org/AbuseTracker/>
<http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/moravian>)

In the movie Madagascar, friendships are challenged when Alex reverts to his old nature, sees zebra rump-steak and takes a bite of Marty.

<https://youtu.be/ePxeQKv1Ax4>

Marty goes into self-imposed exile after he is caught; but his friends rehabilitate him and restores him to community.

Likewise, the church MUST journey alongside perpetrators and victims of sexual violence to realise healing and wholeness for all.

- What is our biblical blueprint for addressing cases of sexual abuse?
- How does our church address issues of sexual abuse?
- How do we respond when perpetrators seek restoration within our worshipping communities?

In Isaiah 11:6-9, predator and prey live together in God's peaceable kingdom without fear or threat. This vision interrogates the integrity of our claim; 'thy will be done one earth as in heaven'.

Our challenge, should we accept it, is to intentionally address issues of sexual violence for transformation of both perpetrators and victim/survivor. We might begin by naming our complicity, facilitating justice, trauma counselling and forgiveness.

Inclusive Communities - Human Sexualities

Let us start by establishing resource toolkits and awareness programmes on sexual abuse. Debunk the myths and address the genuine issues honestly. Provide/create safe spaces for victims and also perpetrators. Craft liturgies for healing those affected by sexual violence. Work with the auxiliaries to foster awareness and action. And above all else; PRAY.

Then we might establish programmes to address and RE/SOCIALIZE our communities regarding human sexuality; viz:

- i) help perpetrators acknowledge their problem BEFORE it becomes criminal endangerment;
- ii) rehabilitate them AFTER they have committed themselves;
- iii) provide effective accountability measures to safeguard against abuse of power;
- iv) provide safe spaces for those traumatized by sexual violence to find healing

Prayer:

God of Healing and Hope, forgive our complicity in silence. Forgive our willingness to ostracise, rather than challenge and empower. We seek Your healing for the hurting, restoration for the broken, forgiveness and justice for the perpetrator and hope in this world. Broken for broken, forgiveness for the perpetrator, and hope for the discouraged; in Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Inclusive Communities - Human Sexualities

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 1: 26-28

TOPIC: Whose Likeness?

People respond to strangers in diverse ways depending on their focus at the time of meeting. Some focus on the emotional response; others, the physical, the tone of voice or even how we are greeted. This holds consistent regardless of the setting and often impacts how we relate to them.

Consider the following documentaries about the Guevedoces, a rare gender group living in the Dominican Republic, Papua New Guinea, Turkey and Egypt. They are celebrated in The Dominican Republic, but outcast in Papua New Guinea (see reference to PNG in Newsweek. <http://www.newsweek.com/rare-condition-causes-girls-become-boyspuberty-374934>).
https://youtu.be/6FBR_Olm86E
<https://youtu.be/Y-bAIQOqINE>

As you watched the BBC Countdown to life clip, did it elicit any reaction? What of the IO clip? Pseudo-hermaphrodites challenge our interpretation of Genesis 1: 26-28 regarding imago Dei and gender roles. In some Jewish cultures, it is believed that

In the Creation story, our sages tell us that the first person was, in fact, not a man but really an androgynous human being comprised of male and female joined together. Then G-d⁴ came along and said this isn't good, and separated the Being into male and female. This act implies that, on a very deep level, man and a woman were really conceived as one unified creature and that, now, in our separate state, we retain a deep longing to connect with each other. This longing underlies a tremendous amount of behaviour in human relationships.⁵

As we explore issues related to sexuality, let us revisit today's case study.

- How do we read and live Genesis 1:26-28 in light of this documentary?
- What is it that we notice first when we meet someone?
- Of the attributes we note upon first meeting, which of those accurately characterize Imago Dei?
- If we were the parent/sibling/relative of the guevedoces, how would we wish others to respond to a guevedoce?

Prayer:

Lord, teach us how to receive each other, as you receive us. As we consider the outcast guevedoces in Papua New Guinea, the Dominican Republic, Egypt and Turkey; help us to reflect you on our journey towards life.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

⁴ Jewish representation of God includes the dash to highlight God's otherness and show respect.

⁵ Women in Judaism, Copyright (c) 2000 by Mrs. Leah Kohn and ProjectGenesis, Inc The Magic Touch Pt 1.

Inclusive Communities - Human Sexualities

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 13:24-30

TOPIC: Of Elephants and Evangelicals

There are some issues which are just as potent as elephants in a room. And in this instance, it would be the very 'clear' divide in thinking of those who condone the arguments for the sexual revolution and the thinking of those who condemn the arguments for the sexual revolution.

This past week, we have explored the pseudohermaphrodites, social and cultural norms which impact our views, sexual predators within the worshipping community; and considered the 'struggle' experienced by those who try to be 'normal' as per evangelical understandings.

In CWM's vision for inclusivity, we have (tacitly) agreed that "...it is only all of humanity together that encompasses the idea of the image of God ... with their different genders, sexualities and abilities."⁶

The onus is now upon us to discern what that translates to in our lived faith. Not everyone will understand and ascribe to these tenets; however, we recognize that 'Jesus, the one with the broken body calls us to be a broken people who live in diversity'.⁷

In July-August 2017, the evangelical alliance of churches in the USA issued the Nashville Statement. <http://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2017/08/29/evangelical-leaders-issue-nashville-statement-christian-manifesto-human-sexuality-lgbt-gay-marriage/611756001>

Having read **The Nashville Statement** in light of Matt 13:24-30, please consider the following:

For those who condemn the sexual revolution

- Is this what we wish to state categorically? Why?
- Is there room in Christendom; rather, in God's House, for both groups? Why/not?
- How might we reflect God's grace to the other, who does not share our viewpoint?
- How might we be community with the other?

⁶ CWM Global Mission Agenda – Inclusive Communities p.20.

⁷ Ibid. p.8.

For those who condone the sexual revolution

- How would you respond to the Statement? Why?
- Is there room in Christendom; rather, in God's House, for both groups? Why/not?
- How might we reflect God's grace to the other, who does not share our viewpoint?
- Is there truly a way for us to go forward in community?

May our lives and lifestyles reflect Christ's love in all we do.

Prayer:

Living love
Love in life,
Spewing intolerance t'ward the Other,
needing grace, withholding grace
oh for grace to love, live, give and forgive.
Selah

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

1 July

Inclusive Communities - Human Sexualities

SCRIPTURE: Romans 10:14-15

TOPIC: As we go forth ... Do we have a Clue?

Sometimes, it seems as if instead of going forward in a logical manner, we go forward, then backwards before heading forward. In concluding this week of reflections together towards life, we once again seek to reflect on human sexuality, what it is and where we now weigh in on the journey towards inclusivity.

Clue and Kinsey, sexuality statisticians invite us to have a "Clue". Let us (re)familiarize ourselves with the information provided in the following video?

<https://youtu.be/9MIT6OxAxNs>

Perhaps you were Clue-less to some degree. If so, then it just might be time for us to get on the page and continue the conversation:

<https://medium.com/clued-in/sex-and-tech-survey-33d64ecc3eda>

Romans 10:14-15 states,

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! (KJV)

We are called to be evangelists – messengers of God's good news for the entire world. We are called to open doors to God's eternal reign. It is not very easy for us to condone or condemn without a clear sense of what the world is saying. Inclusivity loses hope when we exist outside the consciousness of what the world is saying/doing/believing.

We are not so much called to condone or condemn, as we are called by God to be agents of grace, invitation and hope. Can we do that? I trust that we are now more inclined to become more intentionally engaged in providing holistic "... responses to the issues of marginalization, bigotry and dehumanizing encounters that exist and frame countless human experiences."¹ For God's sake, let us be the change in love the world is dying for!

Prayer:

Resources,
reflecting;
unearthing,
engaging
Reality
Yearning for hope,
Shifting
embracing
Hope of the Ages
restore us

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

¹ CWM Global Mission Agenda p. 21.

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 1:16-17 and Mark 12:28-31

TOPIC: Love Your Neighbour

Human trafficking is a form of modern slavery happening in our world on an unimaginable scale. The United Nations estimates that 800,000 people are trafficked every year, 80% of whom are women and girls; 50% of whom are children. Behind these astounding figures are the stories of individuals - real men and women with names; boys and girls whose families and friends do not know where they are. Such huge figures also hide the causes of absolute poverty and great inequality, inadequate education and limited life choices can lead to the most vulnerable people being exploited and robbed of their humanity by traffickers.

People can be trafficked across countries and within their own country. Men, women and children find themselves forced into sexual exploitation, forced labour or domestic servitude, forced begging, organised theft, drug cultivation and forced marriage. Every person who experiences trafficking is being robbed of life in all fullness which Jesus came to bring to all creation.

The words from Isaiah contain three instructions or actions for the building of a more just society. The first word is 'stop' doing evil, 'learn' to do good and 'seek' new priorities which puts the focus on the most vulnerable and exploited. Isaiah would be familiar with slavery and human trafficking is a form of slavery which we must eradicate (stop), understand the causes of human trafficking (learn) and find ways (seek) of sharing the world's resources with the most vulnerable and needy.

Jesus sums up the whole of the law in his 'golden rule' - love God and love your neighbour. Two instructions which are inseparable and mutually related to each other. You cannot say you love God whilst exploiting your neighbour or not supporting people who are vulnerable or in need. You express your love for God in your care for those who are denied life in all its fullness.

As churches and organisations around the world we must work to end modern-day slavery bringing freedom to those who are exploited and justice to those who exploit.

Prayer:

**Strengthen the hands of those who work for freedom
Communities and people who bring liberty to those held captive
In the name of God who created all people free
In the name of the Son who came to bring freedom
In the name of the Spirit whose gift is liberty.**

Revd. Wayne Hawkins
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: 1 John 4:7-10

TOPIC: "...a child of God..."

On the evening of 5th February 2004, at least 21 cockle pickers were drowned in Morecombe Bay off the Lancashire/Cumbrian coast in the UK. The Chinese workers had been imported illegally in containers into Liverpool and were hired out through local criminal agents of international gangs. The cockles are best found at low tide on sand flats along the Bay. The Chinese workers were unfamiliar with local geography, language and customs and were cut off by the incoming tide.

Although emergency services were contacted by one worker who had a mobile phone, a total of 21 people were recovered from the bay. Two victims were women, the majority young men in their 20s and 30s. The majority had tried to swim to safety but were largely overcome by hypothermia. Later the inquest was told how British cockle pickers returning to shore the same evening had tried to warn the Chinese group by tapping their watches and speaking with them. Fifteen Chinese workers survived the tragedy.

Several members of the local criminal gang were imprisoned for a range of crimes including manslaughter and breaking immigration laws.

The story of the Morecombe Bay cockle shell pickers reminds us that there would be no trade without a marketplace. There would no "supply" of human trafficking if there was no "demand" for it at the end of the production line! For human trafficking to prosper there needs to be situations that require cheap labour, even slave labour. Human trafficking happens because there is an economic demand for it that is met by a pool of people whose poverty and hopes are exploited and abused.

Reading this story alongside 1 John's words about love for others and God, we must ask ourselves whether we benefit in any way from the pain and misery of human trafficking? Whether the cheap clothes we want to buy or the food we eat is affordable because it has been manufactured, grown and harvested by people who are held captive and whose labour is forced?

Prayer:

Let us love one another,
 The exploited and vulnerable - easy
 The exploiter of the vulnerable - not so easy
 The victim of trafficking and enslaved - easy
 The trafficker and slave master - not so easy
 Let us love one another for God is love.

Rev. Wayne Hawkins
 Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 34-1-31

TOPIC: Exploitation

According to the United Nations 87% of victims of human trafficking are sexually exploited.

Marinela Badea was 17 when she fell into the hands of human traffickers in Romania. Her family and friends were concerned Marinela had simply disappeared, but in reality as she settled down to complete her homework one evening in March 2008, there was a knock at the door. Outside the door were two men who invited her to come to a barbecue. When she declined she was physically attacked, her passport taken and she was abducted. Within three hours of being abducted, Marinela was raped for the first time.

Marinela was given a new identity and in April 2008 arrived in Birmingham UK, where she was prostituted by the men who controlled her and other girls in her house. She was moved to Manchester where she continued to be sexually exploited. Then the sex crimes unit in Manchester raided the brothel and she was arrested. It was then that her terrifying story came to light. The men who abducted and exploited her were jailed and Marinela was reunited with her family. She settled in the UK and found employment and volunteers to support other women who are trafficked into the sex industry.

Genesis 34 is one of those horrid Old Testament stories we struggle to know how to treat, but they mustn't be avoided. Shechem's lust and power over Dinah grows into love for her and he persuades his father to negotiate a marriage contract with Jacob. When Jacob's sons hear about Dinah's rape they plot revenge and agree to intermarry with the Shechemites if they agree to be circumcised - this is done and whilst they are recovering, Jacob's sons attack the town, killing all the men and plundering the city and taking the women and children as slaves.

Dinah and her feelings are largely irrelevant to how her brother's respond. They cannot allow this shame to be done to them! Today, victims of trafficking are treated as property and their lives are literally owned by their masters.

Prayer:

**As we follow in the footsteps of Jesus
Who was himself exploited and abused,
Bring to justice those who abuse and exploit others,
Taking away humanity and dignity for profit and gain.
Be with those who are powerless
And restore those who need to learn to trust again.**

Rev'd. Wayne Hawkins
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 37:12-36

TOPIC: Let's sell him....

Joseph, like many victims of human trafficking, is exploited by members of his own family. The Genesis story hints that the selling of people was not uncommon as the Ishmaelites were quick to purchase Joseph and take him with them to Egypt. Joseph's brothers have the upper hand over him - they are older, there are more of them and they are undoubtedly stronger. So they determine to get rid of their annoying brother and make a profit out of it! Of course, we know how the story ends and it gives us hope, but for many people who are victims of human trafficking today, hope is in very short supply and there is often no way out.

When Joseph is sold in Egypt to Potiphar he is again the victim of exploitation by the powerful. He refuses to have sex with Potiphar's wife and so she falsely accuses him. Despite being the victim of trafficking and now further exploitation, it is Joseph who ends up in jail; experiences that are not unfamiliar to victims of human trafficking who can find themselves blamed and ostracised, even criminalised through no fault of their own.

Joseph's story is redemptive because of how God intervenes in his life. Despite his youth we discover Joseph is at just the right time and place to be used by God in using his influence to save his family. Again we know how this part of the story develops and ultimately leads to the enslaving of an entire people - but that is another story.

We need the leaders of the world today to use their influence and power to address the underlying causes of human trafficking - global poverty and inequality, injustice and oppressive regimes, conflicts and terrorism. They could make and influence how laws and systems are made to support the most vulnerable and weak so that they may know life in all its fullness.

Joseph's story is one of redemption and reversal as he is set free and uses his experience to free others.

Prayer:

**May the vulnerable know that they are precious,
May the weak know that they can be made strong
May your love for all people
Compel us to overcome our differences and mistrust
So we can see all creation made anew.**

Rev. Wayne Hawkins
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 5:1-23

TOPIC: Bricks without straw

In October 2012 the UK's Guardian newspaper reported how Kent Police and Serious Organised Crime Agency had released 30 migrant farm workers trafficked to work in the UK. The gang master provided teams of workers to travel to dispersed farms where they would work 17-hour days, six days per week hatching hen's eggs. The teams would frequently sleep in vans which travelled between the farms and threats and violence were frequently used against the workers. They were forced into large sheds where the hens were kept without training or equipment and were often overwhelmed by the smell and dust. At weekends they were returned to a small house in rural Kent which they shared with fourteen others in dirty, damp and squalid conditions. Wages were often withheld and they paid large amounts for the foul living accommodation.

When arrested the gang master had several luxury vehicles parked on the drive of his period listed property.

The story of the Hebrew people in Egypt is not so dissimilar to the experiences of people who are trafficked and exploited for their labour. Often tricked into accepting the offer of a job for a better life, people believe the false promises of traffickers. Once entrapped, kept captive and in debt, the farm workers in the stories above were already in 'debt labour' before they began working - a debt they incurred for registering in the first place and which had to be repaid from their meagre wages.

The Hebrew people in Egypt knew about hard labour and exploitation. The phrase 'bricks without straw' refers to Egypt's Pharaoh commanding the slaves to make bricks for his constructions but without straw, which one then assumes they had to first gather before making the bricks. And at the same production rate!

We know the story of how God hears the cries and sees the misery of the Hebrew people and sends Moses to set them free. Those who experience trafficking into hard labour today need a 'Moses' to stand up for them and work tirelessly for their freedom. Wherever there is modern day slavery - may there be a Moses.

Prayer:

"Let my people go"
Wherever people are held captive
Forced into hard labour, prostitution and crime,
"Let my people go"
In each place raise up liberators and supporters
Who will work to
"Let my people go."

Revd. Wayne Hawkins
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

7 July

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 8

TOPIC: "In God's image and in God's name."

People are too precious to be bought and sold, yet they are.

Life is too short to be spent entrapped and enslaved to another, yet it can be.

Men and women are too precious to have their lives reduced to a commodity, yet it is.

Children are too trusting and even innocent to be abused, yet they are.

We have seen in previous day's readings and reflections how people are bought and sold into modern day slavery for labour, sex, domestic servitude, to harvest people's organs, for organised crime. Life is precious and valuable but it is robbed from victims of human trafficking and life commodified and a price tag put on.

Psalm 8 verse 4 asks "what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" The question is asked as the Psalmist reflects on the wonder of God's creation in the heavenly stars and glory of the moon which are set in place. Perhaps God is mindful and thoughtful towards humanity because they are created in God's image and likeness. To recognise that human beings are made in God's image should set us on a course where we respect and honour life as a gift from God; where we recognise God in the migrant worker and the trafficked sex worker, as much as in the doctor who treats our illnesses or the social worker who cares for an elderly relative. It is easier to see God's image in some people than it is in others and yet it is in the most vulnerable and pushed out that God him/herself comes to us.

Hebrews 13:2 reminds us "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it."

Prayer:

**What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?"**

**Each of us is precious, valuable, honoured, cherished,
Along with all creation loved and
In God's image.**

May we remember this as we walk in God's world today.

Rev. Wayne Hawkins
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Acts 16:16-22

TOPIC: Anonymous

I am sorry if my selected Bible reading has disappointed or frustrated you! I expect you want to continue reading and enjoy the amazing story of Paul's remarkable escape from prison - please do not skip and spend a little more time with this neglected part of the story. Most Bible commentators do exactly the same and skip over the story of the 'girl with an evil spirit' to give more attention and comment to Paul and the Philippian jailer. Sandwiched between the stories of Lydia, who dealt in purple cloth, and the miraculous prison escape, this anonymous young girl is easily forgotten. Well, not today.

The slave girl is probably a victim of human trafficking, she has a gift which made her vulnerable (she was different and perhaps excluded by her family because of this) and her owners can exploit her gift for monetary gain. Her gift gives her a little power and influence over how she is treated but in reality, not much and she is forced by her owners to use her gift for their advantage.

When she encounters Paul, she seems unable to restrain the spirit which possesses her and so she encounters Paul every day and shouts to the crowds about who Paul is. Eventually this annoys Paul to the extent that he commands the spirit to leave her. The slave girl's owners are furious because they have lost their money making scheme and so Paul is thrown into jail for being disruptive.

But what has happened to the slave girl? We never knew her name and now she disappears from the story and is not heard of again. In his frustration Paul has added to the girl's vulnerability by taking away her one 'gift'. What next for her? Will she continue to be sold and commodified? Like many girls who experience trafficking, she is lost to us.

Prayer:

When faced with cruelty and inhumanity
And when words fail us
Hear the cries of our hearts,
See our tears
And feel our pain, embracing God.
As we work for your kingdom to come
On earth as in heaven,
Inspire hope in us
Till you make all things new.

Revd. Wayne Hawkins
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

9 July

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 96:10-13

TOPIC: Saving the Rainforest with a Stethoscope

Psalm 96 calls us to celebrate what God has created, and reminds us of God's supreme kingship over all creation – human and non-human. That means ecological and economic issues are inseparable. Under God's reign, God's people must live justly in relation to the poor and creation.

Alam Sehat Lestari (ASRI), an Indonesian healthcare and conservation non-profit in West Kalimantan that helps about sixty thousand residents of the Gunung Palung National Park while protecting its ninety thousand hectares of land, home to ten percent of the world's orangutans. The vicious cycle of poverty, expensive healthcare, illegal logging, agricultural devastation, and waterborne illnesses has ultimately increased the area's carbon footprint. The average monthly income is \$13, and government healthcare is inaccessible in emergencies. For instance, a local logger's wife needed an emergency caesarean section. The distraught logger cut down sixty trees to pay for the procedure.

The deforestation and forest fires caused by slash-and-burn farming practices cause us to judge perpetrators as environmentally irresponsible or ignorant. When we understand the plight of the poor families who log forests, we realise their need to meet the most basic needs. Asked what could help reduce tree logging, locals agreed that low-cost medical care and farming knowledge would. ASRI runs a low-cost hospital and clinic providing affordable high-quality healthcare. Locals pay for medical services with seedlings planted in the community to restore the environment. Villagers learn sustainable agricultural practices. One can almost hear the forests sing for joy as trees are saved!

This story is just one example of economic injustice driving behaviour that harms communities and the environment. What other illegal activities are driven by poverty?

Challenge:

Get involved with ASRI or a similar organization as a volunteer or donor.

Prayer:

Father God, I pray for Your will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. May the abundant life that Jesus died to give us be accessible to all Your children, especially those in need. Show me how I can be a conduit of Your goodness, mercy and justice today.

Dr Goh Wei Leong
HealthServe, Singapore

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 7:5-7

TOPIC: Foreigners in the Kingdom

In Singapore, minimum wage is a mere notion. Some migrant workers are grossly overworked and underpaid. They have little or no enforced workers' rights. A migrant worker typically pays an agent between SGD \$5,000 and \$12,000 to come to Singapore for work that pays \$20 a day.

Being injured on duty leads to loss of income. Even though it is a legal requirement to ensure that workers have accommodation and wages when injured, companies regularly flout the law. Such cases can take up to a year or longer to process. The workers suffer loss in the interim. Salary disputes between agents and workers are also common. Overtime pay is often withheld. When it is paid, the correct overtime rate may not apply due to unlawful "security deposit" deductions.

How can we possibly celebrate our common humanity in the midst of such daily injustice in our society? How can we restore self-worth and dignity to our fellow human beings who are openly mistreated? God promises protection to the Israelites only if they change their ways (Jer 7:5; cf. V3). They were to build a community based on the character and image of God, namely, where taking care of foreigners, orphans and widows is a priority. For those of us in Singapore, this entails providing and advocating for the abused migrant workers in our midst.

At HealthServe Community Clinic, in Geylang, Singapore, many of our patients arrive physically, mentally and emotionally traumatised. We treat their injuries and help to fight their legal battles. More importantly we offer them love, friendship, community and the opportunity to receive our Lord Jesus. Ultimately, true self-worth and dignity is found in God who created us in His image.

Challenge:

Consider writing a letter to your MP protesting the rights of a migrant worker.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, please open my eyes to the injustices surrounding me, and give me a heart that is compassionate like Yours. Show me how I can help bring dignity to the marginalized. Help me to advocate for and defend those whom You love.

Dr Goh Wei Leong
HealthServe, Singapore

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Leviticus 25:28

TOPIC: Market Forces and the Jubilee

Look around at the world today. Humans have done well for themselves, and modernity is proof that unbridled capitalism works—well, sort of. The primary idea of market forces is demand and supply; price and quantity and the highest bidder wins. It is natural that when something is in demand but in short supply, its price rises and only the rich can afford it. To meet demand, production increases. Inevitably prices go down and more people can afford. It sounds fair?

In contrast God's economic structure in Deuteronomy 24 and Leviticus 25 is mind-boggling to twenty-first century capitalists. In God's economy nobody owns anything for long. Those who have are responsible to share it for the common good. After forty-nine years, everything returns to its original owner. It could seem unfair to capitalist minds. In a world where people strive to amass wealth, a fifty-year reset seems unjust. Why should I return surrender everything I have worked so hard for to someone who will not pay for it?

God's goodness is ridiculous. God's laws protect the weak and provide for the vulnerable. Would you not be GLAD to be among those people? "If one of your fellow Israelites falls into poverty and cannot support himself, support him as you would a foreigner or a temporary resident and allow him to live with you. Do not charge interest or make a profit at his expense. Instead, show your fear of God by letting him live with you as your relative." (Lev. 25:35-36) Leviticus points to God as the Landowner and everyone else as tenants (Lev 25:23). Everything we have belongs to God.

Challenge:

Take inventory of your belongings. Give away at least seven items to a charity. They must be in working condition, good quality and appearance.

Prayer:

Father God, I'm grateful for all I have. You are a Good Father and great provider. I fear no lack as your child. Instead of hoarding possessions, I want to be a generous giver, to live with open hands. Help me to give like You today, out of abundance.

Dr Goh Wei Leong
HealthServe, Singapore

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Luke 21:3-4

TOPIC: Surprising Generosity

Jesus had cautioned his disciples against Pharisaic greed and pride. He then highlights the widow's giving two copper coins (each worth 1/8 cent) which outweighed the people's giving in percentage terms. Giving out of her poverty revealed her heart's intent.

Ten years ago, I co-founded Healthserve, an NGO reaching out to migrant workers in Singapore's red-light district in Geylang. We set up a volunteer-run clinic. We were evolving to expand our social services when Mr Yin challenged us unexpectedly. He arrived from Shandong, China after paying approximately US\$6,500 to a Chinese employment agent. For three months, he earned US\$15/day working in a lift shaft. He consequently lost his hearing. Deaf, unemployed and homeless, he wandered the streets. Some street-walkers directed him to HealthServe Clinic. He became a member of our community. Our volunteer specialists treated his hearing impairment. He also came to faith in Jesus Christ.

When his workmen's compensation came after 12 months, he offered to give HealthServe a substantial percentage of his compensation money. I refused, until he protested, "Unless you accept my money, I'm not part of this community. Besides, if you are my brother you must accept this gift". We accepted the gift.

Receiving was not as easy as giving for us. However, community in its fullness constitutes more than giving. By receiving Yin's gift, we invited him and others to become fully part of our community. We affirmed him as a brother in Christ able to exercise his faith by contributing to the ministry. This signalled a paradigm shift. We were accustomed to helping others and never needing help. We learnt to bless others by receiving graciously, thereby dignifying them as giver. How can you bless someone today by receiving from them?

Challenge:

Purchase something made by a disabled or incarcerated person as a way to gratefully accept their gift.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, thank you for the abundance You have blessed me with. It is my privilege to give and, more than just money. I want to give dignity and value to Your people. Teach me humility and show me how I can bless others by receiving from them.

Dr Goh Wei Leong
HealthServe, Singapore



Dominance of the Empire by Crawford Mandumbwa, (mixed media on canvas).

My prayers and reflections on this week

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Acts 4:32

TOPIC: Equity vs Equality

As a doctor, I am invited to fancy functions where we receive goodie bags of free stationary. I receive free meals and goods, which the poor struggle to buy.

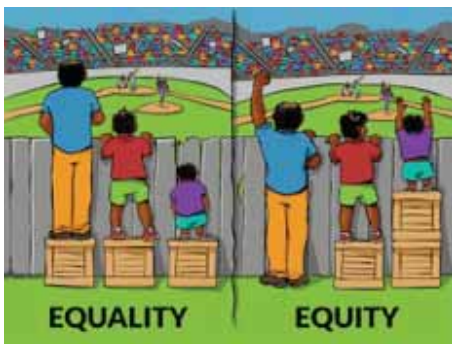
The 2017 Oxfam reports that the world's richest eight own wealth equivalent to the poorest 50%, (3.6 billion people). This grotesquely unjust, rising inequality is due to economic principles that reward those at the top rich at the expense of the poor.

Legislative wage restraint on low-income jobs, tax dodging and tight production margins deliver higher returns to business owners and management. Thus, the affluent pay less than the poor.

The image below illustrates equality and equity. Equality treats everyone the same. Equity caters to varying needs, prioritising the need of the vulnerable.

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross levels the unequal playing field, which is skewed by greed and brokenness. The early Church shared all they had according to their needs (Acts 2:32; 2:44-45). That God protects the vulnerable is evident in the decreed year of Jubilee in the Old Testament where gleaning laws and others provide for widows, orphans and aliens.

How can we practice biblical equity in this unequal world? Can we help bring systemic change to skewed economic systems? My home church grapples with this as we try to radically move from a performance-based salary system toward a model, which pays 'according to needs'. At our sharing platform 'x2change' we attempt to share everything from garden tools to cars. The uptake is slow. Apps like Uber and Airbnb embrace a sharing economy, albeit for monetary gain. We need to go beyond head knowledge to apply biblical truths.



Credit: Interaction Institute for Social Change | Artist: Angus Maguire.

Challenge:

Share the 'Equality and Equity' image above with your friends on social media. Also, give something to someone who needs it more.

Prayer:

Father God, thank you for revealing your idea of equity to me. Give me a heart for the poor and marginalised, widows, orphans and aliens. Give me a chance to share what I have with someone today. Help me to do it sacrificially and cheerfully.

Dr Goh Wei Leong
HealthServe, Singapore

14 July

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 23:23

TOPIC: Mint, Dill and Cumin

Like Mark, Luke records the Lord saying “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God.” Surely Jesus was not talking to us!

Jesus accuses the Pharisees of strictly adhering to the letter of the law to the point of tithing a tenth of garden herbs (Lev 27:30), although they flagrantly flouted the underlying principle of the law of love (Matthew 22:37-40). The Pharisees ignored their sick and poor neighbours. They ostracized the “unclean” instead of offering them God’s love and justice.

In the Singapore context, this reminds me of the exploitation of migrant workers and labourers who are underpaid and overworked. Are we as Christian business owners practicing justice and love when we maximize our profits by suppressing workers’ wages? We are in fact perpetuating their poverty cycle?

Instead of tithing on profits made at the expense of workers, should we be paying workers their dues and tithing based on just profits? The Lord is more pleased by our faithfulness than unjust tithes. We could increase our offerings by “fattening ourselves less”!

Those who are not business owners can also let impoverished workers earn more by supporting the fair trade movement. Fair Trade supports farmers in the developing world to get fair prices for their produce, to attain decent working and living conditions and environmental sustainability. This is to promote equity in international trade.

To support that on our end, entails choosing to pay more for Fair-Trade-certified imports produced in developing countries. Can you pay a bit more for your tea leaves today so that the skilled worker who handpicked them is better remunerated?

Challenge:

Buy fair trade coffee and tea to help support the Fair Trade movement.

Prayer:

Lord fill me with your love. Help me to love you with all my heart, soul and mind. Help me to love my neighbor as myself. Even with baby steps, use me to contribute to love, justice and mercy in the world.

Dr Goh Wei Leong
HealthServe, Singapore

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: 1 Timothy 5:3-4

TOPIC: Rethinking Poverty and the Value of Community

The Old and New Testaments draw attention to widows, strangers and orphans as objects of God's mercy. Paul instructs Timothy to care for widows while advising that children or grandchildren care for widows in their families. In God's economy, the responsibility of caring for the needy starts with family, before the church or state.

Developed nations, have devised efficient programmes to care for the needy. As a family physician, I make house calls in such programmes. I once attended to an 85-year-old housebound woman in the company of two Filipino intern nurses. Mdm Tan had lost her son and only caregiver to a heart attack. She lives alone in subsidized public housing. She refused to move into a nursing home. She receives daily meals, a daily volunteer-visit, and monthly community nurse-visits and occasional doctor's calls at government expense.

I proudly commented, "Isn't this system great? It provides everything the homebound elderly poor needs. This is first-world efficiency!"

My colleague responded, "Gosh, Mdm Tan's government flat is luxurious by Filipino standards. But doctor, this would never happen in the Philippines. If she were in my town, Mdm Tan would never be offered a nursing home or public healthcare services. She'd be taken into one of our homes and cared for as our grandma by our village." I was speechless.

What convenient systems have we devised to avoid caring for the sick and elderly? Have we abdicated our responsibility by not caring for them in homes? My colleagues' village, cares for the elderly with simplicity, sacrifice and love. I wondering who was the poorer — the efficiently-served Singaporean or the communally cared-for Filipino.

Challenge:

Consider adopting a sick or elderly person, as a family or as a church community and care for them as you would a family member.

Prayer:

Father, we pray that Your will be done on earth. We remember Jesus who came to us bodily to fulfil Your will. He came close to us in love. He lifted up and served the broken. Help us to emulate His sacrificial love.

Dr Goh Wei Leong
HealthServe, Singapore

16 July

Mission in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Luke 4:18-19 & John 10:10

TOPIC: Abundant Life – Christ's Mission, CWM's Vision

We are living in a broken world of extreme wealth and poverty, of developed and developing countries. As a pastor of rural churches, I had to be with people living in a remote village. They do not have good houses, nor access to basic facilities for education, health, and communication etc. yet in their worship demonstrated thankfulness to God and their daily lives, happiness and contentment.

This helps me to reflect seriously on the word of Jesus, "that they may have life in all its fullness." Jesus came to bring fullness of life to everyone here on earth because through his ministry, death and resurrection, he promised both salvation and sustenance. These two benefits are then summed up as 'fullness of life'. Jesus brings life. His ministry was wholly directed towards bringing physical and spiritual salvation to people. This does not exclude anyone; it is for everyone - this is the vision of Council for World Mission. As we commemorate our 40th anniversary, we re-affirm our commitment to the mission which is God's "fullness of life for all creation."

Fullness of life is a gift of God's grace conferred upon creation and is to be shared with everyone. It is disheartening to observe that there continues to be individuals and groups who carry out inhumane acts over and against others, stifling and destroying life. We are challenged to continue in the tradition of the prophets of the Old Testament and in the prophetic tradition of Jesus, clearly stated in his "Nazareth Manifesto" that his mission was to bring transformation in order to bring release to the captives and to proclaim that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppression.

Our fullness of life is rooted in the incarnational and redemptive work of Christ. Jesus came to earth so that we may have life in abundance. Jesus can give a whole new meaning to living because he provides satisfaction and guidance - this is the life which we should aspire to. Let us continue to seek to share what it means to follow Jesus, in whose mission we participate. For Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Prayer:

Lord God, your mission is ours, for every Christian, for the CWM family. Help us to be faithful in working towards fullness of life for all creation in all we do. Amen.

Rev. D.C. Haia Darnei
CWM Moderator

Mission in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: John 5:24-29

TOPIC: Eternal Life

Jesus says, "Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life." Eternal life comes from believing in God, believing the One whose word is spoken by Jesus. Christ came to die the death we deserved and was raised from the dead, by the glory of His Father. If we believe Him, we have eternal life.

If eternal life is not obtained while we're here on earth, it will not be gained after this life. This promise of eternal life is a motivating promise. The Greek word *akouo* is the most often used term in the original Greek New Testament for "hearing." It means more than just registering sounds, but also understanding what we hear. We must hear the words of Jesus and believe in him. And when we hear and believe Jesus' word, it is as though we rise from the dead to newness of life.

In John 5:28-29, we find a significant event: "Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation." The resurrection in verse 28 speaks about a future time. In the first resurrection, believers rise to new life in Christ. In the second resurrection, everyone rises to judgment by their works.

If we have received eternal life, then we are motivated to share with others. We cannot refrain from sharing what we know to be true. The promise of eternal life motivates us to share it with others. This is evangelism, one of the nine thematic areas of focus for CWM.

Eternal life is a transforming possession, changing a person's nature. We become one with a spiritual, rather than just a physical nature. It is clear from 2 Cor. 5:17. It transforms a person's habits. We receive power to get rid of the garbage in our lives. It transforms a person's vision from a self-centred worldview to a Christ-centred worldview. One begins to have a desire to please God and sees the world as a place to share the love of God.

So, eternal life is a gift of God. The world today is characterized by groaning, crying, suffering, death, prostitution, trafficking, poverty, injustice, oppression, narcissism, rejection; so many ways in which empire is destroying humanity. We need to look for ways to partner with God in creating life-affirming communities and to be channels through which others receive salvation and eventually possess eternal life – a life of transformation from death to life.

Prayer:

Jesus our Saviour, grant us the determination to bring the good news of life to people trapped in situations which are a manifestation of empire. May they hear, understand and see from our actions your gift of fullness of life. Amen.

Rev. D.C. Haia Darnei
CWM Moderator

Mission in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 1:31; Malachi 4:2 and Isaiah 65:25

TOPIC: Hope for Restoration of the Broken Body

The first chapter of the book of Genesis tells us that there was a perfect harmony in the world – harmony among all the created things and beings, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” God and human beings had a very close personal relationship regularly visiting the Garden of Eden and speaking with them as a friend. Hence, the creation, including the human beings, was the undivided and unbroken body of God. With the fall of human beings, the harmonious relationship suffered a cataclysmic blow. The unbroken body got broken or shattered into parts and pieces seemingly with no hope to reunite as one body.

But, the Bible tells us that God devised a plan from the beginning of His creation, to heal the broken body and restore it to its original nature or form. The prophet Isaiah (in 65:25) says that a time will come when the broken body will be restored to its original position, and there will not be any discord or disharmony. Every creature will live and feed together without any enmity, hatred, ill-will and divisive nature. All kinds of differences will be forgotten and new mindsets will be implanted in all, so that nobody remembers one’s past nature.

The prophet Isaiah here uses symbolical language to inculcate hope of renewal or the hope for the restoration of the original relationship between God and human beings. He says that even the wild beasts or poisonous creatures will forget their natural instinct, and will live and eat together. There shall be complete peace and harmony in the presence of God. God’s power will make what is impossible for humans become possible with God.

What is required is that belief in the power of God, and total surrender to His authority. It is God who heals the broken body and implants hope in the heart of hopeless ones. He will once again renew and regenerate.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, the context of your mission when you walked on the earth and now is one of brokenness. Help us to discern where you are at work in bringing healing, hope and restoration for brokenness. May we be faithful in joining you in mission. Amen.

Rev. D.C. Haia Darnei
CWM Moderator

Mission in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: John 17:11

TOPIC: Maintaining Unity

A long time ago, a little child in an African tribe wandered off into the tall jungle grass and could not be found. The tribe searched all day, but could not find the little boy. The next day the tribal members all held hands and walked through the grass together. This enabled them to find the child, but due to the cold night, he had not survived. In her anguish and tears, the mother cried, "If only we would have held hands sooner!"

Such is the importance that of unity in our lives!

John 17 contains the prayer of Jesus beginning with His prayer for Himself, followed by His prayer for His Disciples, and lastly for His future believers. His prayer is so remarkable that it has been called "The Lord's High Priestly Prayer." Jesus prays that we might be one. All believers are to be one in mind and heart. We are to be one in love. We are to be one in Christ and in God, just as God and Christ are one in each other (John 10:30). This oneness is a spiritual oneness. It is a unity brought about by the Holy Spirit. Jesus also prays that we might remain in Him and in God. Only when we are united with God and Christ can we be united with each other. When we remain in God and Christ we will bear fruit. People will see that we are continuing Christ's work, Christ's mission. They will see our unity and love.

Interfaith relations and Ecumenism represent one of the nine thematic areas of focus for CWM. In doing mission, we relentlessly continue to seek partnerships among diverse faith groups in the pursuit of our shared spirituality, and common mission among all God's peoples. Healthy interfaith relations require unity.

Recent demographics show that the Christian church is in decline in various parts of the world. Why is Christianity in decline? One reason could be because over the years, we have not maintained unity. The word 'unity' literally means oneness, of the same mind, one in thought. St. Paul provides us with a list of the essentials we must believe in (Eph. 4:4-5): One body, one Spirit, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism and one God. Fruitful ecumenism requires unity.

19 July

Mission in the Context of Empire

Maintaining unity in the Christian church is a great challenge placed before us. To maintain unity requires that we have the mind of Christ. There should be no selfish ambition or conceit; rather we must esteem others highly, and look out for their interests as well. We must manifest lowliness, gentleness, longsuffering, forbearance in love and with such diligence maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to maintain unity of purpose around common issues with people of other faiths. May diversity not divide us in the Christian church; instead may we be enriched by each other.

Rev. D.C. Haia Darnei
CWM Moderator

Mission in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Acts 8:26-40

TOPIC: Understanding the Message

One of the great challenges in the world today is to be an inclusive community against dehumanising social categorisations. We live in a world comprising the affluent and the deprived, the powerful and the powerless, the dominant and the weak, the privileged and the underprivileged – this is the context in which we engage in mission. Against such realities, today's text Acts 8:26-40 helps us to focus on the rights of all persons in society.

Philip encountered an Ethiopian, a foreigner; a high-ranking government officer; a man of commitment; a worshiper, a seeker; a reader of Scripture; and also a eunuch. He was a convert to Judaism and had travelled hundreds of miles to Jerusalem to worship in the temple. This officer's identity as a eunuch is important because Judaism had a specific view of eunuchs (Deuteronomy 23:1). Thus, the eunuch represents the very people that have been ostracized and kept away from God because of their identity. Not only would they have been kept out of the temple, but they also couldn't participate in the very tradition that made someone a Jew. However, it is so comforting that Isaiah 56:3-5 speaks of eunuchs being accepted by the God of boundless loving kindness.

The Ethiopian official was reading the Scripture from Isaiah 53:7-8. He was experiencing a deep hunger and thirst for God. He did not know that God's Messiah had already come and had fulfilled the prophecy. When Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?", the Ethiopian invited Philip into his carriage to explain Isaiah 53:7-8 to him. Isaiah's words about the suffering servant appear to be a passage he turned to often in life. For they are words that describe another man, humiliated, from whom justice was denied, without hope of future generations, a man whose life was taken away. No doubt he read something of himself when he read those words. Philip sensed an impulse of the Spirit, the man's need – the man's perplexity. He therefore preached the good news about Jesus.

Mission in the Context of Empire

The crisis facing this man was not about his social standing – he is, after all an ‘official’ with solid political connections. His crisis has to do with his standing with God, the people of God and in the assembly of God’s people because of his being and his nationality. Thus, this account of Philip’s ministry to a high-ranking Ethiopian government official represents a further step in the advance of the gospel from its strictly Jewish confines to a fully-fledged inclusive mission. Likewise, God’s people today are to confront and challenge traditions, structures, ideologies and theologies which govern our attitudes and practices in relationship with societies’ awful categorisation of people into disability, ethnicity, sexuality, religion and gender; and thereby affirm the full humanity, gifts and right of place of all persons in society.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, forgive us for our pronouncements on people that they are not fit, not welcome. Help us to have the courage to go against the tide to affirm human beings all made in the image of God. Amen.

Rev. D.C. Haia Darnei
CWM Moderator

Mission in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Luke 10:29

TOPIC: Who is my Neighbour?

The question “Who is my neighbour?” comes from one of the well-known stories told by Jesus in the Bible referred to as the story of the Good Samaritan. It is a story about a man who helped a stranger in desperate need. The story reflects the Jewish belief system with regard to living a righteous life before God and others in order to inherit eternal life, but without being mindful of the importance of serving humankind by showing love and compassion to others.

Jesus makes love the condition of eternal life, its ‘sine qua non’ (absolutely necessary), so he makes it the one all-embracing duty, the fulfilment of the law. If a man loves God supremely, and his neighbour as himself, he cannot do more to attain eternal life. All other commandments are included in these, and are subject to this greater law. This particular phrase, “Who is my neighbour?”, revealed Jesus’ new ethic for humankind. It’s a new ethic based on love and compassion but to be accomplished by performing one’s own duty for others. Jesus’s earthly ministry is grounded in love, love of humanity.

Reflecting upon Jesus’s new ethic, churches today are challenged to answer this very question “Who is my neighbour?”

Is our neighbour only those related to us by blood?
Is our neighbour only one of the same nation and religion as us?
Are we doing justice to our neighbour?
Do we show kindness and beneficence to our neighbour?

Yes, we all have neighbours. Some are young and some are old. Some are friendly and some are not so friendly. Some are poor and some are rich. Some are great neighbours and some are not so great. All our neighbours at different stages of life need our service. Let’s ask ourselves, “Are we being neighbourly to others?”

21 July

Mission in the Context of Empire

Reflecting upon Jesus' earthly ministry, being kind and generous to our neighbour is not just enough. Our action needs to assure people of different race with different backgrounds of God's love.

As we sought to answer this very question, "Who is my neighbour?" all the churches need to re-read our mission. Re-reading Christ's life would be the key factor to building a city of love and peace which includes people of different races and cultures.

Prayer:

Help us O Lord to hear your voice that we may be the voice for the voiceless. May our eyes be opened to see the needs of our fellow citizens. May we stand up for those who are the victims of social, economic and political injustice. Fill us with your Holy Spirit so that we may be empowered to do justice to our neighbours who desperately need our loving service. Amen.

Rev. D.C. Haia Darnei
CWM Moderator

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: 2 Samuel 12:1—15

TOPIC: You are the man

The phrase ‘You are the man’ is normally used to praise a person who has done well and who has completed the task successfully. However, in this scripture portion, the phrase is used in the opposite to a person who has fallen short in the sight of God and who does not even realise the injustice he has done by misusing his enormous power.

We see real ugliness in David’s life here. Nathan tells the parable about the man who takes the poor man’s beloved lamb. David is so self-righteous and self-assured that his anger burns against this man and he passed judgment. At that very point Nathan said, “You are the man”. David was condemned by this famous reply and the conversation ends with a typical question, “Why?” Nathan then goes on to share the heart of God who had given David so much and had been willing to give him more (2 Samuel 12:8).

We are in the same state as David; God has given us abundant blessings which should be used for his glory by serving humanity. God’s investment in his people is so great and God’s expectation from his people is also great—that he is always ready to bless us with much more gifts. He is equipping his people with the life skills needed to involve ourselves in God’s mission. He gives us an abundance of His grace in our lives.

God cares and feels for the victims of injustice and sends His people to work for justice through mission on behalf of the victims.

Prayer:

Oh, my God and my Lord, I am so blessed that you have chosen me. Help me to be unfailing in mission to work on behalf of victims of injustice. Amen.

Rev. D.C. Haia Darnei
CWM Moderator



Kenya, 2015, courtesy of Nina Foo.

My prayers and reflections on this week

23 July

Worship & Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: John 15:18-19, Philippians 1:29

TOPIC: Christian Suffering is to be Expected

On Palm Sunday, 9 April 2017, around 45 people were killed and 126 injured in two separate bombings which occurred in two Coptic Orthodox Churches in Northern Egypt. Heartbreakingly, such atrocities and disheartening news are becoming more and more familiar to us in the media today.

The Lord Jesus had already warned his early disciples and us that Christian persecution is to be expected. "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." (John 15:18-19). Paul echoes the same theme in Philippians 1:29, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake".

Our natural human response is to be angry, hateful and revengeful in the face of such injustices and atrocities. I was in tears when I heard the Christ-like response of Father Boules George in his message to those who bombed the 2 Coptic Orthodox Churches in Egypt: "We thank you for giving us the honour to share in the suffering of Christ! We love you and pray for you to come to know this God of love!" These powerful words exemplify and testify to the command of our Lord Jesus to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44), inflicting great pain, grief and loss.

Let us continue to pray for our dear brothers and sisters in the world who are suffering and are persecuted because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Pray that each of us will continue to be faithful to the Lord Jesus in whatever circumstances life throws at us. Pray for the many who are yet to know Jesus as their Saviour, to come to acknowledge Him as the God of Love and the Prince of Peace!

Prayer:

**"Be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).
Have mercy upon us all, Lord Jesus, help us to be faithful to You till the end.
Amen!**

Mrs Molly Chua
Presbyterian Church of Wales

Worship & Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 13:8

TOPIC: Finding our Certainty in Christ

The United Kingdom had its General Elections on 8 June 2017. It was interesting to watch how each Party Leader tried very hard to sway voters by promising greater security, better benefits and lower tax. Generally, each voter tends to vote for the one they feel will benefit them the most. However, we were left with the shocking result of a hung parliament, in which no political party has enough seats to secure an overall majority. Therefore, it created great uncertainties and fears about the future of the country.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we find our rest in the One who holds all our tomorrows. Thus, despite living in a fear stricken world, with ever-growing frequent news of terrorism, and political and economic instability, we can continue to be steadfast and strong in the promise that Jesus is our hope and our salvation, the anchor of our souls. We must remember that our future is not in the hands of the politicians who are mere humans, but in Christ, who is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last (Revelation 1:8).

As written in the famous lyrics of the song 'In Christ Alone,' we reaffirm where our "hope" is found. The promise that He is "[our] light, strength, and song" that remains "firm through the fiercest drought and storm". Therefore, through Christ, we do not subject ourselves to fear but rather submit ourselves to Him who is our "comforter" and our "all in all".

It is important to remember that before our certainty can be found in Christ, we must first submit ourselves to Him. Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). It is in the full surrendering of ourselves that we find Him to be our security and stability. This process of letting go is definitely tough but necessary. A daily dying to self means another day of living in Him and for Him, guaranteeing us a future of certainty and hope.

Prayer:

Almighty God, faithful and unchanging, we place our trust in you as we journey with You in these uncertain times. You hold our hands and so we need not fear as you are always near. You are the only certainty in life - the One who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Mrs Molly Chua
Presbyterian Church of Wales

25 July

Worship & Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Jonah 4:5-11

TOPIC: God of the Vine, Worm, Wind and Sun

In Jonah 4:5-11 we read how Jonah is angry with God for the relentless grace shown to the Ninevites who repented. He went outside of the city, built a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.

God caused a vine to grow quickly, which made a cool shelter for Jonah and made him very comfortable and pleased. But the next morning, God sent a worm, that devoured the vine, and it withered. Jonah was very angry and wished that he could die! As if it was not bad enough to lose the vine, now he had to face the scorching sun and east wind.

What is God trying to teach Jonah?

The vine represents the joy, comfort and blessing. The withered vine, the worm, the scorching sun and wind represent sorrow, loss and disappointment. All these were intentionally provided and removed to teach Jonah a lesson.

Romans 8:28 reminds us that God works in all things for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. God used the worm, the sun and the wind to save Jonah from the vine-centred life where he loved the gifts more than the Giver, which is the essence of idolatry.

Jonah was not the only one in the Scriptures who experienced the vine, the worm and the wind. Job experienced a similar pattern but to an even more trying extent. His 'vine' was his ten children, thousands of cattle and an abundance of servants (Job 1:2-3). His 'worm' represented the devastation of losing all those he loved, but were pried from him in just one day! Every blessing was stripped away. In spite of all these, there was a vast contrast between both men's responses. On one hand, Jonah was angry and held bitterness against God, while on the other hand, Job responded in worship and with a thankful heart. "The Lord gave and the Lord has taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

Question:

How do you respond to the 'vine' and 'worm' in your life?

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, help me to receive Your blessings with gratitude. Help me to hold Your gifts lightly. Your gifts are gifts, not rights. Help me to love You more than I love Your gifts. Because your love is better than life, my lips will always glorify you.

Mrs Molly Chua
Presbyterian Church of Wales

Worship & Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Acts 3:1 – Acts 4:22

TOPIC: Have you Been with Jesus Lately?

Acts 3 and 4 recorded the miraculous healing of the crippled man through Peter and John's ministry. Unfortunately, not everyone was happy. Peter and John were arrested and later questioned by the Jewish Council. "By what power or by what name did you do this?" they asked. Peter, full of the Holy Spirit, boldly declared that it was through Jesus that the crippled man was healed. Then the passage went on to tell us that "they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

The disciples were with Jesus for 3 years - talking, walking and learning from Him. They saw Him reach out with love and compassion to people from all walks of life. Jesus' love was evident during His ministry on earth. He engaged the poor, the rich, the powerful and the weak. They heard His teachings through Sermons on the Mount and various other discourses. They marvelled at His wisdom. They saw the crucifixion from a distance, witnessed His resurrection, and ascension. They waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit and lived in obedience. They were uneducated, untrained yet mightily used by God because they had been with Jesus.

So, what characterized the disciples who had been with Jesus?

Firstly, they are characterized by COMPASSION - a heart for people, as each is created in the image of God. Life is hopeless and aimless without Jesus. Only He can change us from the inside out!

Secondly, they are characterised by COURAGE to speak the truth even in the midst of opposition.

Thirdly, they are characterised by COMMITMENT to Jesus and the preaching of the gospel, at all costs.

Question:

1. When people look at us, what do they see? Do they see compassion, courage, and a commitment to Christ?
2. Do others know and marvel that we must have been with Jesus?

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, there is no greater joy than to be in Your presence. Give me a heart that yearns for you like a deer pants for the water (Psalm 42:1). I know with full assurance that I shall find my true satisfaction in You.

Mrs Molly Chua
Presbyterian Church of Wales

27 July

Worship & Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 73:26

TOPIC: Here's my Heart Lord.

Recently my husband and I attended a 3 days 2 nights "Pastor's Time Out" in Surrey. It was such a blessed time away - to rest, to pray and to be prayed for, and to listen to God. One of the worship songs that touched me deeply was entitled, "Here's my heart Lord".

It was originally sung by Lauren Daigle.

Here are the lyrics:
Here's my heart Lord
Here's my heart Lord
Here's my heart Lord
Speak what is true.

'Cause I am found, I am Yours
I am loved, I'm made pure
I have life, I can breathe
I am healed, I am free.

'Cause You are strong, You are sure
You are life, You endure
You are good, always true
You are light breaking through.

Here's my heart Lord
Here's my heart Lord
Here's my heart Lord
Speak what is true

I found the lyrics so powerful.

First, it reminded me afresh of my standing in Christ as one who is found, loved, made pure, given life, healing and freedom! It is so easy to be beaten by life's circumstances and forget our true identity in Christ, that we are children of the King of kings and Lord of lords. We need to see who we are in Christ based on His finished work on the Cross.

Secondly, it reminded me of God who is strong, sure, a life-giver, good, always true, who is light breaking through. It is so easy to try to box God in and try to limit Him in what He can do. Matthew 19:26 reminded us that "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Hallelujah! He is able!

Psalm 73:26 says, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." It is my prayer that you will allow the truth of God's Word to sink deep into your soul and find courage and strength to go on living for Jesus every day.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, You have said in your words, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Have all of me Lord Jesus and I love You! Amen.

Mrs Molly Chua
Presbyterian Church of Wales

Worship & Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: John 14:6

TOPIC: Salvation through Christ Alone

Working among the University students in Swansea, God has taught me to be a good listener, especially as I am a natural talker. Through constant dependence and submission to God's guidance it has been amazing to witness how God has directed my causal conversations to be opportunities for sharing the Good News of Jesus. Being a good listener is vital and has opened my perspective to see the world through the eyes of others. It continues to enrich my understanding, and expand my capacity of empathy.

Christ has given us the ministry of reconciliation. As His ambassadors, we implore others to reconcile with God (2 Cor. 5:18-20). It is important to present the Good News of God's love to humankind. Unbelievers first need to come to acknowledge the 'bad news'; the consequence of their sinful human nature that is death. Only then can they fully accept the Good News that Jesus has come to give us the ultimate gift; forgiveness and salvation in Christ.

Scriptures tell us 3 things about our human condition without Christ:

1. Without Christ, we are spiritually blind

2 Corinthians 4:3-4 highlighted that the god (Satan) of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

2. Without Christ, we are slaves to sin

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) but the way to overcome the death of sin is through Jesus Christ. "You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (Romans 6:18).

3. Without Christ, we are spiritually dead

Paul reminded the Colossian Christians that they were once spiritually dead because of their sins but God gave them new life together with Christ and forgave all their sins (Colossians 2:13).

Let us make it our daily prayer, for guidance of the Holy Spirit as we testify and minister the word of God to unbelievers. The Holy Spirit will help us to present the Good News of Jesus, "who is the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

Prayer:

Thank you we can be your instruments and have the blessing to lead others to you. As we acknowledge that You are the only One who can save us from our sin we pray for receptive hearts of others, so that they too will believe.

Mrs Molly Chua
Presbyterian Church of Wales

Worship & Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Jonah 1:1-17

TOPIC: Stop Running Away from God

In Swansea, Wales, UK, where my husband and I are serving as CWM partners in mission, it has been a privilege to speak at churches and fellowships around the city. Recently, in one of my sermon preparations, I got so excited about what the Lord has been teaching me hence I would like to share it with you for your own reflection.

Some of us may be familiar with the story of Jonah, the reluctant prophet who ran away from God. We could even empathize with his refusal to God as he was called to Nineveh, a city known for its cruel acts (Nahum 3:1, 9). So, he decided to take the opposite route and boarded a boat to Tarshish, more than two thousand miles away from where God had sent him. Unfortunately, his presence on the boat had caused havoc for those on board, for the LORD was pursuing His servant by causing a great storm in which the boat was about to break apart. In fear and desperation, all were praying to their own gods for help, except Jonah, who was asleep. How could he sleep so soundly with all the chaos that was happening? They then urged Jonah to pray to his God in hope that maybe He would save them!

As in their familiar way of seeking divine direction, they decided to throw lots, which fell on Jonah. He was pushed to the corner to confess the troubles he had caused and knew that the resolution to this ordeal was to throw him overboard. The sailors were hesitant and tried to solve the problems to their best abilities but to no avail. At last, they did as Jonah suggested and the storm immediately ceased and the sea became calm.

Question:

1. Are we in any way like Jonah who ran away from God's mission/plan for us?
2. Do we believe that EVERYONE (even the most evil people) deserves God's mercy and relentless grace when they repent?
3. Are we "spiritually" sleeping whilst the world is crying out for help?

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, may we not be a Jonah, but rather be submissive and in one heart with your mission for us. May we have Your heart for the lost as You are the way, the truth and the life, remembering no one goes to the Father except through You.

Mrs Molly Chua
Presbyterian Church of Wales

30 July

Worship and Discipleship (Discipleship)

SCRIPTURE: Luke 19:1-10; Mark 10:17-22

TOPIC: Accountability

October 2017 was a landmark year in the socio-political history of Equatorial Guinea. Teodorin Obiang, vice-president of Equatorial Guinea (and son of the President) was jailed in the French prisons on charges of embezzlement and corruption. The article which ensues outlines his actions and establishes an argument for the justification of his imprisonment.
<https://qz.com/1113971/equatorial-guineas-teodorin-obiang-is-sentenced-to-jail-in-france-for-corruption/>

More troubling was Patricia Moreira's statement, noting the dearth of legislature to ensure that, "... property confiscated in cases like this is returned to its legitimate owners". Her observation implies that the on-going depletion of a developing country's asset base through embezzlement and money laundering, does not see a shift when an embezzler is caught. This calls for a severe paradigm shift in our practice of the faith, for we must not only speak against injustice, but also engage the principalities and powers which diminish life and livelihood on macro and micro-economic levels.

How then do we live? What is our call to justice as faithful disciples?

Two (potential) acolytes. One Lord. One invitation. Two responses. During His Jericho tour, Jesus meets with Zacchaeus, the tax collector. The encounter is transformational. Zacchaeus offers half his wealth to the poor, and promises fourfold returns on monies embezzled. (Luke 19:1-10) En route Jerusalem, Jesus was approached by another man seeking (behavioural) keys to eternity. The man's inability to comply with the Gospel results in his visible disappointment and departure from a just commitment to God. (Mark 10:17-22)

Of the two, it is Zacchaeus who reflects true humility and a desire to secure the rights of the oppressed and marginalised. And, lest we get side-tracked by Zacchaeus' prior record, it is critical to note that the source of the man's wealth is not revealed. So, when one country's coffers and per capita income are disproportionately boosted at the expense of another, Christ calls us to contend for a New International Financial and Economic Architecture. It is the Church which must insist on fiscal accountability among our membership. It is the Church which MUST establish the New World Order.

Question:

1. To whom is your local/regional church accountable in its management of resources? Is there due diligence?
2. How might those who are financially aware help to critique and challenge the current economic status quo in your context?

Prayer:

God of the neighbour, God of the foe, God of the pruning hook
How does the creature say Love, How does the Creature say Peace'²

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

² 'God of the Sparrow' v. 5 Jaroslav J Vajda 1983.

31 July

Worship and Discipleship (Discipleship)

SCRIPTURE: John 17; Ephesians 4

TOPIC: Exit Strategy

With the reality of BrExit since 2016, the Germans in 2017 began to stage war games in anticipation of the demise of the EU.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/11/06/german-army-plans-break-european-union-war-game-scenario/>

The German response is somewhat similar to that of the Caribbean leaders exit from the short-lived West Indies Federation in the 60s. Then, it was Jamaica which left the nascent union and it is alleged that in frustration, another regional prime minister commented, "One from Ten equals Zero".

When our political leaders are unable to find points of commonality, the scope for regional unity is highly compromised. Invariably, trade and other socio-economic issues come to the fore, and too soon, the political boundaries become fixed with little room for negotiation or friendly engagement. Ironically, our spiritual leaders/churches sometimes find ourselves at variance with each other, whether by virtue of orthodoxy or orthopraxy. How then do we prepare ourselves for instances of disunity?

Within the CWM family, we have learned to celebrate unity in the face of our distinct diversity. The call to unity is one of the main foci of Jesus' pastoral prayer in John 17, and is the foundation of Paul's plea to the Church of Ephesus (Ephesians 4). When Jesus prayed for unity among the disciples (and those whom God gave to Him in the then future), He was wholly aware of their/our character traits. Nevertheless, He grounded this request in His own understanding of His own relationship with God.

Unity, then, does not require symmetry or identical ways of being. Rather it requires our willingness to work through and even past the differences for the cause and sake of Christ. This may involve:

- Consciously identifying points of unity
- Determining ways in which we may agree to disagree
- Affirming each other without denying our own humanity and spirituality

In the cases where the differences are too much to overcome, may our responses be that of Paul and Barnabas rather than one which results in a spiritual BrExit. Selah

Prayer:

**Dangerous divisions distancing devoted disciples
wearying way-makers witnesses to woeful wandering and worrisome waste
while seekers consider alternate approaches ...**

**Lost
souls,
opportunities,
hearts,
witness!**

**Finding engaging spaces
For those in faithful places
through Love,
serving ONE God,
ONE Lord,
our Hope through the ages.**

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

1 August

Worship and Discipleship (Discipleship)

SCRIPTURE: Gen 1:28-31

TOPIC: Our Stewardship Responsibility

Climate Change has been one of the ‘hot-button’ topics in international circles since the late 1900s. This is a major concern for peoples of the sea – the Pacific and the Caribbean – for water is essential for life, but the sea and its contents are essential to our identity, trade and general survival. In the link below, there is strong evidence to suggest that the Caribbean Sea is imperilled.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/10/26/shocking-photo-shows-caribbean-sea-choked-death-human-waste/>

While the example cited is Caribbean in nature, environmental degradation is normative for many developed and developing countries around the globe. Our personal and industrialized waste traverses oceans and landfills while humanity continues mindlessly in the pursuit of happiness. Unfortunately, this is not a pressing concern to many Caribbean nationals. We often demonstrate a lackadaisical approach to care for our environment, and fail to see the connection between Christian discipleship and care of our creation.

But, the decision to protect, patrol and preserve the sanctity of creation is one of our core biblical mandates. Upon completion of the creation process, God provided humanity with a blueprint for environmental awareness, advocacy and action; naming us as stewards of the created order (Gen 1:28-31). Moreover, the environment was crafted for humanity’s benefit (note the creation order); not our degradation.

‘The world is in turmoil and creation groans...CWM wishes to remain on the edge of life, looking for ways to partner with God in speaking hope ... and ... to always be in the presence of God...’¹

¹ CWM Framing the Global Mission Agenda, p. 10.

Action:

As we partner with God, here are some simple considerations:

- Build awareness through simple campaigns, stewardship moments and children's stories on the dangers to our waterways
- Invite persons with material and information-based resources to assist in awareness-raising and engagement of the congregation, denomination and region through diverse media
- Encourage local leaders (especially those who are members in our congregations and denominations) to be actively involved with protectionism
- Challenge various auxiliaries to offer liturgies, Bible studies, posters and skits on environmental protection
- Visit local waterways and arrange for a tour of some of the more polluted areas; discuss worthwhile solutions with local environmentalists and other stakeholders
- Invite church auxiliaries to organise water ways clean-up as part of practical action
- Hold governmental agencies and other privatized bodies accountable for protection, preservation and patrolling of our environment.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Worship and Discipleship (Discipleship)

SCRIPTURE: Mark 11:15-17

TOPIC: Just Health

How might one protect the intellectual property rights of a business or an individual? It depends on who has infringed on those rights, the rights of the defendant and the laws of the land. The Jamaican (and British) courts ruled against international pharmaceutical giant, Pfizer in a landmark case involving patents and promises as described below:

<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/commentary/20171031/editorial-pfizer-case-and-slowpoke-justice>

While the wheels of justice have rolled exceptionally slowly (to Pfizer's detriment, one might argue) the laws which facilitated the production and distribution of Norvac on the island may have also resulted in unexpected pharmaceutical access for the poor. In the face of unaffordable health care options for many and the price fixing mechanisms appropriated by many international laboratories, the Christian has a responsibility to address the justice implications generated by the transfer of patent rights in effect with Pfizer and Lasco (Medimpex).

The good news of Jesus which 'announces victory over ...life killing actions of empire' must realize equitable provisions for those who would have been disenfranchised and dispossessed. Subsequently, it is the goal of the missional Christian to 'chant down Babylon', overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the (God's) marketplace while eradicating the distributors and sales team profiteering from the people's needs. (Mark 11:15-17)

Questions:

- Who are the moneychangers in your context? How have the rights/needs of the poor and dispossessed been short-changed in favour of wealthy multinationals?
- Can you identify even one case where the courts ruled in favour of the local David in your context?
- How should the church respond when justice delayed realizes positive results for the poor?
- In terms of missional influence, the church is more frequently known for its provision of food and/or clothing for the indigent. How might your congregation mobilize its members to providing access to quality healthcare at an affordable rate or representation for those whose need for urgent and critical care is ignored?
- Is there an affordable healthcare programme where you live? What does it involve, and are those who need it aware of their rights? If not, consider petitioning your local newspaper or local government official inviting them to consider a more inclusive healthcare programme.
- Identify members of your congregation, denomination or local community who are healthcare practitioners and willing to provide education about patient rights or healthcare access for the medically inept.

Prayer:

Waymaker, Miracle-worker, Promise-keeper, Light in the darkness! That is who you are²!

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

² Waymaker Sinach.

3 August

Worship and Discipleship (Discipleship)

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 61: 1-3

TOPIC: Discipleship as Sacrifice

<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/10/27/560431688/anethical-dilemma-in-a-case-of-conjoined-twins-from-east-africa>

How do we counsel a parent who has to choose one child's life over the other? And, in my case, what do you say to the child who is destined for death so that my sibling might live?

Hello, I know you're wondering who I am, and how I got to be involved in your lives. For the sake of the innocent, let's just call me Grace and my twin Gift. You see, from the onset we were different. Joined in the abdomen, sharing vital organs; intricately, fearfully and wonderfully made.

I was the weaker child, it made sense that I would be sacrificed. But what makes for sense, doesn't always make for life. That we were in Africa where twins, and especially conjoined twins are anathema, my parents were distraught. For you folks in the church, the argument is: 'Choose Life'. And my parents' response was – which one? Do you sacrifice both of us in the name of choosing life? Do you callously discard the weaker child who showed signs of birth defects and thus might not live? And, when your lives are not sinless, who are you to cast the first stone?

I might have been around a few days longer and thus the decision should not be made for me. I wanted to live. But so do the millions of children who are mutilated and abused even in the womb. And the way I figured it, my love for my twin was that great, I was willing to die so my sister could live. That's Christian! You believe in the resurrection – there's a sense in which I live in her. And even if I don't; then we will meet again on that great Resurrection morning. So I am content.

However, I do have a favour to ask of you –

Before you judge the stranger for their choices, pray. Seek God's face as things might not always be as they seem. Consider offering programmes for young expecting mothers which offers life as an alternative. Dig deeper.

Questions:

1. Consider babies conceived from incestuous rape. Who speaks for those mothers?
2. Consider mothers who yearn with empty arms – who provides?
3. Consider single parent families who have been turned out of their homes/churches because their sin is ever before them. Who provides? Will You? Pleeeeease?

Prayer:

God of mercy, God of life, let not my death be in vain.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Worship and Discipleship (Discipleship)

SCRIPTURE: Revelation 21

TOPIC: Walk and Talk in Harmony

Online games have been the rage since the late 1980s. Some persons are familiar with games such as Mario Brothers 'Pacman' and 'Where in the world is Carmen Santiago?' The lure of video games continues to hold sway with video games being legitimized through international tournaments, and yet; few Christians have sought to produce games of merit which engage its target group in the way that Candy Crush, Bubble Witch Saga and several others seem to have done.

One game which may have grasped its share of the market is Elvenar. In its overview, Elvenar is described as ... a browser-based 2D strategy MMO with primary focus on city-building and exploring the world map. Players begin by building up a city, making sure to connect buildings to the streets and growing their wealth by producing resource-generating buildings. Elvenar has a Culture system, offering benefits to players who decorate their town with lampposts, trees, etc., making their townspeople happier, ultimately leading to better resource production. It features a unique combat system, allowing players to directly control their units as opposed to sending them off into auto-battle as many other games in this genre would. The game also features two unique city types: Human and Elf, which offer different gameplay styles and artwork.

https://om.elvenar.com/ox/us/?ref=tab_row_en&&external_param=54735122&pid=msn-msn-home&bid=54735122

It is possible that one might see a correlation between Elvenar and the fantasy world of Narnia, or even Pilgrim's Progress. And to some extent, this would be correct. However, the premise behind this game affords one to build a city to one's own preferences; a situation which has ethical and spiritual implications for us today. Read Revelation 21.

Questions:

1. How would engaging Elvenar affect one's ability to envision the Holy City and is it feasible to see parallels with the human-elf and Christian-demonic interactions?
2. What counter-cultural mindsets are being through the building of the country?
3. How does the building of Elvenar remind you of Nimrod and the tower of Babel?
4. Are there avid gamers to be found in your churches today?
5. In their interactions with Elvenar or similar computer games, have they ever attempted to play along spiritual lines?
6. Is it possible for them to maintain their Christian values while playing Elvenar and how has it helped them in their daily interactions with non-gaming humans?

Prayer:

Teach us Lord to number our days and append our ways such that our walk matches our talk for Your glory's sake. Amen.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

5 August

Worship and Discipleship (Discipleship)

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 12:1; Mark 12: 38-44

TOPIC: Asset Management

"We're probably the only people in the business who think baseball players are paid too much money," she once told me. "He feels like his job is to do his best every day, and the fact that he's making so much money is hard on him." - Brandy Halladay

In an era where everyone seeks to get the most out of the system, Roy Halladay was an anomaly. A self-made baseball player who was never satisfied with mediocrity in himself and would go the extra mile to ensure that his contribution added value to the team, instead of seeking his own glory. Despite having Christian roots, he did not consider himself a Christian, although he maintained values espoused by Christ himself. Halladay, through his professional and personal ethic, encourages us to "lay aside every encumbrance and sin which would entangle us, so that we might run with endurance this race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1). Here's his obituary

<http://www.msn.com/en-us/sports/mlb/the-humility-and-ferocity-of-roy-halladay/ar-BBEHlPq?li=BBnb7Kz&ocid=AARDHP>

Finding such levels of dedication coupled with humility is rare – even among us Christians. From the example of Jesus' life, we realize that even when He critiqued the sociopolitical order of His day, Jesus paid taxes lest it add to the fiscal burden thrust upon those left in his wake. He not only noticed the amount of monies thrust in the temple coffers by the widow, but later lauded her sacrifice as being a better gift to the temple.

This subversive comment is challenging for us in the church today as we seek to craft budgets and improve programmes, for which the widow's mite would be a mere drip in the expenditure bucket. Could it be therefore that churches are being called to craft programmes which assure better stewardship of our resources and more attuned to the needs and realities of those in our contexts?

Questions:

1. What is the teaching in our congregations about money management and valuing the poor?
2. Have we been embarrassed by the amounts of money we possess, and what do we do when we are experiencing surplus?

Prayer:

Surrounded by so great
a cloud of witnesses,
let us run the race
not only for the prize,
but as those who've gone before us.
let us leave to those behind us,
the heritage of faithfulness
passed on thru godly lives.³

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

³ Steve Green - Find Us Faithful Lyrics | MetroLyrics.

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 22:37-39

TOPIC: Be a Neighbour

India is marked with co-existence of multiple religious communities. This necessitates people of different faiths living and working closely together. Educational institutions provide a space for the students from various religious traditions learning together and growing together. Here the children meet with and learn to love people belonging to different faith traditions. Those relationships built during their childhood can continue to grow when they become adults. This would also keep them in closer fellowships even in the midst of adversities. These individuals and communities have helped and rescued each other at the time of disasters or violent conflicts or riots in the past. Such relationship building is decisive in the present context of growing religious fundamentalism, fascistic intolerance and extremist religiosity.

The scripture speaks about fundamental relationships between a disciple, God and neighbour. Jesus, here, was answering the questions of Pharisees about the greatest commandment. Jesus breaks down the Jewish interpretation of the neighbour as the one belonging to one's own community. Instead, he extends the neighbourliness to those who are outside the accepted 'Jewish boundaries' of socio-religious proximity. He quotes the "Shema" here (Deut. 6:4). For Jesus, the greatest commandment is to love God with all that we are and that we have. This includes our whole being including heart, soul, mind, strength, possessions, time and service. Loving one's neighbour is inseparable from the love for God. He quotes Leviticus 19:18 and places it at the same level as the Shema.

Being Disciples of Christ we are called to extend our love to people of other faiths, accepting them as our neighbours. This presupposes constant interaction and intensive engagement between families as well as continuous exchange between individuals. More importantly, we need to train our children to connect and relate with their peers irrespective of religious barriers.

Prayer:

God, make me more human that I may recognize that my humanity is bound up in the other. Enable me to understand that we can only be human together. Enable me to realize a humane world together with others around, Amen. (Inspired by Desmond Tutu).

Rev. Anilal M. Jose
Church of South India

7 August

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 13:16

TOPIC: Hands of Hospitality

We live in a Christian dominated locality in Kerala (the southernmost state in India) where almost every family consists of practicing Christians. But in the midst of this place there lives a Hindu family. They are very strong in their faith and have regular celebrations and rituals practiced in their home. However, during both Hindu and Christian festivals we exchange food items such as 'payasam' (a local sweet), 'biryani' and other dishes prepared specially as part of the celebrations. In addition, we pay visits to each other and have a cordial relationship among us. As a result of this sharing we live together as one community beyond our religious affiliations.

The author of Hebrews asks the believers to do good and to share what they have with others. In chapter 13, the author exhorts the readers to uphold certain values so that God will be pleased with them. While verse 15 speaks about how love for God needs to manifest, verse 16 tells us how love for neighbour needs to manifest in our life. The author also cites examples from the scripture where hospitality of the faithful people brought blessings to their lives. This could be understood in continuation with the first verses of this chapter, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality..."

Obviously when we share what we have with others we are demonstrating hospitality and that has potential for fellowship. Fellowship with another person doesn't just happen; an effort has to be expended to initiate and keep the state of fellowship going. That means fellowship requires an active initiative from our part to extend our circle of friendship to the neighbours of other faith. If we are able to make our community one that extends the hands of hospitality to the people around us; that can lead to fellowship as we embrace them and bring them into a larger communion.

Particularly in today's context of religious extremism, we are called to extend our hands of hospitality to our neighbours of other faith traditions and build fellowship.

Prayer:

God of hospitality, enable us to be true neighbours. Entrust us with the values of sharing and caring. Empower us to extend the hands of hospitality to people of other faiths. Amen.

Rev. Anilal M. Jose
Church of South India

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: John 8:12

TOPIC: Light your Life

Upper cloth revolt was a movement initiated against the legal banning of women belonging to 'lower castes' from covering the upper part of their body in the state of Kerala, previously known as Travancore, in 19th Century. The caste system has divided and perpetuated discrimination in the Indian society for centuries.

The early Protestant missionaries like Rigeltaube, Mead, and Mault focused on women's education. That not only lit their intellectual light but also the obnoxious social practices were brought to their notice. Lady missionaries such as, Mrs. Mead, Mrs. Mault, Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Thompson, devised a loose jacket called the 'Kuppayam' to cover the upper body. Mrs. Snehappu, was among the women who dared to challenge the system by covering her upper body for the first time. She covered her upper body and went to the local market in a place called Arumanoor, near Neyyattinkara in the Thiruvananthapuram District of Kerala State. When she was in the market, outraged upper caste men tore her upper cloth, using a long stick. On the next market day she went to the same market again covering her upper body. This incident initiated a revolt between the 'Nadars' and the upper caste communities that spread across Kerala from 1813 to 1859. Christian missionaries intervened to end the revolt by influencing the Travancore King to issue an order that allowed all women to wear upper cloths.

Jesus was introducing himself as the 'light of the world' at "the treasury" (John 8:20). There were two colossal golden lamp-stands from which a multitude of lamps were hanging. They diffused their brilliance all over the city every evening. Similarly, when one receives the light from Jesus, he/she would begin to reflect the 'light of life' in and through life and would be able to challenge the evil practices around their living space.

"We are told to let our light shine, and if it does, we won't need to tell anybody it does. Lighthouses don't fire cannons to call attention to their shining- they just shine." (Dwight L. Moody).

Prayer:

Enlightening God, fill me with your life-giving light. Let me be a mirror that reflects your light...let me be a candle that glows in the dark...let me be your light that transforms the darkest valleys of loneliness, fear and hopelessness into bright corridors of faith, hope and love. Amen.

Rev. Anilal M. Jose
Church of South India

9 August

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Luke 5:4

TOPIC: Put out into the Deep

Shrikant Pantawane hails from Nagpur, a city in central India, and is the son of a security guard. He began his career as a delivery boy, and later started riding an auto to support his family. (Auto Rickshaws are three wheelers and are a major local transportation option across India. Many depend on them for rides as well as to make a living.) His life changed after a conversation with a cadet at the airport when he went there to deliver a parcel. During that conversation Shrikant came to know that he too could become a pilot.

With a newfound purpose in life, he prepared for class 12 exams all by himself, and after passing, went on to join a flight school in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Though English was a barrier, his friends helped him communicate in the language. Shrikant still sits behind a three-wheeled vehicle, but now it's not his auto-rickshaw, but an aircraft (India Times). Shrikant joined IndiGo as First Officer in 2015 (IndiGo Tweet).

Jesus intervenes in Peter's life and transforms him altogether, while he was at work. Peter allowed Jesus to use his boat as a pulpit to preach to the people gathered at the shore. Later Peter was ready to obey the words of Jesus to move the boat into the deep and cast the net. When Jesus asked him to put out the nets into the deep Peter would never have thought that it would change his life altogether. However, the unexpected thing happened and he got a huge catch. As a result of that encounter with Jesus, Peter decided to take a new route in his life. He left all the fish along with the boat and the nets and followed Jesus.

Sometimes change comes into our lives unexpectedly and through unusual means. Even though we may consider certain things as unimportant, those unimportant things have potential to influence our lives and initiate change in ourselves. There is a potential for change in every person. Anyone can be changed at any time, provided someone motivates him or her to the right direction at the right time. Lighting up the hidden flames within a person is a divine task.

Prayer:

Lord, make me humble and true to myself. Open me to build friendships like a fine art; enlighten me to make each day a masterpiece. Ignite me to initiate changes in the lives of people around me. Amen.

Rev. Anilal M. Jose
Church of South India



Delhi, 2013, courtesy of Nneoma Chima.

My prayers and reflections on this week

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 7:12

TOPIC: Putting on the Shoes of the Other

Kerala, the southernmost state is leading the way for organ donation in India, not just in numbers but also in awareness and attitude. As per the latest figures with the state-run Kerala Network for Organ Sharing (KNOS), the state now tops the country in deceased organ donation per million persons in the population. At 2.3 donors per million population, Kerala has outdone all other states of India. This movement began on 30 September 2009 when Fr Davis Chiramel, the 52-year-old Christian priest donated his kidney to Mr. Gopinathan Chakkamadathil, an electrician, having Hindu religious affiliations, from Thrissur, Kerala. He was suffering with renal failure. The priest, Fr Chiramel considers this as a spiritual opportunity and an act of grace to live the message of Christ.

The Gospels portray discipleship as a call to put on the other's shoes. It is a call for an "other centred" life-style. According to Jesus, attitudes towards the 'other' are the touch-stones of true discipleship. This is affirmed when he gives 'love' as the foremost commandment to the disciples. Matthew 7:12 is considered as the "Golden Rule" to be followed by every disciple. Jesus proposes this great truth as a principle that ought to govern our attitudes toward others. We are expected to practice this rule in every area of our life, so that the person would refuse to say or do anything that would harm themselves or others. Instead, they will always cross-check their own attitude towards others in light of Jesus' commands.

Practicing an 'other-centered lifestyle' would help us to grow in the love of God. This, in turn, enables us to help others in need. This even extends to loving those who may hurt us. When we have to take a decision on behalf of another person, we are required to take the position of that person. That means, in order to practice a life of love, we may have to put ourselves in their shoes and understand the problem from their position. Then, what we consider reasonable that they should do for us, we will then be willing to do for them.

Prayer:

Dear God, make me useful, honourable and compassionate. Fill me with your hope, that I may radiate hope in this world. Mould me to take initiatives to do things that express your love to others, Amen.

Rev. Anilal M. Jose
Church of South India

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Galatians 5:1

TOPIC: Borderless Worship Space

In India, practical field work is an integral part of theological training. In 2002, we were sent to the Medek Diocese of the Church of South India, in the Andhra Pradesh state, India. On a Sunday, while participating in the worship at the Medek Cathedral, we witnessed a huge crowd coming into the church with agricultural produce and other offerings, at the time of offertory. The crowd comprised not only of Christians, but also many people from the Hindu and Muslim communities. They came to the altar, placed their offertory, knelt for prayers and received assurance of blessings from the officiating priests. In the same manner, many of them participated in the Holy Communion later.

We could see deep faith, devotion and dedication in their participation. This was the first time I was witnessing something of this kind in my life. Later we spoke to some of them and found that this was a regular occurrence and even people from faraway places come to the church and participate in the worship.

Worship space needs to be a border-less space where people from all walks of life can come together and experience the presence of God. 'Divide and rule' is an imperial formula to ensure the upper hand and domination of empire. The same formula had been in place at the building of the first temple. The worship space had been divided in terms of 'most holy space', 'holy space', 'porch', 'chambers', 'court of the priests' and 'greater court'. The common people were strategically excluded by not allowing them to approach the altar, by preventing even their entry into the inner courts when Solomon built the Imperial Temple.

Jesus 'set us free' and ensured the freedom of entry into the worship space for the whole humanity. Unfortunately, the imperial forces crept into peoples' mind and made worship spaces inaccessible for many by erecting walls of division in terms of denominations, ability, caste, class, gender, or ethnicity.

11 August

Interfaith and Ecumenism

As Paul says we are called to stand firm in the 'freedom of Christ' to curb the 'yoke of slavery' that divides the worship space.

Prayer:

God of Freedom set us free
From the bondage of Imperialistic attitudes;
From the bondage of individual interests;
From the bondage of the yoke of slavery;
Fill us with commitment for unity of your body in this earth.
Furbish us to stand firm in your love to be true Christians until the end... Amen.

Rev. Anilal M. Jose
Church of South India

12 August

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Micah 6:8

TOPIC: Standing with the Vulnerable

"We were around five hundred people gathered around our house in this compound and two priests in their cassock were standing at the entrance. Only because of that, they did not take our children to fight the war and the whole family along with the people in this campus were spared from death." These are the words of a mother we met during a visit to the war-torn villages around Mullativ in Sri Lanka. During the final war, many families lost their children as they were captured to fight. Both boys and girls as young as 12 years were captured during the intense war in 2009. Most of them did not return to their homes as they were either killed in war or went missing and there is no information available so far. However, the intervention of the Church was very strong and decisive in the post-war rehabilitation and restoration process in Sri Lanka.

Prophet Micah calls people to respond to God's actions by taking a stand on God's side. God expects the faithful to draw near to God through living with God and living for others. The disciples need to take a stand with the vulnerable. Church has to act as advocates for the powerless and take a stand to be with the hunted, tortured, hurt and those craving for help. This requires a spiritual commitment and 'right' behaviour expressed through three phrases: "to do justice," "to love kindness," and "to walk humbly with your God."

The notion of 'doing justice' is a dynamic one and points to something one does. To love kindness is expressed in the concept of 'hesed' which points to a sense of faithfulness and reliability. This quality moves one to act for the benefit of another without considering "what's in it for me?" and to have love with a strong loyalty in human relationships. 'Walk humbly' underlines God's expectation about life. "Walk," describes the whole orientation of one's life. Halacha (walking) is used to mean 'ethics'. 'Walk humbly' then means to live an ethical life daily. The community of faithful, therefore, is called to stand with the vulnerable towards establishing peace.

Prayer:

**Liberating God,
Enlighten us to perceive what you require.
Educate us to do justice,
Empower us with loving kindness,
Envision us to walk humbly with you;
Enable all human beings everywhere, near or far, known or unknown, with
happiness, dignity, justice, peace and freedom... Amen.**

Rev. Anilal M. Jose
Church of South India

13 August

Militarization & Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Zechariah 4: 6 – 10

TOPIC: The Spirit of the Lord Almighty is Enough

“He said to me, “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the LORD of hosts.” (Zech. 4:6)

Very often we hear the Christians heighten the role and power of God's Spirit in their lives and even boast about it. On the other hand, there has been an ongoing reliance on weapons of war by the powerful nations of the world for their national security. The cost of manufacturing these weapons and the impact of war on people's lives are phenomenal.

Such extraordinary amounts of money could be wisely given to the poor nations for their development and to the marginalized people to improve their standard of living and simultaneously promote peace and harmony in the world.

In the fifth vision of Zechariah, God himself proclaims exactly his only way to achieving Zerubbabel's mission and goals i.e. it is through the Spirit of the Lord Almighty who is working within Zerubbabel and his supporters. Not the weapons nor the acts of war but the Spirit of God would enable the world to achieve peace and to realise God's grace working in the midst of his faithful people. The Spirit of the Lord is enough.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, teach us that your Holy Spirit is adequate to empower us to carry out your will in the world. Amen.

Rev. Dr Fa'alepo A. Tuisuga
Congregational Christian Church in Samoa

14 August

Militarization & Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 26: 47 - 56

TOPIC: A Sword and its Proper Place

"Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." (Matt. 26: 52)

"We are moved by love but never driven by intimidation"

This ancient Samoan proverb epitomizes the actual philosophical mindset undergirding the forward thinking of the Samoans. It simply means that any form of intimidation and bullying encountered by the people will never succeed.

All good initiatives, whether they are political, sociological, economic, or religious, for a Utopian society they have to be motivated by true love. Militarization and conflict inspire war, fear, violence, arms, hatred, and retribution in the world. To resort to weapons in an attempt to defend oneself from the danger of violence is an absurd phenomenon according to Jesus.

The narrative about Jesus' betrayal and arrest in Matthew and other parallel Gospels is a story of the fulfillment of the Scriptures and the prophets, not a story of bullying the betrayer(s). If the world does not understand that aspect of Jesus' purpose in God's divine plan, it would never comprehend the place of the sword to which Jesus refers in this particular text. Retaliation and violence have no place in God's divine order of things in the universe.

Prayer:

Lord, teach us to understand that violence and physical retaliation are not your means to experience and accomplish your peace in the world. Amen.

Rev. Dr Fa'alepo A. Tuisuga
Congregational Christian Church in Samoa

15 August

Militarization & Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Micah 4: 1 – 4

TOPIC: The Lord's Universal Reign and Peace

He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore;... for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.” (Mic. 4: 3 & 4)

A matai is the chief of a Samoan family who leads and protects his people at all times. He is the most powerful and respected leader in the Samoan society. He is expected to be a humble, caring, loving and a courageous individual. His judgment and decision making are crucial for the livelihood and the harmonious living of his family members. Whatever he says has an impact on his people.

This portrays the role of God in bringing all his people together in peace in spite of the differences between the people of Zion from which conflicts emerged, He is prepared to rule with power and might. There should be no more wars and conflicts. Weapons of war shall be destroyed forever. The world today shall follow such an example in order to realize the greatness of God's salvation.

Prayer:

Our loving God, we pray that may you give us hope that you will never abandon us due to our shortcomings and transgressions in life. Amen .

Rev. Dr Fa'alepo A. Tuisuga
Congregational Christian Church in Samoa

16 August

Militarization & Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Luke 6: 27 - 36

TOPIC: Be merciful

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6: 36)

Our Father God is merciful. To be merciful like God is the obligation of all Christians in the world. Unfortunately, the big superpower nations of the world seem to ignore that and do the opposite when they relentlessly manufacture weapons of war for the purpose of engaging in warfare. It is the sign of hatred and retribution brewing within the human race.

If we love our enemies and do good to them, undoubtedly we are imitating Jesus' life.

Indeed, to love our enemies is a difficult task. Some say it is impossible to do so in practical terms. That is a challenge for us to at least strive to maintain good relationships with our neighbour and realise hope in God's mercy. Thus, we are exhorted by our Lord to be like him at all times towards others. If everyone would do the same it is anticipated this world would be a Utopian place to live.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, in your mercy, empower us with your compassion, love and care for your people and all of your creation. Amen.

Rev. Dr Fa'alepo A. Tuisuga
Congregational Christian Church in Samoa



Face to Face, Palestine, 2017.

My prayers and reflections on this week

17 August

Militarization & Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Hosea 1: 2 - 8

TOPIC: God Saves

“But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the LORD their God; I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen.” (Hosea 1: 7)

One wonders in this day and age why Samoa as a small island nation in the Pacific has no army and not even a weapon for their police force as most of the world nations have for national security. The normal understanding by the Samoans is that they traditionally believe in the protection by God's might and power to ensure that peace and harmony prevail in the nation at all times. In other words, God saves Samoa, thus its national motto: 'Samoa is founded on God'.

Perhaps in a similar manner, Judah is being confirmed to win God's favour while Israel's military power will be ended. There is no need for any weapon when we strive to have a peaceful world - a world where all people come together in love and support one another at all times. That is our Lord's wish and Christians must always bear that in mind.

Prayer:

God Almighty, in your Spirit show us how to come together in your love and mercy. Amen.

Rev. Dr Fa'alepo A. Tuisuga
Congregational Christian Church in Samoa

Militarization & Conflict

SCRIPTURE: James 1: 12 – 18

TOPIC: Trial and Temptation

“But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; ... when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.” (James 1: 14-15)

Naturally, humankind’s everyday dilemma is to deal with trials and temptations in life. Some of these temptations are from the desires of one’s inner being. Some desire for wealth and wisdom, others are craving for honour, respect and power. Human desires sometimes are deceitful and humankind needs to have a sense of control of such temptations.

James clearly articulates the logic of temptations and their consequences. Some of the conflicts we encounter in life nowadays are the consequences of someone’s desire for fame, power and wealth. Superpower nations are sometimes lured by the power struggle in the world to produce more nuclear weapons, chemical weapons, and missiles for national security and defence. When these superpowers are engaged in these activities of warfare people are killed and trillions of dollars are spent. These large amounts of monies could have been wisely given to the poor nations for development and to feed the hungry.

James words are timely for the world’s political and economic uncertain situations today.

Prayer:

Our dear Lord, temptations in life seem to be too much for us at times. Empower us to face them according to your will. Amen.

Rev. Dr Fa’alepo A. Tuisuga
Congregational Christian Church in Samoa

Militarization & Conflict

SCRIPTURE: James 3: 13 – 18

TOPIC: The Wisdom of Peace

“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” (James 3: 17)

James reveals the two main types of wisdom found in the world. First is that which entertains envy and selfish ambition in one’s heart. It is earthly based and it belongs to the realm of the devil. Indeed this is scary for it brings conflicts, divisions, fears, and evil to humanity. Of course, it also gives rise to wars as we have experienced in the world today.

On the other hand, there is the ‘heavenly wisdom’ which is originated from God high above. As James put it, it is ‘pure’, and it advocates peace. It brings love and compassion to the people of God thus they show and perform good deeds in their lives.

The Samoan concept ‘faautautaga atamai’ seems to resemble this expression of wisdom. It literally means thoughtful consideration in the Spirit of God. Having such attitude and mindset in the process of vigilant deliberations, humanity should be able to perceive and recognize the love of God embedded in the lives of his people needing interconnectedness with one another in harmonious relationships.

This wisdom of peace is needed badly in the world today. Not only does it bring conscientiousness to the interpersonal relationships between individuals and between nations, but it also induces humankind to respect God’s overall creation.

Prayer:

Lord, your wisdom of peace is seriously needed by this confused world. Give us hope in your everlasting love. Amen.

Rev. Dr Fa’alepo A. Tuisuga
Congregational Christian Church in Samoa

20 August

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 12:2

TOPIC: Looking to Jesus

Reflection:

Evangelism is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, witnessing of the Gospel through our words and deeds. It is other-oriented and inclusive in the light of the reign of God. Hence, Jesus Christ is the starting point of evangelism.

Jesus Christ was the example of true evangelism par excellence. He lived with credibility and integrity to exemplify the Kingdom of God to the world. Jesus' exclusive agenda was to realize the kingdom of God whose scope is the whole universe! Jesus was obedient to God, in this regard, from the very beginning of His life until His death. He had no other agenda other than God's program neither did he have any vested interest other than the interest of God. Thus, Jesus became pioneer and perfecter of the faith and a living example to others.

It is the need of the hour to look to Christ in the light of emerging global scenarios of human dilemmas, hypocrisy and contradictions. Evangelism plays a major role in the transformation of life-situations. Looking to Christ is the starting point. It transforms a hypocritical life into one of credible words and deeds. Our lives must be the fifth gospel to reflect Jesus Christ in everyday life!

Our real life is the best medium for evangelism. We could propagate the gospel of Christ through proclamation as well as personal life. For that to happen we should have perpetual association with Jesus Christ who is our model, so that we may mirror Christ to others through evangelism.

Prayer:

Merciful God, we praise you for sending your Son Jesus Christ, making it possible for us to follow Him in our everyday life. Help us to look to Christ who exemplified Your life. Enable us to follow the footsteps of Christ. Empower us to participate in spreading to Your gospel through our words and deeds. Transform us to mirror Jesus Christ to others in our lives. Amen!

Rev Maxcin John
Church of South India

21 August

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Luke 14:27

TOPIC: The Way of the Cross

Reflection:

Evangelism is participation as well as involvement in the way of the Cross-set by Jesus Christ. It is an experience of suffering and self-sacrifice for others, especially the most vulnerable people. Evangelism without the cross of Christ is vain and meaningless. In order to partake in it, we should understand the meaning and the symbolic nature of the cross.

The cross is a sign of God's unconditional as well as sacrificial love, which is characterized by indescribable compassion and forgiveness to others. Proclamation through love connects faith and action in the propagation of the Good news of Christ. Where love rules there is no room for religious fanaticism, extremism or fundamentalism. Love leads to a life-giving way of mutual love, respect and tolerance. When we practice love, we become its channels and a medium for witnessing to life and the way of the cross.

Once we adopt the way of cross in our lives, our nature and our values, it will become evident in daily life. Our approach and attitudes will communicate the power of the cross in practice. Historically, the cross was an instrument of punishment; in Christ, the cross has become a sign of life in love and compassion. It is our duty to practice the way of the cross. There is no evangelism without the cross. It is the only way others would identify us as true disciples of Christ.

Prayer:

God of love and mercy, lead us in the way of the cross. Give us strength to carry the cross and follow you. Grant us wisdom to be true disciples of Christ so that we may live authentic Christian lives even in the midst of suffering. Help us to faithfully propagate the gospel and fill us with your grace to live for Your glory. Amen.

Rev Maxcin John
Church of South India

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Mathew 5: 13-16

TOPIC: To be Salt and Light

Reflection:

As Christians, we have a responsibility and commitment towards God and humanity to be the salt and light of the earth. God calls us to engage in life-giving service for the well-being of others for the sake of the gospel of Christ. This is true evangelism! Amit Ray, a well-known writer and a Himalayan yoga master, says, "It does not matter how long you will spend on the earth, how much money you have gathered or how much attention you have received. It is the amount of positive vibration you have radiated in life that matters." We are called to transform the living situations of others, and by so doing we become channels of Christ's gospel.

All of life is precious and unique. God imbues all life with potentialities and possibilities that are in and around us. We need to identify them and work in service of humanity and creation and so to radiate the power of the gospel.

Dr. Steve Maraboli, a famous American behavioural scientist says, "You've been given the innate power to shape your life." Another American, a religious leader James E. Faust says, "It is a denial of the divinity within us to doubt our potential and our possibilities." Motivational Speaker, Leo Buscaglia, also known as "Dr. Love" has rightly pointed out that "Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around."

True evangelism is other-centered. To be salt and light, we need to stand for others and empty ourselves for them so that the world will bear witness to the good news.

Prayer:

Transform us, O God, to be salt and light on earth. Empower us to fulfil our responsibilities to others. Help us to understand that true evangelism is to empty ourselves for others, in word and deed. Amen!

Rev Maxcin John
Church of South India

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Luke 4:18-19

TOPIC: Good News to the Poor

Reflection:

At the heart of evangelism, is Jesus Christ's manifesto that He brought good news to the poor. Jesus Christ's missional agenda focussed on transformation and liberation of the poor in society. Luke 4:16-21 reveals that God anointed Jesus in order to preach good news to the poor.

In the Bible, the poor include the underprivileged, marginalized and exploited of society. The Hebrew word for poor is 'dalim', which denotes the weak and afflicted. In a broader sense, therefore, the word 'poor' signifies those whose worth as human beings is undermined. In the Indian context, we identify the poor as the economically deprived like the Dalits, indigenous people, victims of gender discrimination and those who suffer due to disease like HIV and AIDS. To such people, Jesus proclaimed the good news. His mission was to bring the good news to the poor, blind, lame, lepers, outcasts, the oppressed, the hungry, and the orphans of his day.

The church of Jesus Christ has the same responsibility to bring good news to the poor today. The church should declare its solidarity with the suffering people. We cannot be deaf ears and blind to the societal issues of the day. The church should therefore pledge support to the poor and locate itself at the heart of society. The church must be ever ready to sacrifice in service to others. Such service should not be for our self-satisfaction or mere sympathy towards those we serve. They are our own brothers and sisters and we are together accountable to God.

Prayer:

Compassionate God; strengthen us to spread the good news to the poor. Give us humble hearts that we may identify with the most vulnerable. Open our hearts to accept them as our own. Enable us to propagate your Word in word and deed. Amen!

Rev Maxcin John
Church of South India

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Mark 1: 16-20

TOPIC: From Self-centeredness to Other-Centeredness

Reflection:

Simon and his brother Andrew, James son of Zebedee and his brother John were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus called them to follow him to become fishers of people. It was a call to a new vocation. They were hitherto involved in family business. In obedience to the call, they left their nets, boats, fathers, hired servants and their respective enterprises. They also left their identity to follow Jesus and to be part of the mission of God. It was a call to a new purpose in life. Disciples who fished for their livelihood would now focus on the wellbeing of others. Salvation encompasses healing, wellbeing, peace and justice. That is what the disciples were called to believe, practice and proclaim and to shift from self-centeredness to other-centeredness. Evangelism, therefore, aims at the holistic transformation of life on earth with a vision of the hereafter.

It was a call to a risky life just like fishing too involves risks at sea. However, fishermen have the mastery to overcome maritime challenges. To follow Jesus was to risk their lives for the sake of the gospel. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*, that, “when Christ calls a man (sic), he bids him come and die”. The disciples committed themselves to sharing the good news, proclaiming wholeness, equality, justice and peace in a world ridden with hatred, exploitation and life-negation in the name of religion, gender, caste, creed and ethnicity. Even today, the gospel remains a challenge to the status quo. The good news of the kingdom of God must also confront us to leave our comfort zones, self-centeredness and embrace a new vocation and purpose in life.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, help me to see and hear the cry of those whose lives are negated by the greed and self-centeredness of our world. I commit to following you as Your disciples did, and so to find a renewed purpose for my life each day. Amen.

Rev James Cecil Victor
Church of South India

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Philippians 4:13

TOPIC: Performative Evangelism

Evangelism is proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. It is other-centered, where the other is a 'non-believer'. This term 'non-believer' is contentious as it may be derogatory and belittling the other's existing faith. Evangelism should therefore firstly be to oneself. Only a person who is inspired and transformed by the gospel can proclaim the gospel.

In today's context, like in Jesus' time, the deeds and the word-proclaimed are two sides of the same message. People need to see, hear and feel in order to believe something. The personal life of the one who proclaims the gospel is an integral part of the evangelism. Jesus' life exemplified performative evangelism. He did not come to abolish but to fulfil the law. He conveyed the love of God through His life. The words He proclaimed and the deeds He performed were consonant. In this light, Paul exalts believers to live by "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things" (v.8).

Thinking about such things leads to deeds. Moral and ethical life is thus a precursor for authentic proclamation of the gospel. In order to draw out life situations that inspired the biblical message, we need to take the context of the text seriously. For the Indian context, such reading would deconstruct the socio-economic, political and religious spheres that subjugate and marginalize the poor to unveil the Gospel of Jesus Christ that gives hope of new life. The gospel challenges structural oppression and champions a just community. "(We) can do all things through Christ who strengthens us" (Phil 4:13).

Prayer:

Dear Lord, fill our hearts with the fire of your love; and with the desire to ensure justice for all. By sharing the good things you give us, help us to secure equity for all our brothers and sisters in our communities. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev James Cecil Victor
Church of South India

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Luke 12: 54-56

TOPIC: Discerning the Times

Reflection:

Evangelism is a process of understanding the times, interpreting the signs and pronouncing the divine agenda in a particular context. In Luke 12:54-56 Jesus said to the multitude, 'when you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, "A shower is coming." Therefore, it happens. Moreover, when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be scorching heat," and it happens. You hypocrites, you know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?' It is a powerful reminder to everyone to interpret the present times so that the good news addresses our contexts.

In agrarian society, understanding weather patterns is integral to life. People discern the weather and make their plans. Jesus was indignant with the crowd for their lack of discernment. To discern is prophetic. We therefore need to discern the truth even while truth and justice are perverted. Affirming the power of forgiveness and reconciliation in a context where terrorism, chauvinism and hatred are prevalent, calls for discernment. Evangelism, discernment of the times, interpretations of the signs of the time in order to respond.

Science and technology reign in our present world. If they cannot foster harmony and tranquility, they are just tools for trade and exploitation. Jesus says, 'why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?' (v.57). Sensitivity to and discernment of current issues can confront challenges in ways that money cannot. Having the end times in mind makes a difference. 'The day of judgment' should not threaten us; rather, it should make us prioritize fullness of life for all.

Prayer:

Help me dear Lord to discern your will for my community and to discern what perverts it. Let my actions to affirm life. Lead me to other of like mind today. Amen.

Rev James Cecil Victor
Church of South India

27 August

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: John 16:21

TOPIC: Life is God's Revelation in the World

Conceiving and birthing life is a challenging and beautiful gift for mothers and expectant parents. Birthing and child rearing are divine attributes of God found in mothers. I have been blessed with eight pregnancies. It is a demanding yet exciting experience because of the movements, attachment, and spiral of emotions constantly experienced through the process. The most fulfilling part of pregnancy is the after birth which John refers to in this passage. A woman suffers through labour pains but when life is birthed, all pain is forgotten.

The joy of a woman to witness and embrace a divine gift which she partook in co-creating is similar to the joy of the disciples which Jesus speaks of when they witness God in revelation. Jesus speaks of revealing God to the world through many things. In this case, Jesus used the metaphor of a birthing mother and new-born child to relate a divine joy like no other.

The joy of experiencing God in a new life is powerful. It shows that the gift of life is something everyone embraces; children and adults. As such, life is the continual revelation of God existing in all of us. Family, through its constituent members, is a representation of a triune God existing in our daily responses, activities, and communications with each other. It is a reflection of a divine joy shared and reciprocated among all family members.

Indeed, children and young people are a reflection of God's beauty in our midst. They should be treated with love and respect as God has shown us in our relationship with God.

Prayer:

Triune God, loving and compassionate, we thank you for the gift of life evident in your creation. We thank you for blessing us with children and young people whose thrill, excitement and enthusiasm inspire us to love. Bless them with talent, wisdom, and resources to persevere and care for others. In Jesus we pray, Amen.

Mrs. Filomena Hunt Leituala
Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa (CCCAS)

28 August

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 18:1-5

TOPIC: Children are a Symbol of Community

A child is a perfect example of community because of his/her childish nature of playfulness. In the Pacific Islands, children are known to run from house to house calling other children out to play. This is a symbol of interconnectedness shared and valued within the Pacific Islands.

A similar image is portrayed by Matthew in the text when Jesus speaks of the little children in heaven. Jesus uses children as a model of innocence, humility, and connectedness to show the adults what is expected of them in terms of character and spirituality. Jesus said that unless they change and become like little children who are free of spirit, free in heart, free to love, share and learn from one another, they will not know what it is like in the kingdom of God.

Children represent togetherness, oneness and reciprocity. We are called to remember that children are a representation of who we are in terms of being in relationship with one another. They are the bond that holds family together and the descendants of tomorrow. They are pure, innocent, and are the treasures bestowed in families by God. They bring joy in our families and draw us close to each other and to God. As representatives of God's kingdom, we as parents, families, friends and communal people must care and treasure them deeply. They should be loved and led in the path of the Lord because they complete us.

Children and young people have suffered due to greed and lust of our hearts. Innocent children have become victims of all forms of abuse, negligence, and violence around the world. But we as a community (people of God, Christians, leaders, governments, and nations) are reminded to save our children. We are reminded to unite and stand together in combating the evil which has robbed us of our children. We are called to liberate our children from the evil around us. This can only be done when we learn to embrace one another, and tolerate our differences, and uniqueness.

Prayer:

Communal God, we pray for the children and young people in the world. May they continue to show us the beauty of your kingdom. Teach us to be like them; humble, loving, and free in spirit. Help those who are in need and free those who are oppressed. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Mrs. Filomena Hunt Leituala
Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa (CCCAS)

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 127:3-5

TOPIC: Children are our Inheritance from God

Samoan families are known for having many children or big families. There are families with four, seven, twelve, even eighteen children. A big family is usually admired because it means many blessings for that particular family. Having many children is seen as God's plan, God's blessings in a family.

This Psalm is believed to be a song of David in honour of his wise son, Solomon. David sings this song to the Lord because of the great joy he feels in his heart having been blessed with a wise and honourable son. It expresses an outburst of joy, love, and thanksgiving to God for granting him a rare gift - an offspring; his descendant who will continue his legacy and memories.

In a world of uncertainty, there are those with the gift to conceive and then there are others who bear no children because of unknown and unexpected complications or because God has a different purpose for them. One thing is certain; children are born into this world under various situations. Some are a result of rape, unplanned sex, cultural norms, coercion, religious beliefs, and many more. In light of this observation, there have been reports of unwanted children, some have been abandoned, and others have been killed or aborted before birth. It is a tragedy to see mistreatment of an innocent child. It is heartbreaking to see a newborn abandoned because the mother was unprepared, young, and afraid of care-giving responsibilities.

But, our text teaches us that there is hope in God. Sing to God with joy because of the inheritance given to us. Praise God because of the children with whom we have been blessed. Rejoice because of the gift of life given to others in terms of adoption because of their quest for children to love. There are many children in the world who hunger for the love of parents, who seek the comfort of a home, and who are desperate for care and support. Let us reach out to them and start by listening to their needs. Spending time with them is just the beginning of good communication.

Prayer:

Loving God, full of grace, we pray for the gift of inheritance which you have given us. Help us to nourish and provide for our children. Strengthen us so that we may be able to help others who have been abandoned, neglected and violated. May you heal their innocent bodies and comfort them in their struggles, Amen.

Mrs. Filomena Hunt Leituāla
Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa (CCCAS)

30 August

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Proverbs 22:6

TOPIC: Raising a Child is a Community Effort

Childhood in Samoa is usually filled with church activities and Samoan traditions. Families normally hold morning and evening prayers every day. Every member of a household is given chores to assist in cleaning, cooking, washing, and beautifying the landscape. Men work on taro plantations, others raise pigs and chickens, women weave mats and clothing, children pick the leaves and collect wood, others care for the young babies. These are all part of a community effort and Samoa was well known for raising children communally. In other words, every adult in the community has the responsibility of teaching, educating, and grooming a child in the village or family. Likewise, a child learns different talents from the adults in the community. This was very efficient and is still an ongoing tradition today with modification.

Our text relates a similar experience regarding disciplining children. Teaching a child is a community effort because it offers a variety of lessons, styles, and avenues to acquiring knowledge. But the most important aspect is that children are able to immediately observe and practice using the information transmitted by adults. So as the child grows, he or she understands the teachings, meaning, reasons, and purpose of contributing, giving, helping and working together as a family and community.

Our text shows that if a child is taught to understand and participate in exercising knowledge, they will continue in that path of helping others. In a communal environment where everyone participates in raising a child, we will see a positive outcome in the child where he or she will grow to receive that gift and reciprocate that love for other people in their family, church, and in society.

Raising a child is our responsibility as a community. The church plays a part in inspiring children, society contributes through the provision of guidance, and family assists in ensuring that they are heard and comforted.

Prayer:

God we pray for your guidance in raising our children. Grant us the patience, endurance, and wisdom to share with our children the way that they should follow. Equip us with the tools to teach our children and bless them with the gift of hearing and understanding so that we may all do your will. Amen.

Mrs. Filomena Hunt Leituala
Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa (CCCAS)

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 6:1-4

TOPIC: Children are Relational Beings

Relationships are valuable aspects of our lives. The relationship between a parent and child is crucial because it reflects who we are as individuals and the values we share with our children. Our text speaks about Christian relationship where a child should listen and obey the instructions of parents for this is righteous in the eyes of the Lord. Parents are also cautioned to teach with justice and love for this will yield positive outcomes. But above all, mutuality is essential in building relationship and bridging unknown gaps between parents and children.

This is the relational aspect of Paul's teaching to the Ephesians. God is witnessed and experienced when there is sharing, and reciprocity of understanding, love, and equality between parents and children. The problem faced by both parents and children today is the lack of relationality. There is no relationship, openness, or room for understanding because parents are prone to exercising power, demands, even oppression on children. In this type of relationship, children are not able to respond properly and often hold back feelings and emotions of despair which can result in suicide, drug abuse, and violence.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, reminds parents and children of how to relate to each other. Paul teaches about raising children and respecting parents. In this sense, Paul is implying that parents and children must share the weight of mutuality and respect for one another for this is the Christian way of processing learning and building healthy relationship.

We are reminded in our text that children mirror our actions. What we teach them, they will reflect to us and others. Paul reminds us to be cautious in how and what we teach our children. We are reminded to be role models of love for the children. Likewise, the children will honour our teachings by obeying what has been taught.

Prayer:

Teach us your ways Lord so that we may follow in your footsteps. Teach us to be humble so that we may hear your Holy Spirit. Lead us today and in the future. Help us to give love and return love so that it is shared and felt by all people. Through Jesus we pray, Amen.

Mrs. Filomena Hunt Leituala
Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa (CCCAS)

1 September

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 11:25-27

TOPIC: How do we Recognize Miracles in Life?

In the Bible, miracles are usually understood as divine acts which Jesus performed during his mission such as giving sight to the blind, resurrecting the dead, healing the sick, and many other things which only Jesus was able to do. Today, miracles are experienced in many ways such as the sudden healing of a serious disease like cancer, an unexpected receipt of reward and more. When these things unexpectedly happen in our lives, we are surprised by their sudden appearance, urgency, and relevance. It is as if God knew what we needed all along and we have no other explanation but to say that God was at work in us.

Jesus speaks out of a similar context when he thanks the Father for being faithful to His word and for witnessing through the work of others. Jesus has testified that God has revealed His essence in him. God chose Jesus as God's revelation to the world. With a heart of gratitude, Jesus thanks God for trusting in him. Jesus was reassured that God is a miracle worker and therefore is at work in him.

Jesus' approach of thankfulness is an example of trust and faith in small things. With the pressured and fast-paced lifestyle we experience today, we become mesmerized by the beauty of expensive things and money. In this way, we have failed to notice that God is revealed to us in little things. In fact, we may neglect our children and their need of our time but they are the miracle which God reveals to us. God reminds us in this text to appreciate the gift of life. God reminds us to slow down, take time to think, and recognize the miracles already unfolding in our lives.

The most treasured jewel is our children and they are God's revelation that God is continuously at work in us. Therefore, our text challenges us to rethink our approach to life. Remember that God is always revealing to us if we take time to acknowledge and thank God.

Prayer:

Lord we thank you for your word which continues to teach us to recognize your presence in us. We pray that you use us in revealing your will. Teach us to love one another and appreciate the most precious gift which you have blessed us with, our children. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Mrs. Filomena Hunt Leituala
Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa (CCCS)

Children and Young People

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 5:1-14

TOPIC: One in Spirit

The Pacific Theological College (PTC) in Suva, Fiji, is a diverse place where ministers from all over the Pacific strive to achieve theological education and learn first-hand the meaning of ecumenism. It is a mixture of culture, perspective, and religious traditions. One thing that I admire about PTC is its persistence and never ending effort in emphasizing and preserving indigenous context. PTC continues to thrive because it acknowledges diversity in oneness. This means that although we are Polynesian, Melanesian and Micronesian, we are still one, united and connected in the Pacific as islanders, as people of Moana (sea), the Vanua (land), and of God.

Many biblical scholars understand the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus' nonviolent ethics. Jesus teaches not to return violence with violence but instead to be forgiving and loving like God who is quick to forgive and loves us in spite of ourselves. Jesus' teaching is profound and promising. It may sound easy to do but in truth, it is difficult because violence is unavoidable even when we do not wish to be a part of it.

However, the Sermon on the Mount reminds us of how we should live. It reminds us that Jesus set an example for us. In this way, God wishes for us to follow Jesus in terms of keeping our relationship with God. This can be achieved by accepting and tolerating others; our neighbours, friends, family and children. In PTC, ecumenism is seen in the tolerance of culture, faith, and race. We worship together as a community of faithful followers and our children play together as the inheritance of God's kingdom. Although they speak different languages, they relate to each other in Fijian which is unique because there is similarity in words. Interestingly, culture is alive and encouraged, and people are encouraged to participate and learn from each other's culture, traditions, upbringing, and understanding. Likewise, Jesus teaches us to appreciate one another through living and interacting with each other.

Prayer:

We pray for the Spirit of ecumenism to be recognized and acknowledged among the churches and in the raising of our children. God empower us to love freely, be open minded and accepting of your calling in our lives. Equip us and let your Holy Spirit guide us in your Mission, we pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Mrs. Filomena Hunt Leituala
Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa (CCAS)

3 September

Inclusive Communities - Older People

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 48:8,9

TOPIC: "That I May Bless Them"

There is an Ndebele saying which highlights the importance of traveling and learning from other people and cultures, it says, "Ukuhamba kuzala inkosi", which literally means 'travelling begets a king'. The person who travels and learns from other cultures would normally come back to share their experiences with those who have remained at home. In the last decade many Zimbabweans have been dispersed all over the world. Many have travelled and become 'economic refugees' seeking to earn a living in foreign lands. This dispersal can have a terrible impact on families as people leave their homes, customs, and cultures behind and are separated from their families back home as they re-settle themselves in their adopted countries. For a Zimbabwean and indeed for the majority of African cultures, it is a terrible thing to not meet and know your own grandchildren.

In our Bible reading from Genesis 48, Joseph, who had been sold by his brothers as a slave but had now risen to the position of Prime Minister in Egypt, is finally reunited with his father and brothers who settled in Egypt to escape the severe drought in their homeland. Joseph presents his own children to his father and their grandfather Jacob for them to receive a father and grandfather's blessing.

For Joseph, as it should be for us today, communities should be built on values of family, friendship, and fellowship across all generations and economic divisions. Joseph, for all his wealth and power, still longed to be reunited with his father and for his sons to know their grandfather Jacob "so that he may bless them".

Prayer:

Eternal God, we pray for our communities today. May you grant that we may learn to seek deeper values like family, friendship, and fellowship with neighbours in our daily encounters. Grant, too, that grandparents and elders may be a source of blessing and inspiration, even though they may be far away.

Rev Majaha Nhliziyo
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

Inclusive Communities - Older People

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 18:1-15

TOPIC: "I Did Not Laugh"

Overseas visitors to Zimbabwe and indeed many African countries frequently remark that we Africans are a very friendly people. This is true. We are especially friendly to visitors and many Africans would go to extra lengths to ensure visitors are comfortable, secure, and happy. This friendly disposition is one of many gifts we should celebrate. This is a positive attitude and gift of grace which helps us work through our problems without being overcome by the many challenges and problems we face. True, the same challenges and problems have now 'gone global' and yet we are still hopeful despite living in a world of great inequality. Despite all these challenges God invites us to join in building our own communities with joy and peace, taking into account the vast experience of the older folk.

In the Bible reading for today, the Matriarch, Sarah, and her much older husband, Abraham, were entertaining visitors according to their own cultures and customs which meant an 'extravagant welcome'. Sarah overhears the visitors promise that she will have a child and she laughs to herself. She knew that she was much too old and was well past the age of childbearing. This promise of a child was just too much and she could only laugh.

But her situation is not a laughing matter but an impossible and heart-breaking one, which only the strong can bear. Childlessness, as it is in many communities today, was considered a curse. But this was not to be so with Sarah as God had visited her and would make her laugh because of the good news.

We too will 'laugh again' as we continue building communities which create space and time for older people who remember, dream, and laugh. Only this time the laughter will be fearless because we know the reason for laughter, joy, and hope - Jesus Christ, who enables us to live with our fears and doubts. We shall certainly laugh again.

Prayer:

Loving God, You are the reason for our hope. Help us to see the value and impact of working in communities that includes all people. Thank you for journeying with us thus far and giving us love and patience to overcome and live with our challenges. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Rev Majaha Nhliziyo
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

5 September

Inclusive Communities - Older People

SCRIPTURE: 1 Kings 12:1-18

TOPIC: To Whom Do You Listen?

There is an Ndebele saying which goes “Inyathi ibuzwa kwabaphambili”. An “inyathi” is a buffalo which is known for its hot temper and dangerous horns. The saying means “one should seek advice from those who have experience” not from someone hot tempered like a buffalo! It is important not just to consult someone who has age on their side but someone who has the ability to listen deeply, reflect and discern carefully, before speaking and offering advice. We experience many communication problems in our communities partly because we only selectively hear what people are saying, listen to people our own age, favourite politician, or those who agree with our viewpoints. This is reflected in the story of Rehoboam, the son and successor of King Solomon.

When Rehoboam inherited the throne from his father Solomon one of his first tasks was to deal with the request from the Northern tribes of Israel to reduce the harsh burdens Solomon had placed on them and thus to make life easier. King Rehoboam consulted the older advisers perhaps who had served his father and he consulted his younger advisers, those with whom he had grown up. He chose to ignore the advice of the older advisers and follow the reckless advice of his peers. As a consequence, the Northern tribes rejected him as king and the nation was divided into two.

Self-interest often gets in the way and makes it difficult to listen carefully. The good news is that there is hope if we can learn from the experience of Rehoboam and be humble enough to listen and learn from others.

Exercise in listening:

Think about ten people you hear, value, and listen to. Does your list include both young and old people? What does this say about who you are and your openness to listen and learn from others?

Prayer:

O Lord God, thank you for being the silent listener in every conversation. By the power of your Spirit may we learn to put the interests of others ahead of our own. May we follow your example of putting the interests of the larger human family and avoid popularity stunts. Amen.

Rev Majaha Nhliziyo
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

Inclusive Communities - Older People

SCRIPTURE: Luke 1:8-18, 67-79

TOPIC: "Do Not Fear, but Have Faith"

Zinhle is a high school student sitting "O" level examinations at the end of the year. She lives with her mother, Tumi, who has raised Zinhle and two other children single-handedly. Her mother works as a domestic worker or baby minder. Zinhle's father left the family to find work in South Africa where he promptly married another woman and rejected his wife and children. He abandoned his own mother who is now vulnerable living in a rural isolated part of the country. Zinhle and Tumi live a life of fear and anxiety. What happens if Tumi loses her precarious employment?" "Where would they stay without money or support?" "What if Zinhle cannot complete her education?" So many questions and no really satisfactory answer or solution.

As we consider the world around us it is easy to see why fear and anxiety impact many people's lives and rob us of fullness of life. Fear comes as the opposite of faith or lack of faith. Faith, according to Hebrews 11:1 is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

In many places the Bible encourages to "fear not." This encouragement to "fear not" occurs in today's Bible reading. An angel addresses a terrified Zechariah with reassuring words, "Do not be afraid Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard." Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are old in years and his lifetime spent as a priest reaches this climax when he is to serve in the temple. As he fulfils his religious obligations an angel appears with news that he and Elizabeth will have a son whom they are to call John. Zechariah - like Sarah in Genesis 18 - struggles to believe what the angel has told him, but later in verses 67-79 he overcomes his doubts and fears and sings praise to God.

Will Zinhle be joining Zechariah's song of praise and thanks at some point in her life?

Questions:

1. How can we have faith in Jesus' promises of "life in all its fullness" when we come face to face with the harsh realities of life?
2. Does fear hold you back?

Prayer:

Dear God we pray for those who struggle to believe your word and are overcome by fear. Help them to know you are already in the future which they are scared to embrace. Thank you for hearing our prayer. Amen.

Rev Majaha Nhliziyo
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

7 September

Inclusive Communities - Older People

SCRIPTURE: Mark 4:35-41

TOPIC: "Peace Be Still"

The coming of independence for any former colony is always received with much joy and generates a great sense of hope and optimism for people. Once that initial euphoria is finished, there is then the need to transition from liberation movement to ruling party. The Hebrew people who had left Egypt complained under the leadership of Moses about the conditions they had to endure. They complained when they faced hardship, "were there no graves in Egypt that you should bring us to die in this desert?"

Fast forward to our Bible reading for today: After a long hard day of preaching, teaching, and healing, Jesus invites the disciples to go across to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Going to the "other side" is Mark's way of saying that this is a boundary crossing moment, when the disciples - like the Gospel's readers - will be pushing at their comfort zones and making new discoveries. No sooner than the disciples are settling into the boat they are suddenly faced with a severe windstorm which threatens their very lives. In fear and desperation they wake up the exhausted Jesus who had fallen asleep. Their words come just short of accusing Him of not caring, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" As we know, Jesus spoke and stilled the storm and the fear of the disciples was transformed into wonder, awe, and worship. "Who is this that even the winds and the sea obey?"

It is in moments of crisis and leaving our comfort zones that we reveal our true character, whether as individuals or as a community.

Questions:

1. How do we deal with crisis?
2. To whom do we turn for support and guidance?
3. How can we stop, reflect, and learn from crises that impact our lives?
Reflect on some crisis you have gone through and think about what you learned about yourself and your community, the whole community.

Prayer:

Caring Jesus, thank you for being there for me in times of crisis. Calm my fears and give me your peace which is beyond my understanding. Grant that I may find you even in the midst of the storms of life. Amen.

Rev Majaha Nhliziyo
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa



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My prayers and reflections on this week

Inclusive Communities - Older People

SCRIPTURE: Luke 7:18-23

TOPIC: What to do When Doubts Assail

The journey and struggle for justice happens despite many an uphill climb through doubt and fear, perhaps even with the overwhelming sense that change is impossible and justice is derailed. Such was the experience of John the Baptist, the forerunner to Jesus. John was suffering imprisonment for challenging the morality of King Herod who had taken his brother Philip's wife for himself. Afraid of the growing popularity of John whom the people considered a prophet, Herod could only imprison him. As he languished in prison, John heard various reports about his cousin Jesus and questioned his identity. "Are you the one who is to come...?" Understanding Jesus' identity was also vital for John to support his own disciples moving on and becoming followers of Jesus. The Messiah assured that Jesus was indeed "the One who was to come."

Assurance and confidence in knowing Jesus is needed more than ever today. When we struggle to include all people and our attempts at working for justice seem slow to deliver or not always successful, we, too, question and wonder. Jesus demonstrated his answer to John's question by preaching, teaching, healing, including, and creating a community for all people, especially those like the elderly who are often pushed out and vulnerable. He told John's disciples to tell John what they had seen and heard.

Questions:

How might you participate in networks and organisations that work to build community and include people who are excluded and vulnerable?

Prayer:

Dear God, we thank you for the gift of the Spirit who brings comfort and strength as we partner with you in mission. Thank you for the re-assurance that you will never leave us alone; and that you journey with us ever closer when we work for justice and peace. Amen.

Rev Majaha Nhliziyo
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

9 September

Inclusive Communities - Older People

SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:25-32, 36-38

TOPIC: Stalwarts of Prayer: Simeon and Anna

Prayer is an essential and integral part of the life of many communities. For many who seek to serve God, prayer is not an option but occurs naturally as an expression of our relationship with God. Many people commit themselves to prayer expressed in different creative forms: through music and movement, dance and poetry, practical acts of service, and working for justice. The comfort we take from prayer in all its forms is that God promises to hear our prayers. As a consequence, we can bring our joys and sorrows, our praise and concerns before God in diverse languages, as well as keeping quiet and being still to listen for God.

Many people live under such oppressive systems that they feel powerless except for the power they experience in prayer. Someone gave a testimony that as an old man he was employed by a farmer to take care of a team of oxen. One particular day one of the team fell into a ditch and broke one of its legs. The farmer was furious and was prepared to shoot the poor old man. Relaying this story later, the old man said that as he stood in front of the angry farmer he prayed for God's protection, acknowledging God as his shepherd. God heard his prayer and the farmer relented and let him go.

Such seemingly 'small' miracles keep impoverished communities going. These miracles are the products of fervent belief and prayer like for Simeon and Anna who had spent a lifetime in the temple praying and waiting for God's sent One. These stories inspire the young and strong to stand for justice and inspire the old and wise and sometimes weak to look for the consolation of their people.

Consider:

Bring together the older people of your community or church to support and struggle for the liberation and inclusion of their community.

Prayer:

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Amen.

Rev Majaha Nhliziyo
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

10 September

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 146:9-10

TOPIC: Foreign Labor Elegy

Reflection:

A tofu factory in Kaohsiung is suspected of illegal employment of Indonesian, Filipino and Vietnamese foreign workers, keeping them under house arrest and making them work overtime. Law enforcement arrested women and two women workers, the boss husband and his wife, and two agents. One 31-year-old Indonesian worker came to Taiwan four years ago after receiving foreign nursing training. He left his family and young child to come and find a job in Taiwan. His employer confiscated his documents every day and the agency deceived him about pay. He only receives a basic salary, and the intermediary repatriates the rest of his wages to Indonesia. Ah Fang workers work every day from 6 o'clock to 6 pm or 9 pm. They have no holidays or overtime pay. Foreign workers got tired and wanted to go home. Until the police searched the tofu workshop and found tearful foreign laborers, freedom was not possible. The Human Trafficking Prevention and Control Act (HTPCA) in Taiwan prohibits sex trafficking and labor trafficking. It imposes penalties of up to seven years' imprisonment. Taiwan Authorities' anti-trafficking action strategic includes prosecution, protection and prevention.

The Psalmist in today's passage reiterates the message of the Old Testament, which presents God as the protector of the foreigner and that God frustrates the efforts of the wicked. The church of Taiwan and the rest of the world does well to align with God's will to protect the foreigner and to frustrate the work of their oppressors. Human trafficking treats people like commodities, violating the God-given value that God places in all of us created in God's image.

Prayer:

Lord, You are my refuge and the refuge of those who are trafficked and forced to work in subhuman conditions. Help me to stand up for the suffering of those who face the attack on their worth and dignity. Help me and other Christians to act for justice so that Your richness and joy of life may spread in the world. Amen.

Rev. Chien Chang Jung
Presbyterian Church in Taiwan Labor Concern Center

11 September

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 123:3-4

TOPIC: Seeking the Lord's Mercy

Reflection:

A Vietnamese domestic worker says she is grateful to Taiwan and the Vietnam's Ministry of Labor for the opportunity to work in Taiwan to improve her family's wellbeing. She has one question, though, 'Why has my salary not increased for so many years?'

While factory and hospital workers are overworked, they still knock off. Some employers even pay overtime. Family caregivers, on the other hand, live with employers and have no fixed work hours. Employers control the work schedule. They may not permit them to go out or be in touch with anyone. This may be why many attempt to escape. The government legislating to streamline working hours and overtime pay, could curb illegal escapes.

The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan Labor Care Center provides activities for domestic workers, the disabled and elderly to cheer them up and reduce stress.

Taiwan has no legislation to protect domestic workers to reduce exploitation. This is an advocacy gap for the church.

Psalm 123 is a plea to God for mercy and protection from the contempt of others. It is a petition against the contemptuous arrogance of those who belittle the lives of others. The Psalmist reminds us that God hears such a plea from those whose lives are at the mercy of others. The plea of caregivers and domestic workers in Taiwan and other parts of the world should be a subject of our prayers and action to glorify God because God takes the cry of the oppressed seriously. So should we.

Prayer:

We are grateful for the help families who need long-term care for the sick and elderly get from domestic workers and caregivers. Thank you for the care they provide to our children and our homes. Please touch the hearts of employers and their families to love their employees and to act towards them with compassion. Lord help the church to align its mission towards the plight of foreign workers in our midst. Amen.

Rev. Chien Chang Jung
Presbyterian Church in Taiwan Labor Concern Center

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 142:5-7

TOPIC: God Who Sets Prisoners Free

Reflection:

A Taiwanese man married a Filipina woman and they opened a bar together and applied to the Ministry of Labor to employ ten foreign entertainers. They used intimidation to force the foreigner workers to engage in transactional sex transactions and illegal liquor sales. After some time, two workers escaped and alerted the police. The police investigation process discovered that two Filipina women worked as dormitory administrators to monitor the victims' lives and to hire a taxi driver to go to the port to attract foreign ship crews to drink and transact for sex transactions. The police rescued the trafficked victim from a small crowded where their captors kept them for sexual exploitation. Through the government resettlement plan the victims obtained temporary work permits and housing. Some went on to do regular work while others opted to return home. This is a case of human trafficking that employed violence, coercion, intimidation, detention, surveillance and extortion to force victims into sex transactions.

Today's reading is a prayer by someone who sees God as a refuge and their rescue from the pursuit of those stronger than them. The issue of human trafficking leaves victims feeling disempowered. Those who seek to intervene, including the church, may also feel powerless because the crime syndicates behind trafficking can seem too strong for us. The Psalmist's prayer is a faith declaration that the almighty God can set prisoners free. Jesus echoed these words in his 'manifesto' in Luke 4. The power of God accompanies our actions on behalf of trafficking victims.

Prayer:

We pray for hope in the almighty God to release migrant workers who are working in Taiwan from their oppressors. We also pray for the government, church and NGOs to help those in danger. Lord, let the wicked fall into their own snares while victims escape. Steadfast love belongs to you, for you repay all according to their work. Amen.

Rev. Chien Chang Jung
Presbyterian Church in Taiwan Labor Concern Center

13 September

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 40:16-17

TOPIC: 'May the Lord Think of Me'

Reflection:

On Christmas Eve, several Vietnamese sisters visited a stranger. A-Un was alone in Hospital. Although they had never met before, the room was full of happiness. They talked in North, Middle, and South Vietnamese. A-un was very happy and had a smile on her face. These sisters gave her a pair of origami swans to wish her well and handed her a red envelope with money inside to help her. A-Un could not hold back her tears. The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan's Center for Labor director prayed for A-Un and her new Vietnamese sisters, and everyone was touched by love that night.

The Taiwanese government has a good affordable medical insurance scheme for foreign workers. However, the scheme does not cover high medical costs like A-Un's, which require long-term treatment. A case like hers may require a charity to fund her treatment. The doctor said they would manage her condition for the duration of her permit after which the hospital would defer to the Immigration Department, employer and an NGO to help her return home. Today's reading is a prayer of someone who longs for the grace of God. The Psalmist makes it clear that such people will be saved and they will consequently learn about the greatness of the God. No matter how helpless, poor and needy, God 'my help and deliverer' thinks of such people. In the case of A-Un, the reminder that God thinks of her came through her fellow migrants and the PCT Center for Labor, who were strangers. A-Un's story is a metaphor for what the church's action needs to be in dealing with those who are strangers in our midst, especially those who are helpless and needy.

Prayer:

Lord, you are the Almighty God, yet full of compassion. We pray for A-Un and her family as her treatment continues. Help us to learn from the example of the Vietnamese sisters and the PCT Center for Labor. Amen.

Rev. Chien Chang Jung
Presbyterian Church in Taiwan Labor Concern Center

14 September

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 4:5-8

TOPIC: 'Who will Bring Us Prosperity?'

Reflection:

INTERPOL reports that human trafficking is the third largest illegal trade in the world after drug and arms smuggling. As such, human trafficking has become an international crime with delicate division of labor whose measure and size is difficult to estimate accurately. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that 2.5 million people worldwide are victims of trafficking. Statistics show that modern day slavery is as high as 27 million globally. Eighty percent of the victims are women and fifty percent children. Many victims of human trafficking usually come from poverty and countries that lack job opportunities. Yet even advanced countries face the threat of human trafficking. Trafficking can be for sexual exploitation, labor exploitation, child trade and organ trading. Of these, sexual and labor exploitation are the most prevalent.

Taiwan's trafficking prevention act in Taiwan aims to protect women, children and migrant workers.

To the question, 'Who will bring us prosperity?' the Psalmist points to the light of God's face to shine on 'us'. The extent of the global problem of human trafficking may seem insurmountable. God's light shines to reveal the righteousness of God as the standard, which should measure and guide our actions. The light of God's face also shines on the crime of trafficking to reveal the evil it is. We cannot lie down and sleep if we do not allow God to help us to face this evil for what it is and begin to act where we can. Let the facts of human trafficking confront us and draw us into the light of God where our complicity to these activities will be revealed. In an intertwined global trade system, we knowingly or unknowingly participate in the enslavement of others. We need to let the shining face of God help us to ask deeper questions about our consumer habits.

Prayer:

O God, help us to reflect on the things we consume and to ask if they enslave and exploit others. Let your light expose our collusion with exploitation. Show us Your righteous path. Amen.

Rev. Chien Chang Jung
Presbyterian Church in Taiwan Labor Concern Center

15 September

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 7:1-2

TOPIC: Taking Refuge in God

Reflection:

A man who owns a Chinese medicine shop supposedly hired a caregiver for his old mother. After doing house chores, she would accompany the grandmother to the medicine shop and continue working there. She would carry up to twenty boxes of medicine upstairs and grinds and soak medicines. The powder from the medicines made her sneeze and tear. At noon, she cooked lunch at the shop. She would continue work until at 9:30 pm. There were still work waiting when she got home. She would not sleep until after 11:00 pm.

One day the police inspected the shop. The Ministry of Labor officers came soon after. The officers showed her a picture of an elderly person and asked if she took care of her. She told them that she did not know the stranger in the picture. The employers had told her to lie that she took care of the stranger. She refused to lie and later went for refuge at the PCT Labor Care Center. She refused to return to the employers' home when the employment agent phoned. She had realized that her employers deceived her into working double house jobs for their selfish benefit.

The pursuit of the powerful can seem intimidating, but we can take refuge in God and thwart their plans. The Psalm reading for today encourages to entrust ourselves into God's hands. It describes in graphic terms the danger that the pursuers pose, 'they will tear me apart ... rip me to pieces'. The domestic worker took a stand that reminds despite her fear. Daniel, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3:16-18) did the same. They said that even if God did not rescue them they would not compromise.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to resolve to live for you faithfully and to trust that you are our refuge. Thank you for the witness of foreigners who live among us. Open our eyes to the lessons of trusting You as our refuge, that they can teach us. Amen.

Rev. Chien Chang Jung
Presbyterian Church in Taiwan Labor Concern Center

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Luke 10:31-36

TOPIC: Compassion to Act

Reflection:

She was employed to take care of the grandmother in the home. The only time she would rest was between 05:00 and 09:30. Her work was to organize the lives of the two brothers of the house, and to accompany the grandmother and the brothers in their movements. They only gave her six slices of bread to eat per day. After a while, they no longer gave her any food. When the grandmother was hospitalized, there was only fifty yuan a day to buy food. The worker secretly reported this to the agency, who dismissed her. Many migrant workers run away because adjusting to the workplace is challenging, so is coping with a different culture. Difficult interpersonal relationships, loneliness and pressure of work are the other reasons. Who can help the suffering migrant workers in Taiwan?

The PCT Labor Care Center provides the following services: emergency placement, medical assistance, legal advice, labor coordination, education and training, care counseling, leisure activities, life management and tracking counseling. The services aim to help migrant workers adjust to life and feel at home in Taiwan. The Labor Care Center is shelter for South-Eastern Asia migrant workers. It provides service for 365 days a year and 24 hours a day. The services are in Chinese, Taiwanese, English, Vietnamese, Thai and Indonesian. For the past nineteen years, we have helped countless migrant workers. We have provided shelter and services to more than 1,500 people.

The story of the Good Samaritan challenges us to help others sacrificially and with consistency. He took a wounded stranger for medical care. He offered his resources to ensure his restoration to good health. Migrant workers deprived and brutalized by their employers need that kind of help. What can we do to make their working conditions better? The PCT sets a good example of a strategy that tackles the problem structurally and in the personal lives of the foreign workers.

Prayer:

Lord help us to accompany the marginalized foreigners among us. Gives us wisdom to respond consistently and with sacrificial commitment as the Good Samaritan did. Amen.

Rev. Chien Chang Jung
Presbyterian Church in Taiwan Labor Concern Center

17 September

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 15:1-11, Luke 4:16-21

TOPIC: Cross-generational Poverty

Reflection:

In Hong Kong, we have lost momentum for upward mobility. Generational poverty is rampant. In the past, young people could transform their lives through education and aspire to a better life than their parents' lives. That ladder of upward mobility has disappeared. The education system favors the wealthy who can afford International, private and direct-subsidy schooling. The standards and facilities in public and subsidized schools cannot compare. The "pay by user" tertiary education, which the poor cannot afford, is the norm. Poor students leave tertiary institutions with government loans to repay, which is a barrier to higher education.

The Hong Kong Church Network for the Poor (HKCNP) recruits mentors from churches for poor students to help them to develop a realistic plan and to realize it with financing from government and business. Since 2009, the Child Development Fund Mentorship Program has sponsored forty-two programs, serving 3,800 mentees. HKCNP is now developing a new program called "Youth Upward Mobility Mentorship Program" for young people with unsatisfactory examination results to do on-the-job training.

In Deuteronomy 15, the sabbatical-year-law granted the poor a remission of debts. It gave them a chance to reshape their future. Its social vision ensured that "There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy" (Deuteronomy 15:4). Jesus came, "To bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18). Jesus always has the poor in mind.

Activity:

Talk to an underprivileged family to understand what the young people are facing.

Prayer:

Lord, fill me with your Spirit to have the same vision and mission as You have.
Bless me with your grace to be a blessing to those in need. Amen.

Po Kam-Cheong
Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 18:1-15; Hebrews 13:2

TOPIC: Entertaining Angels

Reflection:

In January 2014, Erwiana Sulistyaningsih, an Indonesian domestic worker accused Ms. Wan-tung Law, her Hong Kong employer, of subjecting her to eight months of physical abuse. Erwiana's injuries went viral on social media, leading to public outrage. Ms. Law left a severely malnourished and bruised Erwiana at the airport with an air ticket to return to Indonesia. The court later sentenced Ms. Law to six years in jail. Filmmaker, Gabriel Ordaz, made a documentary "Erwiana: Justice for All" that tells the stories of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong. It is "modern day slavery". Domestic workers pay large sums of money to agents before they come. Others suffer physical and mental abuse for lack of knowledge on how to protect themselves. They have to live in employers' homes because of Hong Kong laws.

About 340,000 foreign domestic workers live in Hong Kong. Majority are from the Philippines and Indonesia. They work to better their families' lives back home. They arrive as strangers, but soon become family-friends or even family members of their employers in some cases. My brother's family has had a Filipina domestic worker for nearly twenty years. She has done all the housework and witnessed my nephew and niece grow from childhood to teenagehood.

Hebrews 13:2 says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it". Abraham welcomed three strangers into his tent and the Lord blessed him through their visit. In reality, they were angels with good news for Abraham and Sarah.

Activity:

Find out the figures and stories of migrant workers in your city and country. Pray for that situation.

Prayer:

O God, remind us of the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, "Do to others as you would have them do to you". Teach us to be kind and caring to strangers because You may have sent them into our lives as angels. Amen.

Po Kam-Cheong
Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China

19 September

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 25:31-46

TOPIC: Faith and Deeds, God will Judge Both

Reflection:

Kowloon Union Church runs the “Refugee Kitchen” program. Refugees cook their indigenous food once a month. The community then comes together for dinner. The refugees share recipes, the culture of their countries and their life-stories. They share how they became refugees and what their lives are like in Hong Kong. This program educates Hong Kong people about the life of refugees and helps them to develop genuine relationships with them.

Hong Kong has about ten thousand refugees. The general image of asylum seekers in Hong Kong mainstream media and government is negative. They are associated with “crime” and accused of lying about being under persecution in their countries. They are considered parasites, squandering Hong Kong’s resources. Under Hong Kong law, they cannot work even if they are professionals. They thus cannot contribute to Hong Kong society. They stay in Hong Kong awaiting assessment by UN or Hong Kong immigration authorities so that they can go to host countries.

The Church is one of the few organizations that accepts and welcomes refugees. Many of them became members of churches. Some Christian organizations also provide material support like food and shelter.

In Mt. 25: 31-46, Jesus say on judgment day, those who served the poor by giving them food, drink, clothes; and those who welcomed strangers, cared for the sick and visited the prisoners, would have been serving him. They will inherit the kingdom of God. However, the Reformation doctrine of “Justification by faith” makes us forget Jesus’ words. Faith must yield deeds and God will judge both. To serve the least should be the concern of the Church.

Activity:

Invite refugees and asylum seekers to share in your church.

Prayer:

Lord, let me see your face in those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, ill, who are strangers and prisoners. Teach us to be aware of the situations of the least, the lost and the least and to lend them a hand. Lord, in serving them we are serving you, indeed. Amen.

Po Kam-Cheong
Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China

20 September

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Amos 5: 1-24

TOPIC: Let Justice Roll Down like Waters

Reflection:

About a hundred employees of Next Digital and their supporters protested the media group's plans to outsource its editorial operation. They alleged that the company fired and then rehired its employee as subcontractors. Next Digital has been very successful in Hong Kong and Taiwan in the past twenty years. During this time, media businesses have had stiff competition from social media. To cut costs, Next Digital resorted to outsourcing.

In Hong Kong, as in other countries, more and more contract staff and consultants do outsourced work. Even big companies do not employ long-term or pay employment-related benefits. Profit is what drives employment practices and thereby render employees dispensable. Young people have to accept short-term contractual jobs with no future. The society has become unstable as a result.

Those who are self-employed have to stay productive without medical insurance and mandatory provident fund. Next Digital reflects this phenomenon with its attendant negative effects on the society.

In the 8th century B.C., Israel was an affluent state when God sent Amos to prophesy about Israel's future. He urged them to repent for the injustice in society. Otherwise, they would face the judgment. Even their religious ceremonies and piety would not save them. "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). We need to envision a just society, which does not just benefit the rich at the expense of the poor.

Activity:

Search the internet for the impact of globalization on the job market in your context.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, as we face and try to cope with changes in society, broaden our view of your Word. Help us to create a just society for the benefit of all in the society. Amen.

Po Kam-Cheong
Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China

21 September

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Isa. 65: 17-25

TOPIC: Live a decent life

Reflection:

The news reported that the property prices in Hong Kong rose more than ten percent in 2017. The average price of a new flat is approximately USD2,500 per square foot, which means a flat costs approximately USD500, 000. The size of homes had gotten smaller to fit the market, and private housing estates stay empty because they have become commodities for investment. Rentals are inflated. Young people have to stay with their parents and cannot start their own families because of high housing costs. The poor live in illegal and dangerous sub-divided flats in industrial buildings. To access public housing, people to wait years to be allocated one, usually in such remote areas it is not easy to find a job.

Developers and billionaires own Hong Kong's land and control the property market. They will sell flats only when the price is good.

In Isaiah 5:8-9, the prophet addressed the problem of economic injustice in the community. He denounced those who amassed land and houses without regard for others. 'Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land! The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing: Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant.'

In Isaiah 65:17-25, the dream of a better world where there will be no more tears is clear and concrete. Infants will grow up and the elderly will enjoy old age. Those who plant will feast and those who build houses will own them. All creatures will live in peace with one another. This should be the vision and reality of every society.

Activity:

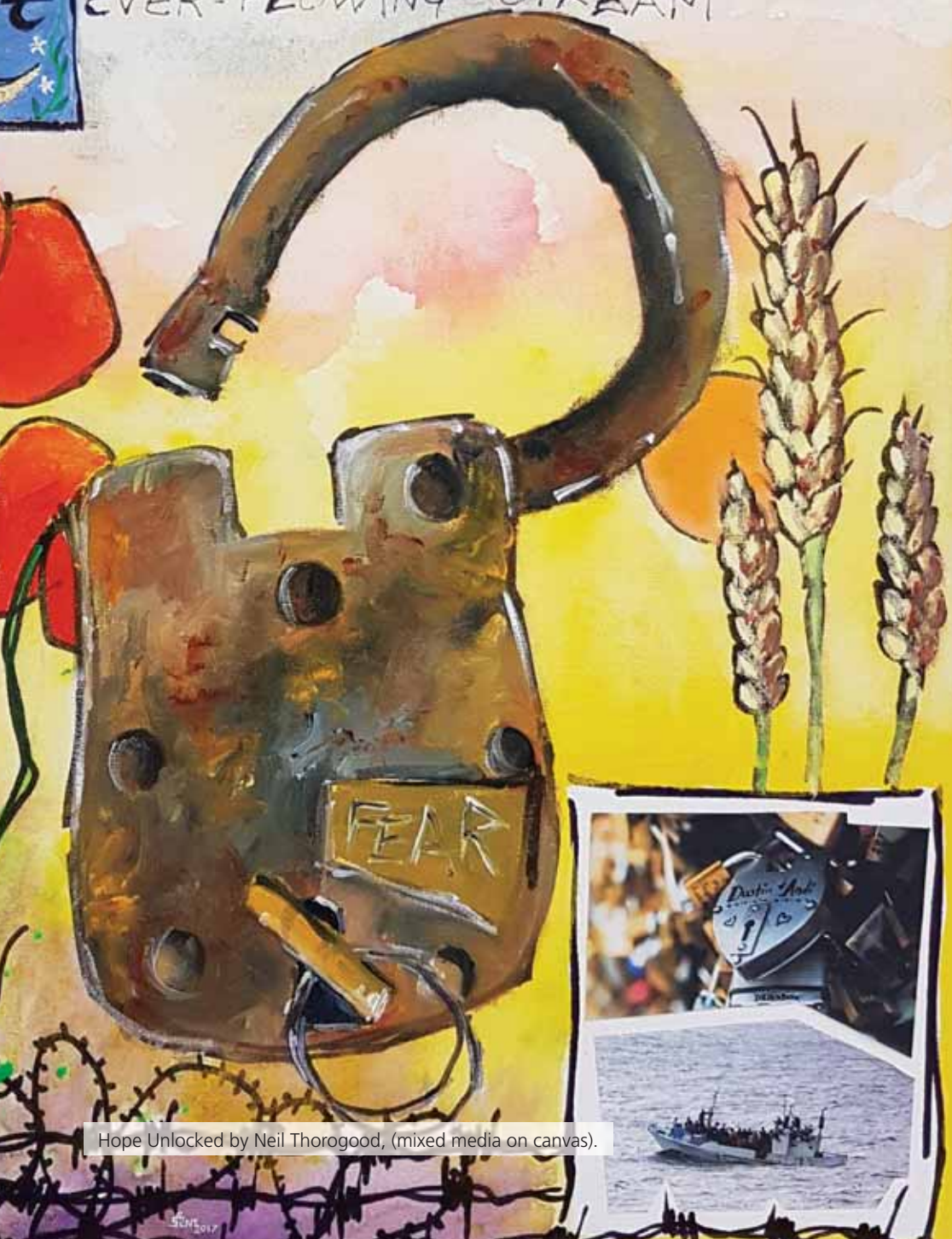
Visit the homeless and listen to their stories.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to build a just and peaceful society, without economic exploitation and a wide gap between the wealthy and the poor. Empower us to be agents of change. Amen.

Po Kam-Cheong
Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China

JUSTICE ROLL DOWN LIKE WATERS
AND RIGHTEOUSNESS LIKE AN
EVER-FLOWING STREAM



Hope Unlocked by Neil Thorogood, (mixed media on canvas).

My prayers and reflections on this week

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: Deut. 24:14-15, Mt. 20: 1-16

TOPIC: Minimum Wage

Reflection:

Hong Kong, the Statutory Minimum Wage (SMW) was finally legalized after decades of advocacy work by workers' movement and NGOs. It came into force from 1 May 2011. This is later than the People's Republic of China. The SMW rate rose from approximately USD4.16 per hour to about USD4.42. It has helped people to have better salaries, especially those in low-income jobs like security guards, cleaners and waiters who work long hours, in poor working environments and intense physical labor. They also suffer occupational injuries and diseases. After the introduction of the SMW, those at the bottom of the salary scale got a twenty percent raise.

Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee (CIC), a Christian NGO has been advocating for labor policies and industrial safety since the 1960s. CIC was under the Hong Kong Christian Council in the past. It became independent later. It has contributed to the growth of civil society in Hong Kong. CIC has promoted labor policies such as paid holidays, maternity leave and minimum wage among others. CIC participates in many strikes and labor negotiations. It expresses the church's care for the grassroots in society.

Laws in Deuteronomy protected the rights of the poor. It was mandatory to pay Israelite and foreign laborers their daily wage or risk God's judgment. In Matthew 20:1-16, Jesus described God as a generous employer who paid workers a fair wage according to their needs. We should have the same mindset, to care for those oppressed by unjust systems.

Activity:

Check whether if your country has a minimum wage policy. Find out how it was formulated.

Prayer:

We pray for those who work but cannot earn enough to support their families. Lord, change the society that the poor may thrive and experience the abundant life You promise to all in Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Po Kam-Cheong
Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China

23 September

Economic Justice

SCRIPTURE: James 2:1-13

TOPIC: Rich in Faith

Reflection:

The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department of Hong Kong arrested and charged Ms. Chu, a 75-year-old woman for selling cardboard in the CBD without a hawker license. The public was outraged. More than fourteen thousand people petitioned the government on social media to drop the charge. Public opinion prevailed. The incident reflects the government's callous attitude towards the poor and reflects the plight of old people.

Hong Kong has a Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme as a safety net for the poor. However, the application process is long, and those on the CSSA scheme suffer discrimination and they are considered lazy. Thus, many old people do not apply for it and have to struggle for survival.

In 2015, it was estimated that nearly one million people (about one seventh of the population) live in poverty, on less than HKD3, 800 (USD475) per month. Many of them are old people. One third of the elderly struggle to meet their basic nutritional needs. Food Angel, a Christian NGO based in Hong Kong, has served more than 3,700,000 meals to the poor. About seventy-one percent of them are elderly. On the other hand, over 3,600 tons of food are taken to landfills. Food Angel prevented over 2,800,000 kilograms of surplus food from going to landfills since March 2011. Despite Hong Kong being an affluent society with more than USD225 billion government revenue reserve, poverty is a significant issue.

James told the early Christians to care for the poor. God chooses the poor to be rich in faith and be heirs of the Kingdom. Let us love our neighbors as we love ourselves. This is the commandment of our Lord.

Activity:

Ask an elderly person in your family or community if they enjoy life or not.

Prayer:

God our Father, You sent your son to live among us. He emptied and humbled himself, taking the form of a slave, serving those in need. Teach us to follow your footsteps, to serve the world. Amen.

Po Kam-Cheong
Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 4: 1 – 11

TOPIC: The Endless Sorrow

Reflection:

We read that ancient Genesis 4 story to remind us that violence has been part of human experience from the beginning of history. No civilization and no generation has escaped its threat. Hunger or sex are a part of the complexity of being human. War is the organized form of violence. Tribes, nation, religions and racial group use war to extend, maintain or defend power. Is it an incurable sorrow? Must it be this way?

The radical Gospel message is that human nature is not forever fixed; there is another way. “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full,” said Jesus. His whole ministry was to enhance, heal and give life. The harsh, military culture of Rome was all around him. There was no escape from war. Some Jews also thought armed rebellion was the right answer. However, that was the way of death. Jesus would have none of it.

Newspaper and screen news remind us that there is no escape and it is easy to become depressed or cynical. Christian discipleship beckons us to hold on to the way of life. There is no clear route to a peaceful world for we are settled into nationalisms defended by force. Nevertheless, Christian witness looks to relationships of justice, conciliation and peace. We need to work for them in local affairs, and encourage those in power to do the same.

Prayer:

Christ of the cross, we know the sorrows of our violent world; our hearts cry at the pain of it. We pray for those who know violence in homes; a sickness and the death of love. We pray for leaders of nations, who control weapons and can use them. May they treasure peace, seek peace and follow the way of life. Christ, you bear it all. Stay with us in this world of conflict. Lead us towards the light. Forgive us our every aggressive passion, and grant us peace.

Rev'd Bernard Thorogood
Uniting Church in Australia

25 September

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 15: 1 – 6

TOPIC: Dignifying Disaster

Reflection:

Every 25 April, Australia comes to a halt to celebrate ANZAC Day, the day in 1915 when Australian and New Zealand troops landed at Gallipoli in World War 1. It was a tragedy. The Turkish defense was secure and ready. After months of bitter fighting, the invading army withdrew. Australia was only 15 years old. It was the baptism of fire for the new nation. Great parades in all the towns and cities celebrate that. So, we dignify disaster. We remember courage, duty, resilience and mate-ship; but forget the folly and waste.

It is difficult for us to keep a balanced understanding of our history. We rejoice in victory, as that Song of Moses did in Exodus 15, almost as though dancing on the graves of the enemy. Their lives count for nothing; our soldiers' lives are precious sacrifices. I remember the rejoicing in England at the end of World War 2. We danced in the streets; wonderful, it was all over. Then came those grey pictures from concentration camps in Germany and Poland with skeletal ghostly survivors. Only then did we understand the scale of the disaster.

We cannot gloss over war. In national life, we may dishonor those who served and died for the nation, but we may learn from the unhealed sores on the body. The Christian church as an international family may be a cell of light and hope for the nation. God does not side with our armed forces. God so loved the world as tangled in politics of unreconciled histories, as it is, that he gave his Son to bring deeper peace.

Prayer:

Christ of the cross, we know that our lives and the life of our nations are not all glory. There is shame there. Help us to be honest and face our failures. Grant us a new day and hope. Cry to us from your pain that God is still God and there is life from the tomb.

Revd Bernard Thorogood
Uniting Church in Australia

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Lamentations 5: 1 – 11

TOPIC: The Wounds of War

Reflection:

Lamentations paints a grim picture of a war-torn nation – it could be Syria or South Sudan. There are efforts to limit its destruction, like the Geneva Conventions and the War Crimes tribunal, yet warfare is more dreadful than ever. Killing goes beyond the military. The burning of Dresden and Hamburg, and the 1945 fire-bombing of Tokyo and atomic bombs have taught us about total war. Children in West Africa are trained to be soldiers and they have shared in atrocities. Women in conflict zones like the Congo, Myanmar and Syria are raped. The wounds of war are widespread, hard to heal and perhaps will never heal.

The powerless women and children suffer most. Human potential is wasted as are materials and buildings. During the 20th century, about 25 million people were killed in wars and mourning, families broken apart, dreams turned into tears is as many families and homes. Human beings are amazingly resilient. Wounded people strive to become fit; amputee-sports are a celebration of courage. We rejoice in that, but the pain and waste of war remain a dark veil.

It cannot be God's will, because war abuses our humanity. We are grateful to those who nurture, heal and care for the wounded. Doctors and nurses give their talents and time to serve in the most dangerous places. Relief organizations bring food, water and shelter to thousands of refugees and they try to reunite families. All these are the hands of Christ reaching out to a troubled world. The church is called to be, an agency of healing to the spirit and the body.

Prayer:

Christ of the cross, you share our pain. You are in this world of broken lives, above, untouchable and unscarred. Speak to us your word of grace. Tell us of God's love. Give us hearts of mercy that care, as you care, for those battered and broken in the violence of crime, war and disaster.

Revd Bernard Thorogood
Uniting Church in Australia

27 September

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: 1 Kings 10: 23 – 29

TOPIC: The Profits of War

Reflection:

It seems strange to me that King Solomon is celebrated for his wisdom. He was astonishingly foolish in his rule over the kingdom. He was great on self-promotion. He conscripted slave labor, raised taxes, and built a pretentious palace with room for his concubines. In addition, he built a great military machine, too burdensome for his small nation. That kind of buildup of military force is common. Many of us live within nations that constantly increase their military spending, calling it national security.

Does security for our people depend on the number of war troops, ships and planes? Will that prevent wicked ideas and prejudice? Australia, is buying twelve new submarines. What are they intended to sink? China, America and Russia as giants have vast war machines. We pray they will stay at home. Although that sort of power tempts them to use it.

There is profit too. Not only do suppliers sell profitably to the military, but arms trade is extensive. There are safeguards for the “end user” but the criminal-side of the business gets around the legalities. Weapons end up anywhere. On a church delegation to the British Foreign Office on arms trade, I asked, ‘what is the policy about supplying arms to India and Pakistan?’ The answer was, ‘We supply to both but we stop if there is a war.’ What a futile dismissal of ethics!

The international church must take up this cause with intelligence and persistence, although governments may not listen. Could your local church take it up with your representative?

Prayer:

Christ of the cross, enable us in every nation to deal in issues of peace and not weapons of war. Give us courage to change course. From the nails that pierced your hands to the nuclear weapons of today, we have dealt in death. Have mercy, Lord, have mercy.

Rev'd Bernard Thorogood
Uniting Church in Australia

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 5: 38 – 42

TOPIC: Risky Alternative

Reflection:

Did Jesus mean to endorse pacifism as the answer to conflict? At first sight, it seems like an obvious 'Yes'. However, our compromised humanity and societies make the answer more complex. The church has perpetually struggled with this question. When I was eighteen, I was called up to the Air Force in Britain. I had to think about my response. I spoke to a pacifist, but concluded that the war to defeat Nazi power was necessary. It was not a righteous war, for all war is evil, but essential for decency and justice.

The pacifist view maintains that anything, to the point of being subjected, is better than war. The Quakers stood firmly on this conviction. They served to save lives not to kill. It is a compelling witness, which the church needs to take into account.

In the passage, Jesus was responding to the wisdom of revenge. If someone hits you, then hit back. If a neighbor steals your cattle, then steal his wife! Many human cultures espouse that wisdom. Jesus swept it aside with a peaceful, generous reaction. The revenge method perpetuates bitterness through generations. Jesus sought to terminate the wrong.

Although that does not resolve the pacifist issues, it tells us that our intent must always respond to violence with calm, not equal passion. For small disputes, this approach can be disarming. It will stop an egomaniac dictator, though. In that instance, we may have to lose life in order to save it. We risk all by fighting and risk the future by refusing to fight. There is no easy choice.

Prayer:

Christ of the cross, we love your way of life and would follow you always. It is hard and we do not always see your footsteps. You forgave even at that bitter hour, for they did not know what they were doing. Help us to know what we are doing that we never hammer in the nails.

Rev'd Bernard Thorogood
Uniting Church in Australia

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 5: 18 - 20

TOPIC: Peacekeeping

Reflection:

Nationalism is two-faced. It produces strong human communities, gives rise to arts and literature and gives us a sense of identity and worth. It also encourages pride and racism. It demands obedience even to unjust laws, and expects us to give our lives for the flag. It is hard to escape and especially if we love our country.

Peacekeeping demands something beyond nationalism. That is what necessitated the United Nations. The UN has many flaws such as the veto of the Security Council, failure of sanctions to effect radical change, constant finger pointing of and the continuing wars. Yet it is our best hope for stabilizing border conflicts and challenging human rights abuses. Standing between combatants takes courage and is not glorious.

We are grateful to the UN forces that intervene in the Congo, Sudan, Cyprus and Lebanon. There are also unofficial peacekeepers who intervene in ethnic disputes as in Papua New Guinea. Often they are devoted Christians who believe that reconciliation is the way. This is a ministry for the church today, to see where the anger or the fear is building up and to offer the ministry of reconciliation through independent, non-compulsive, thoughtful mediation.

My prayer for Australia is for reconciliation with aboriginal people who have been offended, insulted, displaced and hunted in past years. They bear the scars of that sad history. The church, along with all people of goodwill must bind up the wounds and give respect to the oldest human culture.

Prayer:

Christ of the cross, may we know the gift of peace, in the warring parts of our own lives, our communities and nations across the earth. When we run away from Calvary, restore us to the company of disciples so that our lives may echo your word of peace.

Rev'd Bernard Thorogood
Uniting Church in Australia

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 1: 8 – 10; 2: 14 – 18

TOPIC: The Purpose of God

Reflection:

Paul was a visionary man. He knew the harshness of life. He could not forget that he had been a persecutor of the church. His opponents beset him with strong arguments. Yet his vision was clear: In Christ God revealed the purpose to create a new reality, a reconciliation and unity of all the divided, warring peoples of the world. Christ opened the way for all to know the love of God so that all, without distinction, might live in love.

The vision is clear. Has it been realized? The Christian church is divided, so that instead of being the one reconciled home for the human family, it is unreconciled. We need to work towards a ceaseless ecumenism. There is estrangement between those who enjoy the riches of the earth and those who are excluded by injustice, lack of education or the sweep of history. There is division among faiths, which leads to violence on the fringes. Racial division still brings sorrow and bitterness in many societies. There is division when a marriage breaks or there is dysfunction in families. The fulfilment of Paul's vision is still far off. It is incremental work we must do till the end of all time. It is our vocation. Just like the apostolic church overcame the deep Jew-Gentile divide, we are called, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to overcome whatever divides us today. In every local church, this is an immediate calling. Every member can share in this work.

Read the Ephesians verses again, and pray.

Prayer:

Christ of the empty tomb, as you bind us together, your scarred hands reach out for us. May we reach out to those who are rejected, ignored and battered. Walk among us, wounded one of God that we may stay by your side as we live out Your purpose to unite all beings. We are weak; in the Spirit may we be strong. May we live in Christ and Christ in us. Amen.

Rev'd Bernard Thorogood
Uniting Church in Australia

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 24

TOPIC: Creation

Humanity's impact on Earth is so profound that a new geological epoch - the Anthropocene - needs to be declared. The current epoch, the Holocene, refers to the period of stable climate since the last ice age during which human civilisation has developed. The acceleration of carbon dioxide emissions and sea level rise, the global mass extinction of species, and the transformation of land by deforestation and development, mark the end of that slice of geological time. The Earth is so profoundly changed that the Holocene must give way to the Anthropocene. The current order and dominant forms of economics coerce the whole of creation to exceed its productive, regenerative and renewing capacities.

The creation is of God, but our responsibility. Though Psalm 24:1 states, 'The earth is the Lord's ...', we are commanded in Genesis 1:28,

'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'

This is a great responsibility. We are, under God, in charge but we have failed in the task entrusted to us. We have pillaged and raped our planet, mined its resources and devoured its assets, not just to improve our lot as a human family but to enrich some and, by our abdication of care, leave others in poverty, fear and need. Having poisoned the moral atmosphere through our sin, we have gone on to poison our planet. What is happening in our world today is human in origin, and both rapid and destructive.

Question:

What does Calvin expect of us when he says: "Let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses. Then he will neither conduct himself dissolutely, nor corrupt by abusing those things which God requires to be preserved."?

Prayer:

Lord God, Creator of the world, we come before you to confess our sin, our avarice, our neglect of our duty and our failure to treat the planet that you have given us with the respect and care it deserves, being the work of your hands. Amen.

Rev'd Dr Geraint Tudur and Dr Hefin Jones
Union of Welsh Independents

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 41

TOPIC: Foresight

John Tyndall, an Irish physicist, predicted in 1859 that changes in atmospheric gases' concentrations would bring about climate change; the level of atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) was 290 parts per million (ppm). The Nobel Laureate, Svante Arrhenius calculated levels of warming from human CO₂ emissions and, by 1938, Guy Stewart Callendar, an English steam engineer, noted that global warming was underway.

In 1960 the American, Charles David Keeling measured atmospheric CO₂ concentration as 315 ppm. In 1972, droughts in Africa, Ukraine and India caused a world food crisis. An US National Academy of Sciences report found it highly credible that the doubling of CO₂ would bring 1.5-4.5°C global warming, and in 1995, the Second Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) report detected the 'signature' of human-caused global warming. A later IPCC report stated unequivocally that warming was 'very likely', with damaging impacts. It concluded that global warming could not be attributed to solar energy changes.

In 2016, the atmospheric CO₂ level reached 400 ppm. Global warming is happening at a faster and more dangerous pace than had been anticipated.

The evidence has been with us for many years. We knew it was happening and what was to come. Like Joseph in Genesis 41, we read the signs, we interpreted the dream. The Global North knew that after the years of great abundance, and happiness and joy, there would come years of turbulence, drought and famine, and in its wake, suffering and sorrow. Some were eager to act but we were not able to act together. What was prophesied has come to pass. In Old Testament days, even Pharaoh had the wisdom to prepare for what was to come. Though we cannot stop climate change now, we can lessen its effect.

Question:

What messages are we receiving today about God's creation?

1. How should we interpret them?
2. What should be our priorities?

Prayer:

We pray that God will provide us with understanding that we may gain knowledge from all that this world has to give. We pray for God's foresight to see the writing on the wall and to work to achieve what is good for all people. Amen.

Rev'd Dr Geraint Tudur and Dr Hefin Jones
Union of Welsh Independents

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Leviticus 19

TOPIC: The Land we Have Loved

Nauru, Tuvalu and Kiribati are low-lying archipelago nations in the Pacific. Kiribati (population 107, 000) could be the first entire country to be eliminated by climate change; islanders believe the sea will swallow their lands in less than a generation. During his presidency (2003-2016), Anote Tong made practical preparations for the relocation of Kiribati's citizens. Planning for what he called 'migration with dignity', he purchased 6,000 acres of land in Fiji to which the I-Kiribati could move. As 'dignity' also means having a homeland for the diaspora to remember, Tong suggested raising one of the islands to protect it for posterity.

We feel an affinity with the land where we were born, have lived and have worked. As a consequence of burning fossil fuels and careless emission of greenhouse gases, the rising sea level will, within a few decades, drown whole countries, forcing the emigration and relocation of populations.

As the sea levels increase, so does people's anxiety. Though there are many references to the displacement of people in the Bible, there are none that correspond exactly to people living in lands threatened by rising sea levels. There are, however, numerous references to how others should care for them. The most powerful is found in Leviticus (19: 33-34):

'When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.'

Exercise:

Imagine having to leave the home where you were born, the home town in which you grew up, your country. Note three words that describe how you would feel. Give time to reflect on those three words.

Prayer:

We pray for those who will be forced to leave their lands as sea levels rise. Comfort and strengthen them to overcome the bitterness of disappointment and the sorrow of leaving. To countries who open their borders, give grace, compassion and vision to welcome new citizens with generous hospitality.

Rev'd Dr Geraint Tudur and Dr Hefin Jones
Union of Welsh Independents

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: John 4

TOPIC: Fresh Water

Approximately 98% of our water is salty. Of the remaining 2%, 70% is snow and ice, 30% is groundwater, less than 0.5% is surface water (lakes, rivers, etc.) and less than 0.05% is in the atmosphere.

Despite global increases in rainfall, many regions will suffer from reductions. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that one billion people may face increasing water scarcity. An increasing global population also means more demand for agriculture, greater use for irrigation and more water pollution. In parallel, rising affluence in some countries will see more people living water-intensive lifestyles - watering of gardens, cleaning cars and using washing machines.

Water is one of life's essentials. We cannot do without it, yet we often take it for granted. To millions of people, however, it is more precious than gold. Climate change, while causing flooding in some areas, will bring drought to others. Rains fail, crops die and people suffer. Wars will be fought; water will 'become a weapon of mass destruction'. While some people will have a plentiful supply, many will have none. Those in need will go to those in possession, but will the overflowing cup be offered to the thirsty?

To the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7-10) Jesus showed that we must learn to give and take in a spirit of compassion and understanding. To the woman he said "Will you give me a drink?", but he was also willing to give her the cup of Living Water.

Question:

How much water does the average person use? Estimates vary, but each person uses about 60-100 gallons per day. The largest use of household water in the Global North is to flush the toilet, and to take showers and baths. Estimate your daily usage.

Prayer:

Teach us to give and take. In giving, we become too proud to take, and in taking we become too selfish to give. You give us the rich blessings of our earthly home to share as one human family, without anyone being in need - a lesson we are still learning.

Revd Dr Geraint Tudur and Dr Hefin Jones
Union of Welsh Independents

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: 1 Kings 18

TOPIC: Rising Temperatures

Extreme heat waves are among the most direct effects of climate change. They are notoriously deadly; humans can only function effectively within body temperatures around 98.6 °Fahrenheit (37 °Celsius). Currently, 30% of the world's population experiences around 20 days per year during which the temperature threshold is exceeded. By 2100, this will increase to 74% if emissions remain unchecked. While higher-latitude locations will warm more than the tropics, a greater threat to life will be in the more humid, tropical locales. These regions are less able to adapt to worsening heat waves, with limited access to air conditioning and unreliable electrical grids.

In 2003, large parts of Europe experienced the hottest summer since at least 1540. There were 14,802 heat-related deaths in France alone. In Pakistan and India, in 2015, a heat wave claimed over 4,000 lives. Dehydration can affect both young and old, but it is a life-threatening condition for the sick, the vulnerable and the weak.

When Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and incurred the wrath of Jezebel who sought to take his life, he fled into the desert and, in the heat, lay under a broom tree, possibly in its shadow, and asked God to take his life. God gave him food and water, and told him to rise up and continue his journey. He would not allow Elijah to lose heart or to give up. Neither will he allow us.

Question:

Mother Theresa: "We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop." What 'drop' can you contribute to humanity's effort to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and the consequent global temperature rise?

Prayer:

Holy God, fountain of goodness, give us strength and determination to continue to struggle against the Jezebel's of injustice in today's world. By your grace, may we not lose heart in the heat of the battle but feed and quench our thirst for justice to your everlasting glory.

Revd Dr Geraint Tudur and Dr Hefin Jones
Union of Welsh Independents



CWM Assembly, American Samoa, 2012.

My prayers and reflections on this week

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 46

TOPIC: Winds of Change

Conventional wisdom on climate change and security features resource wars, weak states toppling and trickles of immigrants turning into torrents. For many states, climate change tends to be under the radar, exacerbating existing difficulties such as economic weakness, communal strife and weak governance.

There is increasing awareness of direct climate changes (mean temperature and patterns of precipitation) as well as the secondary physical impacts on the Earth's natural systems. The more intangible third-order socio-political effects have not yet been fully appreciated; rising temperatures, droughts and floods bear on the availability of pasture, agricultural produce and drinking water. Scarcity can lead to either cooperation or competition.

Competition, disruptive as it is, frequently occurs between urbanites and displaced rural dwellers moving to cities. When cities do not have the resources to accommodate new arrivals, many will aim to move to more prosperous countries. This can lead to human tragedy for migrants stuck outside various cordons, recriminations on sending countries for not securing their borders, and ugly nativist backlashes in destination countries.

People are generally averse to change. The faster the change, the stronger their reaction to it. With the extremes of climate change come extremes of reaction, with all their destabilising effects upon society and international relations. Fragmentation of human relationships brings few benefits. As these things happen around us, we must keep our hearts, minds and eyes fixed on the Lord, for as Psalm 46 states: 'God is our refuge and strength, and ever present in time of trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, and the mountains quake with their surging.'

Question:

Encourage your local congregation to become involved with a community project. If it already does this, how can it be developed?

Prayer:

Almighty God, protector of the weak, as structures and certainties crumble around us, we turn to you. When the world is in constant flux and turmoil, you are our one certainty, the one everlasting constant in our brittle and breakable lives. We thank you, Lord, and praise your Holy name.

Rev'd Dr Geraint Tudur and Dr Hefin Jones
Union of Welsh Independents

Climate Change

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 9

TOPIC: The Rainbow

One of the earliest literary occurrences of a rainbow is in the flood story of Noah, where it is a sign of God's covenant never to destroy all life on Earth with a global flood again. In 1994, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and President Nelson Mandela described newly democratic post-apartheid South Africa as the Rainbow Nation.

When people are affected by sudden or uncontrollable circumstances, they often seek to explain the situation in terms of supernatural intervention. When natural disasters occur, it is God expressing his displeasure; when illness or disease strikes, it is God's judgment. The Bible states that God is love. God takes no delight in seeing people hurt. What is happening to the climate is not divine retribution for anything we have done; it is the natural consequence of our collective actions as a human family, as the inhabitants of planet Earth.

Climate change, at the rate witnessed today, was not inevitable. Had industrialised nations behaved in a more responsible manner and responded when initial warnings were given, we would be in a better situation than the one we are in today. However, though we have polluted the atmosphere, the rainbow and its colours are still visible, red on the outer part and violet on the inner side.

In Genesis 9:13, the rainbow was a sign of the covenant between God and Earth. God is not the Destroyer: he is the Fountain of Life, the ever-present Lord who is with us through all our trials and tribulations. He is with us today. Let us be strong and confident in him.

Exercise:

Within your local church establish an Environmental Stewardship Group and formulate a Church Environmental Covenant.

Prayer:

May we promote harmony in the world, between people, the environment, and with you. Give us strength and courage to persevere in our efforts so as to proclaim our cause in fulfilling your mission. Let us be gracious in all circumstances and determined in our struggle, as Christ's rainbow people.

Rev'd Dr Geraint Tudur and Dr Hefin Jones
Union of Welsh Independents

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 23: 6-9

TOPIC: Protection of the Vulnerable

ISIS attacks in Syria and other Islamic countries have resulted in refugee crises which have left millions of people displaced. The neighbouring countries are no longer able to absorb them and thousands of refugees have fled to Europe to seek shelter. In their struggle for survival, the refugees have to endure harassment and humiliation in a foreign land.

The resident alien and foreigner are vulnerable people groups in the Old Testament. They are people of different cultural and religious background from Israelite society. A strong humanitarian concern for the protection of the resident alien is being raised in ancient Israelite society and the law forbids oppressing them. They are defenceless against the exclusiveness of the political regime.

The grievous issue of contemporary society is discrimination based on religious background and national identity. Intolerant behaviours range from marginalization to stigmatization of people groups. Religious commitment cannot justify injustices done to the weak. Protection of the minority sections of a people group is an urgent need today. The commitment to the cause of equality, respect, and tolerance of religious background and cultural identity is emancipation from political and religious autocracy.

Christian commitment can be self-centered if we think only for own comfort and prosperity but exclude and dehumanize the other on the basis of religion and national identity. Oppression and exploitation of any community of faith disturb the spiritual and social harmony in society and such unjust treatment can be perpetrated by and to people who call themselves people of God. Therefore interfaith relations represent the quest for affirmation of life and acceptance in the midst of plurality and diversities of faith.

As the Church, we are called to love the unlovable, to protect the vulnerable and to stand against the injustice done to the religious minority and the weaker sections of the people group in society.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we have failed to live as your witness and to help the refugees and victims of war. We did not heed their cries nor defend the vulnerable. We pay lip service to the pains of others. We ask for forgiveness. Give us courage and strength, to stand for justice and to protect the weak.

Ms. Enolyne Lyngdoh
Presbyterian Church of India

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Proverbs 24:1-4

TOPIC: Wisdom is a Quest of Order

Walter Brueggemann states that “poetic imagination is the last way left in which to challenge and conflict the dominant reality”. Proverbial wisdom is not an ideological term or abstract notion but a practical knowledge of ethical value-systems that promote life. Wisdom is a skill of dealing with contemporary issues as well as identifying issues of urgency. Wisdom is a quest of order and this order cannot be experienced if there are conflicts and disunity in the house and community. Peace and justice are built by wisdom and understanding.

The Greek word “Ecumenism” is derived from the word Oikos meaning ‘house’ and the earth as the “oikumene” represents different groups of people in society. If danger and violence disrupt any nation every inhabited creature is affected. If our awareness of protection in cooperative efforts extends to every community and people group, our engagement in building the community of peace and harmony can be accomplished.

Violence and discrimination against religious groups by ruling political leaders have reached new heights such as religious-related terrorism and mass genocide. Religious nationalists tend to view religious traditions as closely tied to their nation and in their attempt to protect their tradition they suppress the minority religious group. Even in democratic societies where freedom of religion is a constitutional right, discrimination against religious minorities is widespread. Religious hostilities increased among the educated and the ignorant, civilized or remote society. Therefore interfaith relations are a call to confront the structure of power and religious hierarchies of a particular community.

As Christians, we need to think seriously that religious conflict promotes hatred and enmity but also isolates us from people groups and nations as well. If war is the solution to solve religious conflict, it could wipe out humankind from the face of the earth.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, forgive our foolish ways. We lack wisdom, knowledge and the fear of you. We have followed the paths that lead to violence, hate, and fear. Turn us to the right path, and let your love and grace flow through us to become peace-makers amidst religious conflict, and restorers of people groups of different faith.

Ms. Enolyne Lyngdoh
Presbyterian Church of India

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 11:1-9

TOPIC: The Babel of Name and Fame

In his US presidential election campaign in 2016, President Donald Trump declared that he 'will build a great wall; that nobody builds walls better than this' to protect the influx of illegal immigrants into the country.

The building of a great wall and a great city is the vision of an empire. The narrative in Genesis 11:1-9 creatively portrays the self-centeredness of humankind in their quest for name and fame. This story symbolically reveals the power game for people or nations who felt the inner need to be the world's famous nation. The narrative interprets the complexity of the notion of power when it is presented as a means of possession such as "to build a city tower for ourselves", and "to make a name for ourselves".

The quest for power and for making one's name great portrays a human desire for recognition and fame. The Tower of Babel was the most ambitious task and it became a metaphor for the division of the human race into groups unable to communicate with one another. Despite the spectacular industrial progress, the metaphor of Babel indicates that we are lost in confusion. We seemingly built the Tower through unknown space and unmarked boundaries. The politics of religion represent one of the strategies of power games that inspire and motivate a people group to rule and control.

The impact of the Tower of Babel does not only separate humankind from God but also from each other. The modern Babel is the threat of nuclear war, the increasing project of military weapons, and the competition between nations on nuclear industries. Nations invested large capital in building a great city by robbing the right of the poor to live as fully human. Therefore the compulsive need to be in control can be seen in military power and conflict between nations.

As the Church of Christ, we, therefore, need to critically examine, reflect and resist such ideology that divides and exploits the vulnerability of the common people.

Prayer:

Lord set us free from pride, ego and the spirit of control. If our hearts are hard, O God, soften us with your love. If our hands are clenched, O God, open with your grace. Help us to undo the wrongs we have done. Forgive us, and guide us. Amen.

Ms. Enolyne Lyngdoh
Presbyterian Church of India

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: John 4: 7-15

TOPIC: Transcending Boundaries

The Jews do not associate with the Samaritans. Besides their identity conflict, there are also gender and religious doctrinal differences. Normally a Jewish man cannot speak to a woman publicly and it will be shocking news to see a Rabbi talking with a Samaritan woman who was a prostitute. Jesus, on this occasion, transcends all human-made boundaries of religious identity, gender, and cultural discrimination.

Transcending boundaries is the ability to connect with people groups, transcending beyond one's own boundary, ego, culture, pride and prejudice in order to be more inclusive, to see ourselves as part of a larger humanity within the Universe and to recognize that we are a part of all that exists.

Transcending boundaries compels us to widen our circles with which we have been comfortable. Although it is not easy, it is not impossible. Transcending boundaries is tolerance and respect of ethnic group, cultures, religion, gender, caste, and colour. Hatred and violence are basically power conflicts that challenge racial and religious minorities. Our dissensions and conflict reflect the gap of togetherness and we can hardly call ourselves people of God. Jesus himself set an example of deterritorializing all human-made barriers that create conflict with one another. Transcending boundaries is a vision of connectedness and oneness with all humanity by dissolving differences.

As Christians, we are called to build a community that can mend division, accept diversities of language, identity, religion and culture to experience the kingdom of God on earth.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we have forsaken others. We confess that we have twisted the truth, We discriminate against those who are different from us. We have remained silent to the struggle of the weak. Open our lips to speak for justice. Give us grace to accept others and give us faith to follow you. Amen.

Ms. Enolyne Lyngdoh
Presbyterian Church of India



Interfaith Relations and Ecumenism Programme, 2017

My prayers and reflections on this week

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: 2 Kings 5: 1-5

TOPIC: Words of Healing

“Naaman, commander of the army for the king of Aram, was a great man in his master’s sight and highly regarded because through him, the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man was a brave warrior . . .” (2 Kings 5:1). However, he was a leper. Traditionally in ancient days lepers were isolated and humiliated and they were outcasts. The little girl, a slave who had been captured by her master, was not pleased to see him suffering from leprosy. Although he was a person of different culture and religious background she wished for him to be healed from his pain and misery.

It may be difficult and challenging for someone to expect blessing and happiness for a person who had plundered their homeland, caused them to lose their loved ones and their family like this little girl. It is even harder if the person is of another faith and nation.

The story of the nameless Israelite girl portrays her love and concern for her enemy. We cannot judge people’s character by their religious background. The refugee crisis and suffering in different parts of the world are presented as the result of religious conflict. We are tempted to use religion to fit our agenda to divide and conquer. However we fail to recognise our common humanity when we deny people who need the word of healing that can restore and bind relationships because of religious creed, gender, caste, and colour.

Wael Abdelgawad said forgiveness is not for the weak. Being able to forgive those who have wronged us is a mark of spiritual strength and confidence. When we forgive, we grow; our heart begins to heal.

Prayer:

Holy God, we dim your light within us. We know that you love us, that you do not abandon us and that, again and again, you call us back to you, back to love, back to grace, and back to your light. Help us to affirm life through our words and deeds. Amen.

Ms. Enolyne Lyngdoh
Presbyterian Church of India

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Jonah 4:10,11

TOPIC: Particularism versus Universalism

The Story of Jonah exposes the tension between religious particularism and universalism. Jonah runs away from God in order to hold on to his orthodox theology. He does not want the people of Nineveh to receive the favour of God. Eung Chun Park states, "God loses and the Orthodox theologian wins". And the text is silent as to whether Jonah learned a lesson after his experience inside the belly of the whale.

Jonah's selfishness and prejudice towards the people of Nineveh convey to the world that one can believe that God's compassion and love is only for a specific people group. We may ask why should God be concerned with the people of Nineveh? They were the enemies of the Jews. But the interesting fact that one can learn from the story is that it is not the same with God, and our enemy cannot be God's enemy. Sometimes we seek people's attention and support in order to make our enemy their enemy and Jonah might have had the same desire.

The text indicates that when the heat of the sun beat down on Jonah's head, he was angry about the bush that could not shade him from the sun. God asks Jonas, is it right for you to be angry about the bush? Jonah is more concerned for his own comfort than the people of Nineveh. The refusal of Jonah communicates the shallowness of our understanding of God's love. God created all humankind in his image and we are called to love and respect each other but we limit our love to a particular people group and expect God to do the same. Our concept of love is limited to oneself, friends, family or people of common grounds.

We need to reflect our relationship with God in our attitudes towards people of other faith.

Prayer:

Gracious God, you are so patient with us. We run away, and you seek us. We make foolish choices, and you teach us the better way. We hurt you and others. Forgive us. Help us reveal your glory and goodness to people of other faiths and bear the love of Christ to all humankind. Amen.

Ms. Enolyne Lyngdoh
Presbyterian Church of India

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Luke 10:25-37

TOPIC: Who is my Neighbour?

We live in a time where love is interpreted by the ideology of the commercial media. The text narrates the question raised by a lawyer who asks Jesus: "What should I do to inherit eternal life?". Jesus asked what was written in the law. He replied, "You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbour as yourself" (10:27).

Who is my neighbour? The question asked by the legalistic Jewish lawyer who felt secure in the spirituality of fulfilling the external standards of the law. The exposition of the law of 'neighbour's love' by Jesus goes beyond one's understanding that embraces the suffering person and the victim of the scene. The Samaritan saw a person lying in the street as someone who urgently needed help. He does not even bother to know his identity or background. But the attitudes of the priest and the Levites can be described as reflecting those who observe the law of purity without an understanding of its ethical spirituality and distance themselves from the victim and pass by on the other side (vs 31-32).

Dogmatic understanding of religious tradition can lead us to pseudo-spirituality that hinders us from helping those who are in need. Blind committal to dogmatic interpretation of religious tradition is one of the issues of living of the major religions of the world.

The story of the Good Samaritan is an eye opener to nations dominated by one particular religious faith because help can come from unexpected hands in our time of need. Neighbour is not only defined by proximity but also by need. We live in a world masked by fake religious conviction and in the name of religion we plunder and kill. Jesus teaches us that love is an attitude stronger than vengeance, stronger than racism or hatred. Love covers all wrong and restores the wounds and heals the pain. Our commitment to God is to love our neighbour who may be our enemy.

Prayer:

Dear God, we have turned away from you and from our neighbours. We do not love you with our whole heart and mind and strength. We do not love our neighbour as ourselves. Show us again how to love others the way you love us. Open our heart to feel the pain of our neighbours. Amen.

Ms. Enolyne Lyngdoh
Presbyterian Church of India

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Luke 5:27-32

TOPIC: Invitation to Discipleship

In my local church, the criteria for selecting church workers/leaders are clear including a good reputation and good leadership skills. The candidate's name must be sent to church meetings at various levels and then the candidate is endorsed to undertake a specific role of leadership. Hence, to engage in discipleship as a leader/church worker in my local church, one must meet stipulated criteria approved by the church. As a result, many who failed to meet the criteria have been excluded.

In the reading, Jesus' invitation to discipleship is different from the approach of many churches. During the time of Jesus, tax collectors were the most hated people in the society. According to the religious hierarchy they were outcasts and sinners. It was in this very context of hatred and rejection that Jesus of Nazareth challenged the religious structures and criteria. He did not inquire about the historical background of Levi - whether he was a good man fit for God's mission. He simply said "Come follow me." (v.27b) Jesus saw the goodness in Levi, he saw the potential in him and he was sure that Levi would participate in God's mission. We can also learn from Levi's response. He never made excuses; he left everything and followed Jesus, (v.28), an act which demonstrated the high priority he placed on the call of the Master.

However, Jesus' approach to calling his disciples has been highly criticized by the religious authorities of the day (v.30). "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" implying that Jesus' method of calling his disciples was in contradiction to their approach. In response Jesus gave a parable which identified those who truly need a Physician; a sharp rejoinder on the very purpose of his coming. He did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repent (vv 31-32).

Questions:

1. How does the Church, call disciples to participate in God's mission in a global context?
2. How do we respond to the call of Christ in order to participate in God's mission as Christ's disciples?

Prayer:

Thank you for calling us to participate in your mission and to invite others on the journey of discipleship. Help us not to be judgmental but to lift the banner of love as the symbol of the liberating power of Jesus Christ, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev Armstrong Pitakaji
United Church in Solomon Islands

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Luke 9:57-62

TOPIC: Discipleship - a Lifetime Commitment

We live in a world where we have to make decisions every day. As a high school chaplain, I used a phrase with my students - Triple D or the 3 Ds - "Decision Determines Destiny". Sometimes we are caught in the dilemma of prioritizing which invitations to accept and which to decline.

In my rural community, at a specific time of year certain species of fish are so hungry for bait they are easily caught at dawn. At dawn the Pastor also calls for morning community devotion. During this season, most men are out fishing so their commitment to the worship life of the church is challenged. It is even worse during the season for the highly valued bêche-de-mer because almost the whole community will be out in the reefs at night fetching bêche-de-mer.

In our contemporary global communities, we are challenged by many voices and invitations - unjust economic structures, unjust political systems and voices of powerful capitalistic ideologies driven by greed. These voices keep calling and inviting us to participate in facilitating economic gains of the powerful and few elites who designed these unjust systems in the first place.

Jesus challenged the priorities of a true disciple and made it clear that those who desire to offer their lives for service in the kingdom of God must do it wholeheartedly (v58-62), be willing to sacrifice and commit for life.

In the scripture reading, Jesus made it clear that true discipleship involves challenges, sacrifice and wise choices. Christ our risen Lord, the Lord of the church universal calls us with only one condition and that is to serve him wholeheartedly. It is a commitment for life.

Questions:

1. Are you willing to offer your life wholeheartedly for the service of God's kingdom?
2. Discuss and reflect on what are the voices and invitations you often hear in your own context today? How do you respond to them?

Prayer:

Lord Almighty, we are so thankful to have this privilege of being called your servants and disciples. May your Holy Spirit help us to discern the right voice to obey as we serve you in Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev Armstrong Pitakaji
United Church in Solomon Islands

17 October

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Romans 6:13

TOPIC: Surrender to Worship God

In our contemporary world, the word surrender implies being defeated and giving in to a stronger authority. Before the end of a war, there must be a point of surrender.

Surrender suggests someone is a loser, and in today's competitive societies no one wants to be a loser. Surrendering means totally submitting to the stronger opponent. Everyone strives to be a winner, in a war, games and sporting events. According to this reading, there is demand for total surrender on our part as true disciples so we may offer true and genuine worship to God.

The author of the Book of Romans, in this particular chapter and verse, appeals to us to shun evil. This implies totally surrendering our lives for God's service. Offering ourselves to a life of worshipping him and serving his divine purpose requires our commitment to withdraw from sinful behaviour and from the kind of lifestyle that satisfies the fleshly desires in us but displeases God.

Verse 3 is clear, "Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather let us offer ourselves to God. Surrender ourselves to God's will." His will alone be done in our lives as the very people he brought back to life and living hope through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ.

One cannot be a true disciple to render genuine worship to God without surrendering the old self life. We have been asked to offer every part of ourselves to be an instrument of righteousness for the work of God's mission. True disciples surrender their whole life to God, only then will true worship be rendered to God for his glory.

Questions:

1. Discuss what are some of the hindrances to a surrendered life?
2. Discuss what are the steps involved in surrendering our lives to participate in God's work of mission?

Prayer:

Forgive us O Lord for we have been guilty many times of not yielding our lives to you. Help us to surrender ourselves fully to you for your service alone. Come Holy Spirit and use us as instruments of God's righteousness, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev Armstrong Pitakaji
United Church in Solomon Islands

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Luke 6: 46-49

TOPIC: Foundation for Discipleship

Living in a complex society where we experience the impact of globalization and secularism, people tend to build their lives upon material foundations. Money, materialism and one's valuable assets become the security and foundation of life. Many around the world are engaging in corrupt activities for their economic gain and for them this is the sure foundation for living.

In my country, Solomon Islands, the super-imposed western concept of development that is based on the extraction of natural resources has taken its toll. The current ecological degradation that is evident in our sea of small Islands is the result of people's perception of money as the foundation for their lives. Christians are involved in bribery and land disputes because of money. Money seems to be the solution to all their problems, needs and wants so many transnational companies were invited to do logging activities in our Islands, harvesting our forests of trees.

In the reading provided for this reflection, Jesus challenged those who did not live up to his teachings and yet continued to call or address him as Lord (v. 46). In verse 47 Jesus then lifts up three very important descriptors:

- everyone who comes to him
 - everyone who hears his words and teachings
 - everyone who puts them (his words and teachings) into practice
- as being synonymous with those who build a house on a rock i.e. on a very strong foundation. He warns that those who take his words and teachings lightly are in danger of succumbing to the storms of life.

Jesus' teachings are the sure foundation on which our lives are to be laid.

Questions:

1. In our discipleship journey, is your life built on the sure and right foundation?
2. Discuss some of the issues in life that hinder you from building on the right foundation.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we have been guilty of building our lives on wrong foundations. We ask you to forgive us and help us to continue building our lives on the sure foundation of your teachings which give meaning and purpose to our lives, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev Armstrong Pitakaji
United Church in Solomon Islands

19 October

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Luke 14:25-27

TOPIC: The Cost of being a Disciple

In the Solomon Islands the extreme Pentecostal - religious movements present the gospel of Jesus Christ to the audience in such a way that a disciple of Jesus Christ is guaranteed a bed of roses and a luxurious faith journey. Many Christians in our rural settings have been influenced by this teaching and they expect a life of luxury and comfort where there are no challenges, difficulties and times of peril.

In contrast to this Jesus, in this portion of scripture, teaches that true disciples who are serious in their commitment to follow him have to go through tough situations possibly including leaving their own families, if necessary, for the sake of the gospel. He further challenges those who want to follow him to first deny themselves, take up their own cross and follow him, otherwise they are not fit to be his disciples.

Self-denial and taking up one's own cross are costly.

Self-denial implies that we let go of all that pleases our own soul and submit to the will of God. Taking up the cross implies that we must be willing to accept the challenges, pain, struggles and afflictions in this discipleship journey fully trusting our Lord, the one who called us to serve him and who cares for us. There are many Christians who held leadership roles in the church who resigned from their positions as they faced difficulties in their journey as disciples of our Lord.

Our Lord reminds us that two very important features of the road to discipleship are self-denial and taking up our cross.

Questions:

1. What is your understanding of self-denial?
2. Discuss what Jesus meant when he said that one must take up his/her own cross to follow him.

Prayer:

Lord God who continues to call us into the pathway of discipleship, forgive us for not fully denying ourselves in order to participate in your mission as your fellow workers. Holy Spirit, help us carry our own cross as the living witness of our Lord Jesus Christ that we may reach out to the poor, the hungry, the needy and the sick, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev Armstrong Pitakaji
United Church in Solomon Islands

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Acts 1:6-8

TOPIC: Empowered for Mission

Many Christians engage in mission today. Some fail in their work and others are successful, bearing fruit and leaving a lasting legacy. Still others put more emphasis on the eschatological message of the soon-coming Christ. They preach that this world is full of evil and therefore, we should detach ourselves from the social issues, affecting societies today.

According to the selected reading, the disciples of Jesus are worried about God restoring the kingdom to Israel. In his response, he drives their focus to the zeal for mission. Jesus' great concern for his disciples is for them to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. The purpose of this empowerment is engagement in mission. Without the empowering work of the Holy Spirit the disciples will miserably fail in their mission as true witnesses of their Lord. 'You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth' (v.8).

In the same manner, as Christians and disciples of Christ today, we cannot carry out God's mission entrusted to us to be living witnesses for our risen Lord without the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

Our earthly titles, status, and qualifications are limited and cannot give us the power (dunamis) to carry out the required tasks in God's mission. The church today, Christ's disciples, must first of all be empowered by the Holy Spirit before they can execute the assigned mission of God as living witnesses.

Questions:

1. How do you wait for the power of God's Holy Spirit to execute God's mission in your own given context today?
2. What is the evidence that the power of God's Holy Spirit rests upon you as Christ's disciple?

Prayer:

Almighty Father, thank you for reminding us that we cannot execute this mission of spreading the good news of liberation to our world without the power of your Holy Spirit. Help us to be filled and empowered by your Holy Spirit to humbly carry out the duties you have called us to do, in Jesus Name. Amen.

Rev Armstrong Pitakaji
United Church in Solomon Islands

21 October

Worship and Discipleship

SCRIPTURE: Romans 12:1-2

TOPIC: Disciples as Living Sacrifice

In contemporary society, there are many Christians who are heavily involved in extreme social activities such as excessive consumption of liquor, smoking etc. In addition to being unhealthy this can also affect the family budget of low-wage earners. There are other activities, like gambling, that drain the energy and finance of many Christians. These reflect the world's system and set patterns.

In this reading Paul, as the author of the book of Romans, urges Christians in Rome to present their bodies as living sacrifice to God. In so doing they are actually rendering true and spiritual acts of worship (v.1). Paul challenged them to withdraw from worldly patterns or systems, and instead to long for complete transformation by the renewing of their minds.

In light of Paul's message to the Romans, as Christians today we are asked to become a living sacrifice by presenting our bodies to God and dedicating our bodies and lives to God's service. We are to eschew worldly patterns or systems of doing things and instead do things the way God likes/requires from us. True disciples become a living sacrifice to God. Our spiritual act of worship is our commitment to offer ourselves to God for his service.

When you help a poor widow to carry her bucket of water, when you support hungry children, when you clothe the naked, when you visit the sick and those in prison, this is your body being presented as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God as your spiritual act of worship.

Questions:

1. Discuss some of the things Christians in your context spend their lives and time on which prevents them from being a living sacrifice to God?
2. As disciples of Christ, how do you remain consistent in being a living sacrifice in God's mission?

Prayer:

Lord, we ask you to teach us your ways. You have required us to become living sacrifice, holy and dedicated for your service and in so doing render our true spiritual acts of worship and bring glory to your name. In Jesus name. Amen.

Rev Armstrong Pitakaji
United Church in Solomon Islands

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 2:4b-25

TOPIC: Redeeming the Scriptures from Abuse

"But somehow even the Holy Bible talks about the responsibilities and obligations of men and women. The bible says that the woman's body does not belong to her only but to her husband, and vice versa, the husband's body does not belong to him but to his wife."

The above quotation is from the article "Campaign against domestic violence" in the Solomon Star, 3 December 2015. The article says that one reason for violence against women is the withholding by a wife of her body from her husband. Violence against women in the Pacific is very high. A 2013 report by WHO established that "violence against women is pervasive globally ... not a small problem that only occurs in some pockets of society, but rather is a global public health problem of epidemic proportions, requiring urgent action. It is time for the world to take action: a life free of violence is a basic human right, one that every woman, man and child deserves."

In the Christian world literalistic interpretations of scripture lead to and justify acts of violence against women. The bible is central to the task of evangelism but is often abused as a tool of oppression instead of a tool for liberation. Genesis 2 is one of these texts open to abuse. Its liberative edge must be proclaimed.

Two crucial insights are important: firstly, current scholarly research advances that the Hebrew root word translated "helper" or "helpmeet" is more correctly translated as "strength" or "saviour". This makes sense in the context of the narrative where the man is "lonely". He needs strength to redeem him from loneliness. However, the use of "strength" is qualified by a second root word which means "equal". This makes the woman a "strength" who is equal to the man. Secondly, this is affirmed by the Hebrew word commonly translated "rib" which can also be correctly translated as "side". Woman is neither inferior nor simply an assistant to man! The humanity, equality and dignity of woman and man are rooted in the very being of God. Violence against women is sinful.

Contemplate:

Any culture or religion or context that denies the truth that violence against women is sinful is not and cannot be of God.

Prayer:

Creator God you make us in your image. Thank you for making us and all of creation share in your very being. Help us affirm and respect one another and your very good creation. Amen.

Rev Dr. Cliff Bird
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Mark 1:14-20 (cf. Matthew 13)

TOPIC: Colours of the Kingdom of God

People Community Network (PCN), a local faith-based NGO in the Fiji Islands, helps poor people living in squatter settlements to save toward owning a proper place they can call a home. Many families are now assured of a life protected from the hazards of nature and can work toward rising above poverty.

The gospels attest that at the heart of the ministry of Jesus is the kingdom of God. Many preachers and teachers today tend to spiritualise God's kingdom to the heavens and evacuate it into the future. Jesus, in the majority of cases, had a more in-the-here-and-now vision of this kingdom – an earthier rather than a skyward-futuristic one! In Mark's gospel Jesus appeared and immediately announced the dawning of the kingdom, which could be received or entered into through repentance. This announcement is followed by the call to discipleship, and by the miraculous deeds and teachings of Jesus. The kingdom of God unfolds and manifests in the life of Jesus. It is realised amidst the harsh and hard economic, social, political and religious realities of life as crowds and individuals are touched and transformed by the compassion and just deeds of Jesus. The 'parables of the kingdom' in Matthew (chapter 13), all portray the kingdom of God for and from the Earth. Renowned theologian Walter Wink describes this truth evocatively and powerfully: "In parable after parable, Jesus speaks of the 'reigning of God,' using images drawn from farming and women's work. It is not described as coming from on high down to earth; it rises quietly and imperceptibly out of the land. It is established, not by armies and military might, but by an ineluctable process of growth from below, among the common people. Its colours are not gold and scarlet and purple, but earth tones: brown, yellow, and green [and blue]. Its symbolism is not masculine (kings, swords, chargers, shields, spears) but feminine (water, soil, dough, women, a home)." What you do is important!

Question :

How do the works of justice and compassion you engage in help to earth the reign of God where you are now?

Prayer:

God of justice and compassion, enable us to discern and celebrate the works of your kingdom in our families, communities and the world. Re-direct our gaze from the skies to earthy realities we daily encounter. Embrace us to partner with you in your life-affirming mission. Amen.

Rev Dr. Cliff Bird
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Luke 4:16-30 (cf. Isaiah 61:1-4)

TOPIC: Mandates of the Kingdom of God

“In this new century millions of people in the world’s poorest countries remain imprisoned, enslaved, and in chains. They are trapped in the prison of poverty. It is time to set them free ... poverty is not inevitable. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right – the right to dignity and a decent life.”

The above words come from the pen of Nelson Mandela in February 2005, and are still very relevant in our day. Mandela’s words resonate strongly with those attributed to Jesus in the gospel reading. Verses 18-19 stem from Isaiah 61:1-2. Jesus surprised the worshippers by stating that this scripture was fulfilled in their hearing – through him. Down the centuries there has been the tendency to spiritualise this Lukan text. However, these interpretations must be revisited in the light of the historical context of Isaiah 61, namely the dashed hopes of the earliest returnees from the Babylonian Exile. The returnees were frustrated and humiliated over the failure to rebuild the city and the temple to match its former glory. Economic disparities and religious and political factions riddled the city. The reality of life in Jerusalem was nothing like the expectations for a restored Jerusalem and a righteous community as proclaimed by the prophets and as envisioned by the returnees. This was the tangible situation into which God’s anointed would speak and act. Now in Luke, Jesus saw himself as fulfilling the roles of God’s anointed in his time. He reached out to the oppressed and rejected, to those who mourn and those whose hearts were crushed. He confronted the perpetrators and sources of oppression, marginalization, hopelessness and despair. Now is our time and this is the church’s call to God’s mission: to both follow in Jesus’ footsteps and to create life-affirming opportunities and activities for all God’s people.

Imagine with John Lennon:

“Imagine all the people sharing all the world.” What would the world be like?

Prayer:

Living God, may we follow in the footsteps of your Son. Empower us by your Spirit to boldly declare and live out your loving compassion and justice in the places in which we live and work. Make us your channels of grace, liberation and transformation. Amen.

Rev Dr. Cliff Bird
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: John 10:1-10

TOPIC: Tangibleness of Abundant Life

May you always have
walls for the winds,
a roof for the rain,
tea beside the fire,
laughter to cheer you,
those you love near you,
and all your heart might desire.

Above is an Irish poem which for me helps bring to life in our time the words attributed to Jesus in verse 10 of today's text. For far too long the text has suffered from overt spiritualisation in the Pacific Islands. I am certainly not against the spiritual aspects of human life and existence, however, the text is not about these! Analyses of images and words used by Jesus lend support to this position.

Image 1: shepherd. The shepherd has the total wellbeing of the sheep at heart, cares for and protects the sheep, goes before the sheepfold, and leads them out to find pasture.

Image 2: gate. Gate enables entry and exit and highlights access and safety and protection of the sheep.

Word 1: pasture. Pasture is about good and sufficient grassland and waterholes.

Word 2: life – abundant life. Life (Greek *zoe*) is about existence, one's means of life or livelihood and lifestyle.

Evangelism

Put together these images and words are about food, clean water, shelter, safety, protection & freedom from harm and violence, health & wellbeing, meaningful work, freedom to make informed choices, inclusion & participation, dignity & respect. Evangelism is more than mere words!

Activity:

Add to the “I am grateful for” diagram. What makes God’s offer of abundant life real for you?

Prayer:

Merciful God, forgive us for the times we shied away from declaring and acting out the offer of abundant life you intend for all people. Strengthen your church to work toward the realisation of tangible fullness of life in different contexts in which your people live. Amen.

Rev Dr. Cliff Bird
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission



Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Mark 12:38-44

TOPIC: Poverty is Human-Made

According to a World Bank Group's recent report, approximately "10.7 percent of the world's population lived on less than US\$1.90 a day ... This means that, in 2013, 767 million people lived on less than \$1.90 a day." In the Pacific region "an average of one in four households are now living below their country's national basic needs poverty line." This is equivalent to 25 percent of households.

Poverty is not natural; it is human-made. There are sufficient resources which, if shared justly amongst the peoples of the world, would be enough to meet the basic needs of the world's citizens, without hundreds of millions having to live in extreme poverty. Today's text, especially the words attributed to Jesus (verses 43-44), are commonly interpreted to be about giving – more specifically about giving all that one has, even the very little that one has, to the work of God. There may be some validity about this traditional interpretation, however, close analysis of the text tells a different story. The subtlety of the text is: why is the widow poor? Who makes her poor? In verse 38-40 Jesus says, "Beware of the scribes ... They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." Scribes are more than mere persons: they are symbols of authority and they wield power; they represent structures and systems and are part of the ruling elites in society; they enjoy affluent lifestyles while the majority of the people are poor. By pointing out the widow Jesus highlights her plight and the plight of all those in her situation and why they are in such a situation. Jesus cares for people like her.

Mission and evangelism are also about asking the "why" question, in order to help identify and address root causes of problems such as poverty. The gospel of Jesus Christ must be made relevant in the face of poverty; it must be preached and put into practice in order to bring about liberation and the tangible salvation of people from the pains and inhumanities of poverty.

Prayer:

Merciful God, we remember before you all poor and neglected persons: the homeless and the destitute, the old and the sick, and all who have none to care for them. Help us to heal those who are broken in body or spirit, and to turn their sorrow into joy. Amen.

Rev Dr. Cliff Bird
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: John 4:1-42

TOPIC: Prophets and Heralds of the Gospel

In March 2013 I was diagnosed with dengue and admitted at the hospital's Acute Ward. Many very sick people of all faiths were in the ward. Because I could not eat, visitors brought cash gifts. On Easter Sunday I was discharged. My wife and I shared the entire cash gift with all the patients in the ward.

The story of the Samaritan woman follows immediately after the story of Nicodemus in chapter 3. John does this purposely. We are meant to notice this contrast in all of its detail. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, an insider, a leader of the Jews. He is a man, he has a name, but he comes to Jesus by night. In chapter 4 we meet a Samaritan, a religious and political outsider. She is a woman, she has no name, but she meets Jesus at noon, in full daylight.

Contrary to what many assume, she is not a prostitute. Various social, cultural, economic and religious factors would have resulted in her present situation. Every day she lives under the shadow of her marginality. Every day she goes to a well – a painful persistent reminder that in that world, her lot belongs in the exclusionary shadows of gender, ethnicity, and condition. Jesus does not condemn her and nowhere in the text is she called to repentance. Jesus sees her not as society perceives her. She sees Jesus as prophet. Both engage in serious faith discussion. In the encounter she is led to faith and Jesus is challenged and enriched.

Deep calls to deep (Ps 42:7)! Emerging from the shadows of routine, menial and unvalued work and deeply embedded stereotypes she becomes a forerunner of the proclamation of the gospel: "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done'" (verse 39).

Contemplate:

In chapter 1 John the Baptist calls crowds to come and see; in this text the Samaritan woman calls people of the city, come and see. An Israelite prophet and an unnamed woman – both are prophets and heralds of the gospel! Bless God!

Prayer:

God of life, shower us in your living water, bringing us to new life, fresh and clean. Walk with us as we share the knowledge of your living water with others, so that all might live and enjoy your offer of abundant life. Amen.

Rev Dr. Cliff Bird
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Luke 16:1-13

TOPIC: Subversive Nature of God's Kingdom

"... fundamental to any development of economic alternative is the question of sufficiency in regards to the fulfilment of basic needs and healthy regard of the ecology, and solidarity as it relates to sustaining community life and relationships."

The above quotation is from "Re-Thinking the Household of God in the Pacific," – a concept paper by the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) about alternative models of economic life and relationships. Today's text is from a chapter whose main focus is on economic relationships. However, we must first free our minds from the ideological biases reflected in such titles as "The Parable of the Dishonest Manager" (NRSV) or "The Parable of the Unjust Steward" (NKJV).

Against the currents of traditional reading and interpretation, Jesus, through the landlord, commends the manager (verse 8). Why? The actions of the manager only make sense when seen against the exploitative, poverty-inducing and unjust economic system – the empire – under which both he and the servants work. It is a move from one form of economy that is based on extraction, exploitation, and coercion to another that is based on hard honest work, and on human communal relationships. It is a redistribution process – a redistribution of goods and resources the landlord got through greed and exploitation of the tenant farmers in the first place – and rebuilds and fosters social and communal relations. He subverts the empire!

Contemplate:

The kingdom of God inverts and subverts. Evangelism is also a call to confront the empire which enslaves and dehumanises.

Prayer:

Open our eyes to the joy of your healing of relationships, including economic relationships. May we always heed Jesus's repeat warnings that we cannot be disciples while accumulating wealth at the expense of the poor. Cause us to stand for justice by standing up to the powers of empire. Amen.

Rev Dr. Cliff Bird
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 14:1

TOPIC: Huge Responsibility

Reflection:

One of the most thrilling experiences happened when I saw the live image of my first child's heart pumping on the ultrasound machine monitor when my wife was three months pregnant. I was filled with amazement and my immediate prayer was, "Lord, let that little heart belong solely to you." This was not a casual prayer. It was an outcome of my struggle with God. My wife informed me that she was pregnant while I was away from home on a field trip for my seminary graduation. This news should have been especially exciting because it was our first child. I am sorry to say that I was not. The addition of another mouth to feed was perturbing, considering our financial situation. We were living on my scholarship, with no regular income.

In the midst of my uncertainty and worry, God spoke to me clearly saying, "You think that child is yours and the responsibility of looking after her yours alone? No, that the child is mine, and I'm going to put what belongs to me in the hands of both you and your wife as parents, to look after my child for my glory. I'm going to entrust you with this valuable possession of mine."

My perspective on children changed with that experience. I see God as their first owner/parent as today's reading reminds us. God is responsible for the existence of every child before we are. Rather, our responsibility as parents or guardians is enhanced. Parents are to protect, nurture and guide children for the sole purpose of glorifying God. God entrusts parents with this holy responsibility. What is in our hand is divine! For that reason, child trafficking defies God and parents at once.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for your trust in giving us oversight over children. Help me today to guard what has been committed to my trust. Let me see the value and greatness placed in my hands. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Ramengliana
Presbyterian Church of India

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 1:4

TOPIC: Holy Purpose

Reflection:

Looking at my daughter, a very childish yet poignant question struck me, "Where was my child before she was born, before I married her mother, and before my own parents met?" The prompt answer to that philosophical question was, "She was in the mind of God."

When a painter picks up his canvas and brush, the painting already exists in his mind. In the same way, we existed in the plan of God long before we were conceived. Scripture speaks of God choosing us before the foundation of the world (Eph.1:4). This has tremendous implications. God created us for a purpose and we exist for that purpose, which is valuable to the Creator.

We speak of self-esteem, self-confidence and self-assertion today. Christians do well to remember and cherish the fact that God has a special plan for each of us. Our self-esteem, confidence and assertion must come from the eternal design of God. Moreover, our most valuable task is (?) model to our children and challenge them to discover the reason for their existence from the perspective of God's plan for them. That plan gives us purpose for life now and the hereafter. Nobody has a better plan than the all-wise, all-knowing God.

In the past, people feared death and hell. Today, young people fear meaninglessness the most. They want to see themselves as significant, living purposeful lives. To live without purpose is to have no hope and no happiness. Our purpose for existence, and meaning in life is found in the eternal plan of God, which is holy, realistic, productive and exciting.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for keeping me in your eternal plan. Help me to always see clearly the value of this truth, and to remember not to stray from the abundant life you purposed for me. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Ramengliana
Presbyterian Church of India

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Psalms 127:3

TOPIC: Welcoming the Gift

Reflection:

When our second child was due, many well-wishers expressed how they wished for a boy for us. We live in a society where the preference for the boy-child is high, so high that girl-babies are often rejected. Our friends and relatives wanted a boy because our first child was a girl. My wife and I did not state any preference, for that would amount to not welcoming any child God gave us.

People find it difficult to understand the doctrine of predestination, which prioritizes God's will above the human will. Whatever our position on that, it is true that there are certain things in life that do not depend on our choice. We do not choose our place of birth, our race, our parents, our children, our siblings, etc. They are given, and they are given for our good in God's will. Thus, we must receive what comes from God with deep appreciation. We accept and consider them divine as they come from God apart from our decision. We must train ourselves to nourish those gifts with our utmost love and care.

Even animals are possessive and protective of their young ones. Naturalistic explanations for this instinctual love elude us. Without those instincts, offspring have little chance to survive. When we are oblivious of their children's value, we see them as a means to our own personal dreams. We may even control and abuse them for our pleasure. Children truly deserve to be handled with care. They are 'given', not 'chosen' by the family and society in which they are born. They are the special gifts, a heritage from God (Psalm 127:3).

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for the gift of children as a heavenly heritage. Help me to appreciate and take good care of what have been put in my care. Guide me to know what you want me to do every day as I look after my children. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Ramengliana
Presbyterian Church of India

1 November

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Psalms 11:3

TOPIC: Vulnerable Victims

Reflection:

On 8 November 2003, the state of Manipur in India came to a standstill when an eight year old, third grader, daughter of the then Minister of General Administration Department and Taxation, was abducted from school. It was unprecedented and shocking and communities unanimously condemned the act. Despite payment of a ten- thousand rupee ransom, the decomposed dead body was found three kilometres from her school a week later. The post-mortem revealed severe bodily injuries on her private parts.

This brutal murder at the hands of heartless murderers manifests how far societies can degenerate into lawlessness and unconscientiousness. Any wickedness in society that remains unchecked can expand and become destructive. The most vulnerable targets are young innocent children. Their future is compromised, their life threatened and their chance to give their best is diminished in a strife-torn society.

Every society is responsible to maintain a safe environment for its children and to nourish them to physical and spiritual health. Spiritual decline in society and its corollary of the rise of materialism lead to neglect of the rights and safety of children. In addition, in such a disoriented society injustice, felt by large section, becomes a way of life. Today's reading challenges us to action as the foundational values of our societies are destroyed.

Simplistic answers will not do for a situation like this. It calls for a rigorous faith. A faith that puts first things first with courage in the face of formidable challenges, and trust in the goodness and power of God are the only resources we require. We have to be involved in societal struggles without being inundated or colluding with evil and to dare to be different.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for being our guiding light in the dark. Help me to be a beacon of hope in the midst of despair; to ever hold my head high with integrity and faith. Help me to live out my resolve not to compromise your standards at all cost. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Ramengliana
Presbyterian Church of India



The Word Rooted in Land, Culture and life by Etan Pavavalung (woodprint).

Etan

My prayers and reflections on this week

2 November

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Proverbs 2:6

TOPIC: Success with no Hole

Reflection:

On November 9, 2016, the outgoing Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh was found hanging from the ceiling fan in the meditation room of his bungalow. He was the embodiment of success, a true 'rags to riches' story.

His mother died shortly after his first birthday and his father when he was six. Growing up without family, he faced extreme poverty and hopelessness. He had contemplated suicide several times. Yet, he rose to become a millionaire during his college days. Elected to the legislature at 35 and serving as Minister for eleven years, he was the youngest Chief Minister in the history of his state. He died at forty-six. He was under severe political pressure and without hope. He had once pronounced, "I don't believe in God because had He been there, I wouldn't have suffered."

This illustrates possible consequences of success for success' sake. We think of success in terms of achievements. Even though success cannot be success without achievements, there is more to it than accumulating wealth and power. The sad story of the young minister is an example of despondency despite enormous personal accomplishments.

The Bible has stories of highly successful people, even by material standards. God never considers material blessings as an end in itself. Success has to be within the bounds of a living relationship with God. Jesus teaches that whoever wants to be his disciple has to love him more than family and self. He meant that there is more in him than anything the visible blessings and relationships can offer. He offers us success with no hole. Today's reading offers us the alternative not to fall through the hole if we live by God's wisdom, knowledge and understanding.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for all the blessings you have showered upon me. Let me never lose sight of the truth that success for success' sake is empty, and help me to always remember that to fear you is the beginning of wisdom. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Ramengliana
Presbyterian Church of India

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Jonah 2:2

TOPIC: Nadiri¹ Helplessness

Reflection:

On 15 July 2004, in a protest that shocked the world, twelve Meitei middle-aged women, stripped in public, protesting the alleged rape and murder of a woman, and the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which allowed the Army to do it. On 21 April 2017 hundreds of Karbi young men also carried out a nude protest through Diphu in Assam demanding an updated voters list to check immigrants.

Naked protests are a cry against rampant injustice from the standpoint of helplessness to the point of stripping all personal dignity. It is a form of asking 'What more can we ask or do?' When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, they were stripped to nakedness and felt indignity. They hid from their only friend, God. God's first restorative mission was to dignify them. He replaced their fig-leaf clothing with animal skins. God's mission gives dignity to the weak, powerless and despised victims of injustice.

We are invited to this mission as God's co-workers. Injustice, oppression and power games strip off the dignity of people. We have no choice but to strip ourselves of our dignity in the task to put the clothing back onto people whose helplessness is at the nadir.

The human tendency is to clothe those who are already clothed, to strengthen those who are already strong and to please those who are powerful. Our Lord always sided with the losers and set us an example to side with the losers in society - people whose nakedness and humiliation need to be covered and their dignity restored.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for creating all men and women with dignity. But their dignity is often violated by forces of injustices in society. Give me courage to stand for what is right, and join You to restore the dignity of those stripped of it. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Ramengliana
Presbyterian Church of India

¹ Nadir is the lowest or most unsuccessful point in a situation.

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: I Corinthians 12:6

TOPIC: The Power of Sitting

Reflection:

A Bishop who spoke at my seminary and told us about an experience I will never forget. During his days at the same seminary, a rabid dog bit his classmate. The friend lay in hospital with high fever and hallucinations. The bishop and his classmates, understanding that there was no chance of survival, went to the hospital to sit beside their friend as he battled for his life. They were acclaimed for their Christian love and sacrifice at his funeral service. "We didn't do anything; we just sat there with our suffering friend," the bishop said. Sometimes sitting with someone is everything.

We should never think sitting with people is passive inactivity. Presence, when it is needed is a sign of moral courage and spiritual health. It may be the beginning of an incredible missional journey! Jesus Christ himself was sometimes physically inactive at the most climatic times of his ministry. Hanging on the cross became the turning point of history.

Most of us will not rise above ordinariness and become spiritual giants who do great things for our Lord. We may want to have great impact, influence people and change the direction of society as you oppose oppressing powers. Sometimes what is needed may be sitting beside those who suffer, identifying with them as one of them. Large life-events and acquiring wisdom does not necessarily require great learning or a high IQ. It requires love and sacrifice. These are eternal values and they speak to the soul and influence people. No one can live without these values. Sitting in the right place is what it requires to attain and manifest these values.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for making me who I am. Help me to understand that there is always a way to serve you no matter what my capacity is. Help me to cultivate a willing and open outlook, to wait and to do for your glory. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Ramengliana
Presbyterian Church of India

Inclusive Communities - Multi-Culturalism

SCRIPTURE: Luke 13:6-9

TOPIC: Another Year of Grace

A conflict exists between an orchard owner and a gardener, as a fig tree is not bearing fruit. The owner would like to cut the tree down since it is not productive while the gardener would like to spend another year trying to cultivate the tree with nutrients and care. In the parable, we do not know the outcome of this growing project but the story is a call to self-examination, change and transformation.

In 1994 the Presbyterian Church in Canada made a confession about its role in the tragic legacy of the Indian Residential Schools. Indigenous children were forcibly taken from their families for the sole purpose of assimilation and destroying First Nation, Inuit and Métis culture. Our church acknowledges its role in the colonization of indigenous people and commits to examining the theological and ethical implications of the Doctrine of Discovery and other doctrines that assert the superiority of one group of people over another.

The restoration of trust and rebuilding of relationships with indigenous people will take time and commitment. Many Canadians are still learning about the injustice to indigenous people. The onus is on Canadians to understand that this part of our history is not an indigenous problem, but a Canadian problem.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada is committed to working for justice in those areas of Canadian society where the gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous people exist in our country. The justice work includes access to health care, education, clean water, housing, land, reasonably priced food, and safety for girls and women.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples provides a clear and positive framework for reconciliation and the Presbyterian Church in Canada is committed to using it on our journey of healing and reconciliation with Indigenous people in Canada.

Prayer:

O God of unconditional love, who shows no partiality in respect to people or nations, grant us the wisdom to overcome racism, prejudice and discrimination through actions that promote hospitality, justice and peace. Amen.

Rev. Dianne Ollerenshaw
Presbyterian Church in Canada

Inclusive Communities - Multi-Culturalism

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 137

TOPIC: Sing When It Hurts

Thanks to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada, citizens have been growing in awareness and joining in a national journey for healing and reconciliation. Seven national gatherings were hosted, each based on the teachings of the Seven Grandfathers¹: respect, courage, love, truth, humility, honesty and wisdom.

Justice Murray Sinclair, a TRC Commissioner, speaking at the national TRC event in Vancouver, said to school children: "We know that among you are the future leaders of this country. Among you are those who are going to govern this land. Among you are those who are going to make important decisions about reconciliation. And you are going to have to come to terms with this history that you're going to hear a little bit about. We know that's a difficult process. But it all starts with three things. You must watch. You must listen. And you must show respect."

Through the truth-telling by survivors and their families, Canadians have heard how Canada's Aboriginal policy was designed to eliminate Aboriginal governments, ignore Aboriginal rights and terminate Treaties. Through assimilation, the Aboriginal peoples would cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada. Many have wrestled with this dark past and have come to realize the effect of colonization and the serious consequences for First Nations, Inuit and Métis people and for all of Canada. Lack of understanding has been an obstacle to nurturing good relations between Aboriginals and other Canadians, which has led to continued discrimination and marginalization of indigenous communities.

We long to sing a new song of reconciliation. May we have a teachable spirit, open to a conversion of thoughts and perspectives.

Prayer:

O Holy God, help us remember and change so that we move forward together on the road of peace and reconciliation. Amen.

Rev. Dianne Ollerenshaw
Presbyterian Church in Canada

¹ The Anishinaabe people's set of teachings on human conduct towards others (Benton-Banai, Edward. The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway. Hayward, WI: Indian Country Communications, 1988).

Inclusive Communities - Multi-Culturalism

SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 37:1-14

TOPIC: Living Hope

In 7th century BCE, Ezekiel lived in Babylonia among the first wave exiles. In mid 1700s, the Blackfoot Confederacy experienced first contact with Europeans. Soon the buffalo and the natural grassland would be replaced by cattle and wheat, respectively. The settlers diverted water and the wetlands were drained and cultivated. Chief Crowfoot foresaw the coming changes. To protect his community's wellbeing he began negotiating Treaty 7².

The image of the Ezekiel walking through a valley of bleached bones symbolizes the wide gap between our vision for reconciliation and current reality. Today Canadians seek to address 94 Calls to Action. In order to champion human rights, truth and tolerance we need to confront our past intergenerationally.

'Mortal, can these bones live?' Yes, by the grace of the Creator. That is how the valley of dry bones becomes the valley of living hope.

A Blackfoot elder stood up to share a song of hope at the end of a difficult day of hearings. He first provided wise counsel, "When there is a storm like a blizzard and the snow drifts are deep, remember the buffalo turns and runs into the storm rather than running in the direction that the storm is tracking. The buffalo knows that if it runs into the storm, the storm will not last as long."

The elder instructed us to run into the storm when we experience challenges and to place our trust in the Creator. He then picked up his drum and sang in Blackfoot. Midway through the song, the beat of his drum doubled in tempo. You could imagine that you were the buffalo running into the storm.

Prayer:

O Holy God, may healing and justice flow in our land. Grant us courage and resilience to walk a path of peace with hope. Amen.

Rev. Dianne Ollerenshaw
Presbyterian Church in Canada

² One of 11 Treaties between First Nations and the Crown (1871 and 1921), which delimited land for tribes (reserves) in exchange for annual payments and/or hunting and trapping rights on "tracts surrendered". Thus, tribes ceded rights to territory they owned (see: <http://www.albertasource.ca/treaty7/index.html>, accessed 1/11/2017).

Inclusive Communities - Multi-Culturalism

SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 5:18-18

TOPIC: A Teachable Spirit

The day before the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was released, KAIROS (Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives) hosted the Blanket Exercise on Parliament Hill. This location was chosen because it is the home to Canada's federal government where laws are created that affect the lives of every Canadian. It is also the traditional lands of the Algonquin Anishinabe First Nation.

The Blanket Exercise is a teaching tool created by KAIROS. The aim is to raise awareness and promote understanding among indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians. Churches, schools, and government agencies use it to teach the history of Indian residential schools and to highlight aboriginal experiences and contributions to the country.

Under a warm June sun forty blankets were laid out on the lawn. They represented Turtle Island (North America) thousands of years ago. The narrator explained that the participants would now represent the indigenous peoples of this land for some 10,000 years. Using numbered scrolls and readers, the group travelled through time and learned how the arrival of Europeans, the signing of treaties, the appropriation of land through colonization and forced assimilation affected them. Some participants left the blankets, indicating that they had died from small pox, measles or starvation. Others were removed as part of the residential school system. With each encroachment, the blankets were folded back to indicate the shrinking indigenous lands. In the end, only a fraction of the original population remained, scattered on the remaining blankets.

At the end of the exercise, a listening circle to debrief normally follows. On this occasion, a woman danced for us. She was wearing a turquoise dress adorned with jingles, triangular metal bell shapes attached with ribbon. The woman moved her feet in small controlled steps, in a zigzag pattern reflecting the journey of life, and to lend cheer to the dance. I learned that the gift of the jingle dance is healing.

Prayer:

O God, give us humility of heart and teachable spirit. Amen.

Rev. Dianne Ollerenshaw
Presbyterian Church in Canada

Inclusive Communities - Multi-Culturalism

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 141:2

TOPIC: Spiritual Practices

Ten years ago, my friend courageously shared her story of attending a residential school run by the Presbyterian Church in Canada before a group of Presbyterians. She had not entered a church since her youth. After she facilitated a listening circle in the church hall, we invited her to worship. She hesitated. It was her choice to leave or remain. The guest preacher sensed my friend's unease. He asked her if she would could start a smudge³. She agreed. Medicinal plants were bound together to create a cleansing smoke. We could all sense the energy shift. There was an openness and receptivity to gather in prayer, that is reminiscent of today's Psalm.

During worship, the minister invited my friend to use his ceremonial drum during the singing of hymns. She felt honoured by this gesture. As the community rose to sing, she held the drum firmly in her hand and beat it steadily. The tension in her shoulders slipped away and a beautiful smile appeared on her lips. Our worship was blessed in many ways. Tears of joy and sadness testified to the goodness of God's grace.

The 1994 Confession of the Presbyterian Church in Canada acknowledges the harm done to Aboriginal children in its care during colonial days. By God's guidance it made a commitment to "walk with Aboriginal peoples to find healing and wholeness together as God's people." And also acknowledged that "the roots of the harm we have done are found in the attitudes and values of western European colonialism." The Church continues to seek forgiveness for complicity in policies that banned spiritual practices through which Aboriginal peoples experienced the presence of the creator God."

Prayer:

O Wondrous Creator, you are the God of all truth and the way of all reconciliation. Open our hearts to love you and receive your guidance for wisdom for the journey. Amen.

Rev. Dianne Ollerenshaw
Presbyterian Church in Canada

³ Smudging is a traditional ceremony for purifying or cleansing the soul of negative thoughts of a person or place.

Inclusive Communities - Multi-Culturalism

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 61:1-4

TOPIC: Good News of Deliverance

On the first day of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in Ottawa I rose early. I headed to Victoria Island near Parliament Hill to participate in the Sunrise Ceremony at the Sacred Fire. Elders greeted and welcomed us all to the unceded Algonquin territory. I was welcomed with these words: "Welcome, all my relations." The elder explained that we are all kin, indigenous, settler and newcomer because we all share the air, water, sunlight and earth. "All my relations" recognizes all as one body moving through time and space together. It stresses the values cooperation and interconnectedness. The elder said, "We are all Anishinabe⁴, all at different stages of healing."

Before the first national TRC gathering, the tears of all who attended would be honoured and collected. To ensure this, health workers and healers provided an abundant supply of Kleenex to collect the tears and paper bags for their storage. At the end of each day the Fire-Keepers collected the paper bags and placed the tears on the sacred fire.

At the conclusion of each gathering, Fire-Keepers collected the ashes, to use to start the next sacred fire. At the last sacred fire on the shore of the Ottawa River, I witnessed the Fire-Keepers ceremonially placing the ashes gathered from coast to coast on burning logs. It was a cold rainy morning. The elder reminded us that it was the gift of the tears of our ancestors. This holy moment filled me with warmth and hope. I reflected on how all things are possible with God, even the healing and "the oil of joy instead of mourning".

Prayer:

Loving God, keep the embers of courage and hope burning brightly that we may faithfully follow you.

Rev. Dianne Ollerenshaw
Presbyterian Church in Canada

⁴ A group of culturally related indigenous peoples in Canada and the United States.

Inclusive Communities - Multi-Culturalism

SCRIPTURE: Colossians 4:2

TOPIC: Continue in Prayer

Chief Robert Joseph is a hereditary Chief of the Gwawaenuk First Nation of the northeast coast of Vancouver Island. He is an ambassador for Reconciliation Canada, and an honorary witness to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). As a child he was taken away from his family and forced to enter St. Michael's Residential School where he experienced hardship and abuse. As a leader in his community and country today, Chief Joseph speaks about the important role of reconciliation in transcending trauma. He has inspired many to join him in grappling with the differences brought about by intolerance, lack of understanding, and racism.

Months before the TRC in Vancouver, Chief Joseph had a dream that after people heard the testimonies of residential school survivors they would come together and walk for reconciliation. There was no organizational structure or funding in place to support this walk. Chief Joseph cast his vision and encouraged family, colleagues and the community to host a walk to say reconciliation matters.

On the day for the Reconciliation Walk, it was pouring rain, wind and cold. Yet to everyone's surprise and delight some 70,000 people gathered. Chief Joseph smiled with tears of joy. He told us we were a wonderful sight.

A special guest, Bernice King, the daughter of Martin Luther King, Jr., told us that we all had a responsibility to move our world towards being a beloved community. Her words were especially moving because it was the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington and her father's "I Have a Dream" speech. She warmly counselled us not to grow weary, to lean on one another and to pray often.

Wherever we walk on the road of reconciliation, we remain close to the Creator and to one another. And we walk and pray without ceasing.

Prayer:

God of our ancestors, help us to prayerfully engage in the daily task of peacemaking so that we may understand what it is to love. Amen.

Rev. Dianne Ollerenshaw
Presbyterian Church in Canada

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 1:26

TOPIC: An Insult Against God's Image

What can you purchase today with US\$90.00? Well, for that amount, you could ride the subway for a month. Or, you may choose a healthier lifestyle and do more walking instead. And so, for the same amount, you could treat yourself to a pair of Nike sports shoes. This would certainly reduce your visits to the doctor's office, which could easily cost you the same amount per visit! But you probably knew all that already. What you probably don't know is that today, people are being sold into slavery for the very same amount – US\$90.00!

Human trafficking, also referred to as “modern-day slavery,” may be manifest in a variety of ways. The United Nations defines it as *“the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation”*. Exploitation for sexual purposes, forced labour or domestic servitude, or for the removal of organs, are among the many horrendous ways human trafficking is manifested, extracting the dignity of free choice, and devaluing life itself.

The highlight of the creation story, as told in Genesis 1: 26, relates that God created man and woman, in God's own image. Further, God gave them life, and they were the objects of God's great love; set above all the other created forms, to “rule over” them. Within this context, human trafficking can only be seen as a demeaning insult against God's creation: human beings whom He created in His own image. It is a sin against the victimized and a sin against God. Its evil, which demeans creation, diminishes the significance of life, and is a force that seeks to oppose and destroy the image of God, and those who bear God's image. Any attack that seeks to demean man, woman and child in these ways, is in fact, an attack on God!

Christians as children of God, therefore have only one option: to pray, to speak out and act; to eradicate human trafficking and to live in ways that help create change in the lives of those impacted by this devastating crime. We must proclaim the sacredness of human life and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society.

Prayer:

Dear Father, let us see human trafficking for the evil that it is, a gross sin against You and against humankind whom you created in your own image. Teach us how to pray, speak out and act against it! Amen.

Mrs. Elaine Commissiong
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

13 November

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: 2 Peter 2:19

TOPIC: Lured into Bondage

Keza (not her real name), was the only member of her family to survive the 100-day Rwandan genocide in 1994, in which an estimated 800,000 nationals were murdered! Understandably, she was overjoyed when she received an offer to work for an affluent American household. This was the opportunity of a lifetime! But when she arrived, she was confined and forced to work day and night. When she did get a chance to sleep, her bed was the kitchen floor. This sad but true story relates a common method used by human traffickers to trap particularly young aspiring persons anxious to get into the job market. They lure them with the promise of employment and make the path to this promise attractive, accessible and easy ... too easy. "They promise them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved." (2 Peter 2:19).

Mainly young women, but some young men too, are deceived into believing people who befriend them will honour the promises to help them achieve a better life. When they eventually come to realise that they have succumbed to false promises, it is too late. What little they have is taken and they are sexually exploited or forced into labour for which they receive little or no return. Or they are kept captive or restrained, through the use of violence and threats against them; rendering them powerless and vulnerable – they are in bondage.

All humankind is subject to the bondage of sin; sin that started in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve succumbed to persuasions to disobey God. However, through God's Grace, manifested through the gift of His Son Jesus Christ in atonement, we are freed from that bondage. Those of us who have accepted this Gift of Grace are free from bondage. We are free to pray for those subject to the bondage of Human Trafficking, for insight into the deceit of the enemy, camouflaged as promises of success and economic gain. Proverbs 31: 8-9, teaches us to *"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."* These principles certainly all apply to those hurt through the illegal practice of human trafficking, with the confidence that as James 5:16 reads: *"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective"*.

We must act in other ways: speaking out to those in our schools, businesses, churches, and community who still remain unaware of the problem of human trafficking and show them how they can help.

Prayer:

Lord help us to be good advocates for the disadvantaged; the poor, the voiceless and the disenfranchised and those lured into the bondage of human trafficking. Help us to empower change in their lives, through prayer and focused action in your name.

Mrs. Elaine Commissiong
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: 2 Samuel 13:12

TOPIC: Rescued from Sexual Exploitation

“Eighteen months in Hell” was the headline in the Jamaica Gleaner newspaper. A young college student who had fallen on hard times described how she was lured into prostitution. The story, not only told of ‘how the trap was set’ and her descent into forced prostitution for 18 months, but also of the experience of being rescued.

The road to sexual exploitation and human trafficking often begins with the apparent extended hand of friendship or even one that protests to be of love.

“I was trying to get USD 3,000 to go back to school, the young lady reports, and he (the trafficker) said ‘I will help you. I have a basement apartment that I won’t charge you for.’” She took up the offer, and was lured into a trap that had her first agreeing to dance at a club, but which concession soon escalated into an existence as a forced prostitute. Deputy Superintendent of the Jamaican Anti-Trafficking in Persons Unit, said that while for security reasons, he could not publish the details of the rescue, she was now free to tell the tale, and warn others against falling into the trap she had experienced.

Sometimes, the person who exploits is a relative or someone who poses as a friend. 2 Samuel 13, chronicles the story of the violation of Tamar, by her half-brother Amnon, who was greatly attracted to and protested love for his beautiful, virginal, sister. With the collaboration of his friend Jonadab he trapped her. Tamar vainly protested the incestuous relationship, crying out, “No, my brother! . . . Don’t do this wicked thing!” (2 Samuel 13:14). But Amnon forced himself upon Tamar and raped her. There was no rescue for Tamar, although her brother Absalom did later seek revenge and murdered Amnon.

The rape of Tamar, like the story of the Jamaican, highlights the use of male power and violent force used against women who resist and fight back, and who say ‘no’. In both cases, sex was forced. This not only goes up against God’s intention for human sexual relationships but, in Tamar’s story, the act of sexual violence, created a cycle of revenge of even more violence and destruction.

Prayer:

Lord teach us how to respond with forgiveness even when the hurt is great.
Amen.

Mrs. Elaine Commissiong
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 37:18-36

TOPIC: Sold into Slavery

The United Nations estimates that 2.5 million people are trafficked annually. It deprives people of their rights and freedoms and it is a global health risk, that often leads to, or is a part of organized crime. An insidious aspect of human trafficking is that of trafficking for forced labour. This may range from domestic servitude and other 'small-scale labour operations to large-scale operations,' such as working in large farms, or for major international entities. It can be a billion-dollar business!

As the reading in Genesis 37, tells us, Joseph was trafficked as a result of the uncontrolled jealousy of his brothers. Being first thrown into a cistern, they finally got rid of him, by selling him to travelling merchants – Midianites, who eventually also sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's captain of the guard. With the passing years, through God's mercy, Joseph's fortunes and ascendancy eventually found him in a trusted and lauded position in Pharaoh's kingdom, through which he become the source of relief from certain starvation to the same brothers who had trafficked him!

Today, traffickers sell people into the bondage of slavery mainly for financial gain. In many instances, persons belonging to lower socio-economic groups are targeted. In this way, the victims are more easily lured by promises of gainful employment that are never fulfilled, as even though they earn, they never receive in full the rewards of their labour. It is a thankless, punishing, degrading and depressing existence!

Those who believe, know that God values and loves each one of us equally. We who seek to follow Him, should therefore be equally driven by the desire to love our fellowmen, and to respect their personal dignity, irrespective of their ethnicity or socio-economic status. In fact, any action that seeks to disrespect or to deny others of their rights as human beings, is an action against God Himself. Within that context, we sin when we seek to exploit people and treat them as property. Importantly, it flies in the face of Christ's command that we love our neighbour as ourselves (Mark 12:31).

Prayer:

Caring God, help us to seek to dismantle structures that are exploitative in nature, including situations of poverty and oppression in our nation that foster the opportunity for human trafficking. Help us to act to ease in positive ways, the burdens of the unemployed in our society, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Mrs. Elaine Commissioning
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 139:14

TOPIC: Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

We were not put together in a haphazard way. Each organ, each tissue; each cell was carefully and thoughtfully devised, planned and constructed. We are God's masterpiece! Each one of us is unique in form and structure! Of the unimaginable number of persons God has created, no two are exactly the same. Yet the truth is, we devalue our bodies. Some of us tend to look at ourselves and see only those things that are "wrong" and require improvement. Psalm 139 however reminds us of the wondrous reality and context of our creation. *"We are fearfully and wonderfully made!"*

God wants us to treasure and treat our bodies – every cell – with respect. Leviticus 19.28 urges us: *'Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD (NIV).* That is, we should not "cut or injure our body or subject it to a practice that might even result in, or cause infection or disease." Paul asks the people of Corinth *"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?"* (1 Corinthians 6.19 -20).

The trafficking of organs, usually involves the forcible removal of kidneys and other organs from captive victims. Targets are usually the poor and disadvantaged. The practice would not thrive, if there were not people willing to purchase these parts, secured in this questionable manner. The extraction process is often unsanitary and devoid of post-surgical care, so much so that the victims sometimes die.

This contrasts with the situation in which persons, who out of love for a fellow human being in need, would choose to donate an organ, such as a kidney, to save the life of another, through organ transplantation, or who would 'will' his or her body parts for transplantation, so that another person may live.

God wants us to treasure our bodies, which are fearfully and wonderfully made, and treat them with reverence as the temple of the Holy Spirit!

Prayer:

Lord God, help us to remember and value our bodies as your creation; made in your image, and as the temple of the Holy Spirit — "fearfully, and wonderfully made!" Amen.

Mrs. Elaine Commissiong
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 19: 13,14

TOPIC: The Kingdom Belongs to Such as These

A frequent sight in many city streets around the world is of children begging. This sight becomes even more disturbing to some, when it takes place during the time of day when the normal expectation is that these children should be in school. Some of these children are not on the streets voluntarily. They represent a form of forced labour that is another aspect of human trafficking.

“Child begging” is virtually a hidden crime of human trafficking. Often, while the child runs up to a vehicle in traffic, the public face is one of the beseeching child, but frequently in the background there is an adult who stands monitoring every request. Punishment for non- or poor performance may include severe beating to the point of maiming the child, who sometimes may be as young as six years old.

In India, the police state that “at least 300,000 children across India are drugged, beaten and forced to beg every day, in what has become a multi-million-rupee industry controlled by human trafficking cartels” (Thomas Reuters Foundation).

Jesus has a special compassion for children. In Matthew 19: 13-14, children were brought to Jesus, and the disciples were reluctant to let them access Jesus but He said; *“Let the children come to Me, and do not hinder them, For the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”* Jesus used children as an example for adults to emulate in the expression of faith. He told His disciples, “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” (Mark 10: 15). Jesus wants each of us to possess a childlike faith – a pure, unassuming, and humble faith, which allows us to receive God’s gift of salvation with confidence.

The children that are trafficked must rely on their handlers for the provision of their needs, which they accept under duress; but Jesus used the child to show us the kind of dependency He would like us to show to Him as our Father, the One on whom we can depend to fulfil all our needs lovingly, caringly and consistently.

Prayer:

Our Father, we give you thanks for our daily food. We give you thanks for your care, compassion and love, which endure forever. Our life is not our own. On you we totally depend. We give ourselves to you! Amen.

Mrs. Elaine Commissioning
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Human Trafficking

SCRIPTURE: Ecclesiastes 5:10

TOPIC: Greed

2017 estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO) are that human trafficking, or modern-day slavery, as a global industry nets profits of roughly \$150 billion a year for traffickers, (according to the ILO report from 2014). Profits by sector, have been identified as follows:

- \$99 billion from commercial sexual exploitation
- \$34 billion in construction, manufacturing, mining and utilities
- \$9 billion in agriculture, including forestry and fishing
- \$8 billion dollars is saved annually by private households that employ domestic workers under conditions of forced labour.

It involves some 24.9 million people worldwide; representing twice the number of slaves transported during the entire Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Human trafficking is big business! These statistics probably indicate the reason behind the persistent insidious growth of this global scourge, seemingly fuelled as it is by greed and the love of money. We live in a secular world; one which equates affluence with success and happiness and the struggle is to acquire as much wealth as possible. As Christians we are urged to view money differently from the way the secular world views it; not to despise money or to discontinue earning it, for money is a necessity for basic living, but to heed the Biblical warning that the love of money creates evil. (1 Timothy 6:10). It is important not to allow money to become the centre of one's life.

Jesus talked much about money. Sixteen of the thirty-eight parables were about how to handle money and possessions. Jesus knew that money would present a challenge for us as Christians. Wealth is often an enemy of faith. *"Woe to you who are rich"* (Luke 6: 24). Jesus warned us about the dangers of greed (Luke 12:15) and about the danger of storing up wealth for one's self. (Luke 12:16-21). Believing in God offers the righteous a lifetime of wealth (Romans 11:33). Knowing God and understanding God's love are the true eternal riches. *"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you'"* (Hebrews 13:5). By removing the focus on money, we are able to give God supremacy in our lives. God is the one on whom we must depend. God is our Provider!

Prayer:

Faithful God, help us to put our faith where it ought to be; in You, our God, who stands by and blesses Your children according to our needs. It is this promise, not money, which truly satisfies. Amen.

Mrs. Elaine Commissiong
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

Worship and Discipleship (Worship)

SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 36:26; Psalm 29:1-2

TOPIC:

What are your views on evolution and/or organ donation for sustaining life? One might argue that those are two separate concepts, although support of evolutionary theory may influence willingness to participate in organ donation. Here's an article which links death with genocide and offers hope through organ transplant. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2017/11/17/worlds-first-human-head-transplant-successfully-carried/>

Wow! What was your initial response to this report? Had you ever conceived of this being a possibility in 'your' time? Now read Ezekiel 36:26. How do you hear God's voice speaking to you in the express of Ezekiel's proclamation? It would not be remiss to experience mixed feelings about God and the creative order after reading this article. For, on the one hand, we have been invited to partake of God's creative process through procreation and preservation. But 'genocide' is a little strong isn't it. And is Nature a euphemism for God or the postmodern/post-Christian understanding of the evolutionary order? For Nature has been accused of inflicting genocidal activity against ALL humanity by providing no solution to death.

How does a Christian factor Creationist theories in this equation? In embracing this transplant as the natural flow of medical science, what is your understanding God as Creator? And what does this translate to in Psalm 29:1-2? How does this impact our understanding of Life after Death? There is yet another aspect of the transplant conversation to be considered. Whose organs will be 'harvested' for the transplants? And if the transplant is successful, will the character of the donor be passed on? Those have serious implications for humanity and our own understanding of ourselves.

Will there be selection of the donor or recipient based on the individual's past or potential for the future? Would such a transplant suggest that we are seeking to be our own gods? How would this impact illegal harvesting, life support and death penalties? Let's take this home a bit more directly - how does one respond if it is a loved one's life which hangs by a thread?

How would you counsel a family faced with such a decision? As we thank God for scientific and technological advances which preserve and sustain life, let us also seek wisdom for addressing these other ethical decisions which accompany us being human.

Prayer:

Holy God, teach us how to honour You as we preserve life through scientific and technological advances. Amen.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Worship and Discipleship (Worship)

SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 5:21

TOPIC: A Tale of Two Kings

The world's longest reigning monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand died in 2016. After a year of public mourning, a 5-day \$90M cremation ceremony was staged. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/25/world/asia/thailand-king-cremation.html>

The entire country allegedly mourned the beloved monarch's passing. But protests were staged and raised regarding the wanton opulence (waste) of much-needed resources which could have otherwise been appropriated. It is somewhat hard to be aware of the depth of the response to the Thai king's death, and not think of another response to another great king's death so many years ago.

If one should compare Jesus' king-ship with that of other reigning monarchs, one would perhaps argue that Jesus was the ultimate 'anti-king'. Son of a single woman; born in a manger rather than a palace; claimed by his carpenter stepfather; the first major witnesses to his birth were shepherds protecting their sheep from praedial larceny, rather than other royals vying to see and be seen; the blurb of his birth only making the headlines after the Magi from the East got lost while trying to follow a star to his potential birthplace – these are not what one would expect from a monarch, even if he was born in exile.

Christ invited others to become part of his kingdom and threatened the status quo with his profundity, his apolitical and spiritual acuity, his servant leadership style and willingness to be found with winebibbers and prostitutes. He healed the sick, ate and drank with lepers and tax-collectors and, on the day of his coronation, finally seemed to have earned the devotion of the masses. Less than a week later, the revered monarch was deposed in exchange for Rome's Most Wanted – Barabbas. While undergoing a very horrifying non-trial resulting in a public execution, the bloody, beaten, battered Redeemer echoed the words which bought our devotion; "Father forgive them ...". And in that moment, the status quo was forcefully overturned. For; "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Questions:

1. Of the two, which king is worthy of our praise?
2. How might we emulate the one whom we seek to worship?

Prayer:

'O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him!
O come let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!'

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Worship and Discipleship (Worship)

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 20:1-5

TOPIC: Invisible Omniscient Puppeteer

Have you ever stopped to think about the history of money/currency? And do you believe that there is a correlation between currency and worship? It is purported that 'money' has been in circulation as a means of payment for goods and services from as far back as 6,000 years prior to the birth of Christ. From cowrie shells to gold, to paper, then plastic and now electronics, we find that there is a New World Order being subtly crafted between the technological giants resulting in our transformation to acolytes in a cult of materialism and self-indulgence.

The following documentary invites a fresh look at how and even why we spend. As you peruse the documentary, it is recommended that you:

1. Watch once for a sense of the issues being raised
2. Grab a notebook and pencil/mobile to record as you consider what is being proposed.
3. Pay special attention to the ways in which humanity is manipulated into volition-free purchasing; and as you do, try to discern ways in which the strategies adopted have become part of your reality whether you prefer cashless transactions or not.

The strategies are scientific, practical, though presented as effortless affording the unseen puppeteer to direct one's moves according to timing, trends and trajectory. As we pause to reflect on the concepts presented at various points throughout the 11 minutes of the presentation, it is worthwhile to also explore how/why we worship in light of Exodus 20:1-5.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zAu3_ne2GI

Some points to consider are found at:

- 3:48 - 4:00 how we think
- 5:12 – 5:50 how/what we worship indirectly and the app economy
- 5:57 – 6:07 omniscient app
- 7:32 - 8:26 humanity the new data

Worship and Discipleship (Worship)

How have those revelations impacted your understanding of worship, and what will you change about how you spend?

God prefers that humanity exercises free will, and yet there are aspects of our life which seem to be predestined by an Omniscient Creator. How comfortable are you with recognising that the techno giants, in particular Google, seek to lead us by the nose while practising an insidious means of directing our every thought about spending and saving?

Can you honestly discern which god has the market share on your worship? What will you do differently now?

Prayer in song:

I'm Yours Lord

Everything I am, everything I'm not, everything I have, everything I've got

I'm Yours Lord... see if I can be completely Yours.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

22 November

Worship and Discipleship (Worship)

SCRIPTURE: 2 Samuel 7:1-5; Psalm 24:3-6

TOPIC: My Tribute

Are there Superstars in your country? How are they treated by the leadership of your country? There are many sports stars in the Caribbean. When they rise to prominence, they are feted and honoured in public arena. It's not uncommon for stars to receive the "Keys to the City", or be honoured via rebranding/renaming of streets and public spaces. In Trinidad, stadiums are the public honorifics, and recently, Jamaicans have ascribed honorary doctorates. But there is a protocol which determines these outcomes. Here's the background to Rihanna's own drive in Barbados: <https://caribbeannewsservice.com/now/barbados-westbury-residents-on-board-with-rihanna-drive/>

What are your views on the Barbadian community's drive to honour their star?
How do you honour your heroes in your context?

In 2 Samuel 7:1-5, King David seeks to honour the all-time love of his life. With the settled monarchy, David sought to build a house unto God, perhaps one which matched the sartorial splendour of the palace.

Does our giving in worship (i.e. time, talent, treasure) match our giving at the altar of success? What are the protocols we put in place for receiving gifts in our worship spaces? God's response to David in verses 6,12,13 suggests that God is not impressed with ostentatious buildings and ecstatic praise without substance. Rather, Psalm 24:3-6 indicates that it is the purity and genuineness of body, mind and soul which God loves.

Were you to offer to give of your best tribute to God today, how would it be received under the Davidic covenant? Could it be that God desires an inward act of worship which is demonstrated in our every word and deed? What does that look like today? Through Christ, we have the opportunity to boldly approach God's throne, without fear of rejection. Have we paused to thank God for such amazing grace?

Today, let us endeavour to worship God in the little ways, such that others will be drawn not to our giftedness and brilliance, but instead, to the majesty and wonder of our giving and forgiving God.

Prayer in song:

Change my heart O God,
Make it ever true, change my heart O God,
then I'll be like You.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Worship and Discipleship (Worship)

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 10:34-35

TOPIC: War Just War!

The struggle for world domination is real; it is not new, and may continue ad nauseum until eternity. While some consider it idolatrous, arguments in favour of imperialism have persisted through the ages; with some leaders assuming demi-god status, and others justifying their acts of militarism through the theological premise of a jihad/crusade.

The rhetoric undergirding the “For God and Country” slogan of American WWII chaplains is somewhat reminiscent of the hermeneutics which spurred the Israelites on into the Promised Land after four decades of wilderness wandering. With the Ark of the Covenant and the priests before them, victory was sure for the children of Israel as they cleared the land for habitation. For many Christians the premise of going to battle to pre-empt war or to claim territory in the name of the Lord is natural, ethical and acceptable.

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=trumps+korea+speech+november+2017&view=detail&mid=B6F9FB4696E343C294C9B6F9FB4696E343C294C9&FORM=VIRE>

How does a Christian respond to the issues raised by the USA to N. Korea in light of the potential for severe collateral damage? Are there points of engagement for persons who have clashing/contrasting points of view about America's role in international peacekeeping? In his message to Korea, President Trump justifies his stance from a Christian perspective, citing human rights violations in his arguments. How might one seek to propose a Christian solution to the escalating tensions between USA and N. Korea? Some might argue that the USA is one of the empires which Daniel references in his apocalyptic vision. What then of N.

Korea, China, Russia, Israel and any other country/alliance which seeks to establish hegemony over world affairs through imperialistic tendencies and purported peacekeeping?

Moreover, how does the Christian discern God's will in the face of wars and rumours of war? Discerning one's stance is not cut and dried: Matthew 5:7-9 advocates for mercy and peace, assuring great rewards for those who obey. Yet Matthew 10:34-35 contradicts this. Which is God's way? And what does God expect of us?

Does support of either argument (pacifism or just-war) lend itself to idolatry? How is God venerated? Are there mitigating circumstances which justifies the alternative perspective? As congregational leader how would you counsel someone considering pacifism/a military career?

Prayer:

Grant wisdom dear Lord, to counter the rhetoric of those who seek the thrill of the conquest rather than obedience to your will. Help us to worship You through and despite, for You are our God. Amen.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Worship and Discipleship (Worship)

SCRIPTURE: John 4:23

TOPIC: Wooden devotion

What does religious devotion look like for you? Do you shout it from the mountain tops, infuriating your captive audience? Or are you a contemplative worshipper, taking time to meditate at specified times during the day? Are you a laissez faire worshipper who simply gets the worship on when you can, more often than not at church – if you attend?

How do you express your love for Christ? Through philanthropy, tithes, talents, time? Is your modus operandi for worship any different in the private sphere than it is in the public worship space or the marketplace? How would the person on the street identify you as a worshipper? One Asian millionaire embarked on a project which combined his zest for worship with his love for beauty and his desire to add new life to the woodworking industry

This was the result

<http://www.msn.com/en-us/video/peopleandplaces/a-masterpiece-in-the-making-thailand%e2%80%99s-sanctuary-of-truth/vi-AAuyfa6?ocid=AARDHP>

What is your initial response to the extravagance and attention to detail in the commissioning of the job and the craftsmanship exhibited? Can you identify the feelings this building stirred within? Toward the end of the documentary, the viewer is advised that the project has outlived the devotee himself, and yet the plans are being followed to the letter. The narrator then states that the temple is being crafted to the creator's specifications. How do you respond to this reference to the devotee as the Creator?

During His profound and transformational conversation with the Sychar Woman, Jesus invites her to seriously consider engaging in pure, Spirit-filled worship (John 4:23). Do you maintain that this is feasible, and is the temple a manifestation of such? Why/why not?

Spend some time reading Isaiah 6; Isaiah 58 and John 4. Note the difference in worship ways and consider which best describes your own personal worship scenario. As you continue along your spiritual journey, be reminded that what we believe ought to be evidenced by how we live

Action:

Consider what visible act/sign of worship you will undertake this week as tangible proof of your devotion to your God. Make time to do it, even if it isn't as opulent as the Taj Mahal or the Thai temple. Commit your plans to the Lord and make time to execute them.

Prayer in song:

To worship You I live, To worship You I live

To worship You I live, I live to worship You

(Spend some time reciting your favourite psalm or singing the chorus above)

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Worship and Discipleship (Worship)

SCRIPTURE: John 14:1-6; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 and John 3:16,17

TOPIC: Worship - The Greatest Show on Earth

The year 2018 will see a flurry of activity centered in Russia. For 32 countries around the world- footballers, referees, umpires, medics, food handlers, support staff and fans - will converge around several stadia for football's 'Greatest Show on Earth'. The FIFA World Cup is staged every four years, with qualifying teams being selected from national and regional matches. In some countries, qualifying for the World Cup is cause for major celebration.

The following clip offers the representation of the qualified countries by regions:
<https://youtu.be/G5jZIAB2eC8>

During the games, there will be millions of persons glued to their television sets, the internet sports channels, sports bars or actually present in person to experience the thrills of victory and the agonies of defeat in this season of sportsmanship. The players from all 32 qualifying countries have been undergoing serious training and tests to build stamina and skill for The Game. Airlines are adding routes/aircrafts to ferry teams, auxiliary staff, referees, equipment, medics and supporters to Russia; where stadia have been secured, strengthened, tested to ensure that everything is in order for the Summer-long games.

For those who believe in eternity, there is another event which WILL eclipse the quadrennial World Cup games. And like the FIFA World Cup, preparations are underway for the arrival of the participants. What preparations have you made to assure your qualification in the greatest event in all eternity?

Considering humanity's sinfulness/propensity for evil, do you find cause for worship in response to John 14:1-6?

How do you respond to the description the rejoicing for souls in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 and John 3:16-17?

What do you think is the heavenly response when each of us qualifies for eternal life? Do you think that there are response teams, medics, umpires and other similar support staff amongst the angels desiring to help us make it to eternity?

In light of what is promised in the aforementioned texts, have you ever considered inviting others to participate in the Promised Glory? Why/not?

What do you believe detracts from the spread of Christianity in light of its claims? How might this be rectified?

Prayer in song:

Lord make my life a prayer to You, I wanna do what You want me to
No empty words and no white lies, no token prayers no compromise...
[I'll] share the hope You gave to me
The love that set me free
(© Keith Green)

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Zechariah 4:4-6; Jeremiah 30:17

TOPIC: See, Hear and Understand

Reflection:

Myanmar is in transition from military to democratic government while internal conflicts arising from identity crisis, ethnic conflicts and related armed clashes are growing. Thousands of people in Kachin and Rakhine states are displaced and have few safe options.

Religious tensions between Buddhist and the Muslim Rohingya have added to widespread hardship and riots among the civilian groups. To hold and take power is the ideology within every conflict. Meanwhile, different views and various opinions confuse the people. Many people who are involved in the conflicts do not really know whether their sides are right or wrong. While civilians have sought to manage these threats as best they can in most cases, women and children bear the brunt.

Reading Zechariah 4:4-6 in this situation, we liken the prophet to Christians in Myanmar. We see and hear what is happening but we do not understand what these things mean? How should we as Christians respond to our brothers and sisters who are longing for peace, regardless of our religious and ethnic differences?

God's response is that human might and power will not last (v.6). Fighting each other will not achieve peace. Use of military or social power to oppress others will only destroy our nation. Only the spirit of the Lord, who creates love and conciliation, not armed conflict. We should hope in God to restore health by healing our historical wounds (Jeremiah 30:17). This hope should translate into action for peace.

Prayer:

We pray for peace among the ethnic Kachin people, the Myanmar army, Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. Help us Christians to dare to take responsibility by the Spirit of God to create peace in the country and to choose God's side. Amen.

Rev. Ling Zaw
Presbyterian Church of Myanmar

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 31:15-18

TOPIC: They Shall Come Back

Reflection:

The text describes lamentation in exile, yet it is a life-affirmation text that recovers the human capacity to mourn. In verse 15 is an image of bitter lamentation. Rachel is weeping for her children. This scene is all too familiar for the Chin ethnic women who weep for their children who are 'smuggled' to China and other countries in South East Asia in search of higher paying jobs. Their children have become "smuggled migrants" to support their families. The Chin mothers, like Rachel, refuse to be comforted because their children "are no more". In some villages, all the youth have gone abroad.

The 2014 census reported that 51.5 million people live within Myanmar. Out of those, 4.25 million, live abroad. Up to 70% of migrants live in Thailand, followed by Malaysia (15%), China (4.6%), Singapore (3.9%), the USA (1.9%) and others in Laos, and India, etc. The percentage of illegal migration to China is underestimated. Many Chin people (the highest Christian percentage in Myanmar) work illegally in China. For the Chin people, livelihood is the main factor that drives them to risk their lives in other countries.

In verses 16 and 17, God the comforter of mothers gives Rachel a future promise, "Your work shall be rewarded." The children shall come back from the land of the enemy to their own country. "There is hope for your future." This is a far-reaching promise. It is the invisible goal of the prayers of the Chin mothers. This is our hope that the prayers and lamentations of the Chin mothers shall prevail and the suffering of their families will vanish one day. How can we align our actions to these lamentations to collaborate with God in realising the hopes of the weeping mothers?

Prayer:

Lord, reduce the vulnerability of migrant workers around the world. Help Your Church to undertake activities to stop the smuggling of migrants and to call our political leaders to account for prudent use of national resources for the benefit of all. Amen.

Rev. Ling Zaw
Presbyterian Church of Myanmar

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Romans 1: 18-25

TOPIC: Without Excuse

Reflection:

Paul's letter to the congregation in Rome shows that Jews and Greeks reveal the righteousness of God through faith in Christ. Through faith, their lives changed and they were able to overcome the world and the power of sin, the law and death. He summarizes the reality of the Roman Empire in Romans 1:18 and criticizes the forms of conduct, which were destructive to community. It is clear that for Paul the entire social reality of the Roman-Hellenistic culture and social order is characterized by injustice and that the all-perverting reality of structural sin took captive of even the God-given Torah. Paul linked ancient Israelite and Jewish approach to idolatry and social criticism. Paul criticized the Jews for worshipping 'the creature' instead of their Maker, so God has abandoned them to their degrading passions (Rom.1:19).

What does Paul say about the situation in Myanmar context today where the percentage of Christian community is no more than 9%? Within that small community, we have hundreds of denominations. Instead of God being the leader of the church, everyone wants to build their own empire to make money and improve their wellbeing. Christians are without excuse (v.20). Many church leaders honor themselves and the money they make become idols instead of honoring God. Just like in Rome, in our context too, 'though they knew God, they did not honor him as God' (v.21). We have exchanged the truth about God for a lie, worshiped, and served the creature rather than the Creator (v. 25).

Prayer:

Maker of all, we confess that we would be righteous who will live by faith, we would witness the truth against all ungodliness and wickedness within and outside Christian community. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev. Ling Zaw
Presbyterian Church of Myanmar

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: I Corinthians 1:20-31; Philippians 2:6

TOPIC: No One Might Boast

Reflection:

Some are of the opinion that Paul conformed to the Roman Empire, patriarchy and spiritualizing the gospel at the expense of proclaiming its concrete social, economic and political dimension. That is quite wrong, for Paul did remain true to Jesus' basic direction. Just as Jesus inspired wandering preachers, groups and house-meetings in Palestine, so Paul gives rise to messianic communities through the spreading Jewish diaspora, in the whole Roman Empire and specially in urban settings. Paul is the apostle to the people.

It is clear that Pauline communities consisted of tremendously poor people, social outcasts and manual workers, though they did not exclude some well-to-do people. Paul writes explicitly to the Corinthian community to consider their own call. Some members yearned for the wisdom of Greek thinkers and some seem to demand the Jewish soothsayers. Paul reminds the community that the world did not come to know God through human wisdom; but 'through the foolishness of the proclamation to save those who believe' - the wisdom from God.

The Presbyterian Church of Myanmar was not founded not by people of noble birth but by the lowly, poor and weak people, by human standards. The Church is chosen in this world to correct wrongs in society, to remind those who boast in their own pride, and to subvert the existing order that suppresses righteousness and justice (1 Cor. 1: 26-30). It is no coincidence that in the hymn of Philippians 2:6, Paul does not write simply, "Jesus became a human being," but "Jesus assumed the condition of a slave." No one in the Church should boast if Christ has humbled himself to save the world. If the Church expects to be exalted, it must follow Christ. Therefore, let everyone in the church boast in the Lord Jesus! (1 Cor. 1:31).

Prayer:

We pray for PCM full time workers and members, all of whom are engaged in the mission of God in the country to be filled with the wisdom from God. Amen.

Rev. Ling Zaw
Presbyterian Church of Myanmar



CWM Assembly, Jeju Island, 2016.

My prayers and reflections on this week

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 2: 16-19

TOPIC: Moses and the Seven Daughters (South East Asia Women's Day)

Reflection:

In Exodus 2:16-19, Moses defended Reuel's seven daughters who were driven away by male shepherds from their ancestors' well when they tried to draw water for their father's sheep. The Hebrew verb 'yasha' could be translated as "help, save, deliver, defense." Moses did not say, "Now, you can draw the water again for I have chased them away." Instead, Moses got up and came to their rescue (v. 17) which indicates intent for action. They went home earlier that day because Moses helped them, 'he even drew water for them and watered the flock' (v.19).

Some men attempt to help women in their struggle for liberation and gender justice. Theologians, pastors and church ministers are happy to inform members of the church, "Preaching and discussion about the Word of God is not enough in terms of fighting for women's liberation and justice." If there is no change (revolution) from the existing reality, that struggle cannot be called liberation. We may discuss gender justice and equality endlessly in our society, but if we do not allow for change in our day-to-day personal relationships and act with intent, there will never be true equality among women and men.

Moses helped to resolve the difficulties faced by the seven daughters to the very end. The seven daughters reported, "He even drew water for us and our flock." Men can, help women in their fight for justice and gender equality. Together with women, they can subvert the root causes of injustice, violence, war, women subordination and other vices in society.

Prayer:

We pray for the long struggle of South East Asian women who face domestic violence, harassment in the work place, vulnerability to crime and cultural war and are still at the bottom of social hierarchy in the Church and society. Lord, help us to enhance the partnership of women and men to fight injustice. Amen.

Rev. Ling Zaw
Presbyterian Church of Myanmar

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: John. 9; Revelation 2:17; Philippians 1:21

TOPIC: Hidden Manna (World AIDS Day)

Reflection:

Myanmar has one of Asia's highest adult HIV prevalence rates, followed by Cambodia and Thailand. About twenty thousand die from HIV/AIDS annually and UNAIDS (2015) estimates that 220,000 live with HIV. Of those, 77,000 women aged 15 and above and 9,500 are children aged 0 to 14; 9,700 deaths are due to AIDS and 110,000 children aged 0 to 17 are orphaned due to HIV and AIDS. The women and children are infected with the virus, yet only a small number are aware of their infection. The majority of people in rural areas still shun HIV and AIDS infected people. Even the church does not open its arms and mind to accept them as people of God.

Today's text, John 9, about a man born blind in the time of Jesus is relevant here. The disciples of Jesus asked, 'Who sinned?' Jesus replied 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.'

Revelation 2:17 is God's comforting word for those who have lost their hope, who are HIV positive. The living manna is served for all humanity. We believe, one day, we will all sing the song of redemption together. However, before that we must learn to accept and apply to our relationship, the love of God that is unconditional. 'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.' (John Newton, 1725-1804)

Prayer:

Lord we pray for those who have lost their hope in this world because of their suffering and stigmatization by society. We acknowledge that the living manna of Christ is served to us all equally. O God, open our hearts to know the pain of others and to let them take their rightful place. Amen.

Rev. Ling Zaw
Presbyterian Church of Myanmar

Militarization and Conflict

SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 5:16-20

TOPIC: Ambassadors for Christ

Reflection:

The UN's Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN's of 2010 reported that Myanmar's forest biomass holds 1,654 million metric tons of carbon and is home to over eighty rare species. Forests covered about 70% of Myanmar at independence in 1948. By 2014, there were only about 48% forest cover left. Myanmar is one of the most corrupt nations, which negatively affects nature in general and forests in particular. According to many climate model predictions, Myanmar is already one of the most climate-disaster-prone nations. Moreover, rural populations (about 70% or 30 million people) rely on forests for their basic needs.

Those who cut trees for profit ignore the effect it has on ecosystems, leading to natural disasters. The government makes rules that favor deforestation because money seems to be more important than retaining the environment for human beings and the rest of creation. As Myanmar opens up for business, a new report has found that converting forests to commercial agriculture land is increasing at an alarming rate, with devastating results for forest dwellers and biodiversity. Generally, environmental awareness remains low and people are often not aware of the impact of their activities.

The Churches in Myanmar have the opportunity to be ambassadors of Christ in this regard. The God of the universe has given us the ministry of reconciliation of all of creation. If the Church is in Christ, we must strive for a new creation, not the destruction of the creation. Paul in II Corinthians 6:1-10, urges 'us work together in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions.....by truthful speech.....with the weapons of righteousness.... Now is the acceptable time. Now is a day of salvation to make all creation new'.

Prayer:

God of universe, teach us to love the earth, which you have created. Teach us not to corrupt nature, soils, trees, waters and air since ecosystems, on which all life depends, cannot survive without them.

Rev. Ling Zaw
Presbyterian Church of Myanmar

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Mark 5:1-5

TOPIC: A Plea for Help

Peruse the following picture and craft a possible backstory



How old is this person and what is their gender? Have you ever met the person represented by the picture? (If yes, state where and when) What may have generated those marks? Now consider this picture in light of Mark 5:1-5. Were there any similarities between the narratives?

The issue of self-mutilation has been part of the human psychological landscape at least since ~30 C.E. According to the Recovery Village's site, self-mutilation is 'that act of inflicting physical pain on one's own body,' with almost half million persons having visited the hospital for such issues in

the USA during the 2013 statistical period.¹ But this is not an American problem. It is prevalent among teens in the UK and the Caribbean. Possible reasons behind self-mutilation include:

- Bullying
- Challenges at school
- Gender dysphoria
- Gender-based violence/sexual abuse
- Low self-esteem
- Peer pressure

Regardless of the reason behind this type of behaviour, this is usually a plea for help. Although cutting is cited in scripture and more easily recognised, there are other forms of self-mutilation including burning, pulling one's hair, hitting oneself, punching walls, using chemicals or sharp objects on the skin and choking or suffocating oneself.

Having recognised the symptoms of self-harm, it is likely that one might seek to chastise the mutilator for the negative behaviour. This is not the best course of action, as this may send the individual underground rather than engendering positive conversations.

¹ C.f. <https://www.therrecoveryvillage.com/co-occurring-disorders/self-harm/#gref>.

Evangelism

It is worth noting that Mark 5:5-9 provides noteworthy points for consideration. Mutilation is a public, though hidden problem; It is sometimes beyond the individual's ability to solve, but also recognizes and yields to inclusion and affirmation. It ought not to be condoned. The issue, not the person, needs to be addressed. Further, it is the Christian counsellor's responsibility to ensure that a Christ-centred approach is taken. It is critical that the self-mutilator receives the love and affirmation of their value at several points during treatment. Additionally, though this may be ample opportunity to gently share the good news; use with caution. Praying for/with the individual is critical, as divine direction will prove fortuitous in eventuating transformation.

Prayer:

Life-giving, redeeming healing God; grant us awareness of those who have missed the joy of experiencing Your love. Embrace and fill them with Your Holy Spirit as You open doors to abundance we pray, Amen.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Acts 18:1-5

TOPIC: A Plea for Help

CWM General Secretary, Rev Dr Collin Cowan has often cited a profound truth, 'No one is hopeless who knows the God of hope'. It is therefore our joy to share this hope we've found with others. Today's case study invites us to consider the possibilities. By the time you begin working on this study, Hurricane Maria will be exceptionally old news with limited long-term effects, outside of those whose lives were permanently scarred by the devastation. Despite the setbacks faced, Dominica is poised for growth and renewal, as is indicated in the FAO Report:

<https://caribbeannewsservice.com/now/dominica-commonwealth-secretary-general-pledges-to-challenge-development-assistance-rules/>

For the growth and renewal to be effective, we all must get involved; from the youngest to the eldest.

We join in the campaign for enhanced and abundant life with our prayers, our faith, our preparation, our finances and our presence. There's nothing that embodies the gospel more in situations of distress than the presence of a caring sister or brother in the faith. And, in situations which require change in legislature, our voices may be part of the change we wish to see in the context. Advocacy, prayerful direction and the strength to endure may impact lives more powerfully than any evangelistic service ever could.

One will note that as a tentmaker, Paul was able to connect with his peers although he could be found in the temple on the sabbath (Acts 18:1-5). This suggests that each of us has the potential to become actively involved in the sharing of the good news. Some may source seeds and suckers, others may plant seeds while others may craft proposals which in turn become effected as laws or amendments to the law.

What are the developmental needs presently existing in your context? Can you presently identify ways in which you may help to effect change? Formulate a team and get involved

Evangelism

Identify persons within your context to help your congregation and community to craft an evacuation strategy for times of disasters and emergency. In that strategy, remember to identify the most vulnerable and assign persons to help evacuate/distribute scarce resources as needed in seasons of crisis. Consider preparing care packages with your churches contact details for distribution to those in need. Volunteer to be an Emergency Services staff and ensure that you are trained.

Prayer in Song:

Thuma mina Thuma mina
Thuma mina so mandla
Send me Jesus (x3)
Send me Lord!

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

5 December

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Acts 1:8

TOPIC: Happily ever after

For many Caribbean children who grew up in the late 20th century, fairy tales were normative, right alongside Anansi stories, folktales and proverbs. The regionally contextual tales served to foster cultural awareness, resilience and independent thinking as the equipped storyteller – regardless of his/her age – had the power to alter the ending of the folktale, Crick Crack or Anansi Story to suit the audience and the issues of the day. This seems to have been a retention of the African storytelling tradition where the griot maintains the core message of a tale, altering to suit the needs of the community, and is reflective of the community dancing among the Ngoni peoples in Malawi, who appropriate the medium of the dance to address themes related to HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, and gender roles.

To some extent, the griot has been replaced by the journalist, who, if serious about the craft, proves that sometimes the Pen is mightier than the sword. One journalist presented the plight of a man rendered homeless, who was then obliged to live in a one-room shack. The human-interest slant elicited public response:

<http://www.capitolnewsgy.com/2017/11/02/rose-hall-town-family-whose-home-was-destroyed-by-fire-forced-to-live-make-shift-hut/>

John 10:10 recounts Jesus' assertion of abundant life as a counteraction to life-stealers, but the call to abundance is not an invitation to prosperity as some pundits have appropriated. Further, Acts 1:8 offers to the committed evangelion, the opportunity to bear witness to Christ's saving grace wherever s/he goes. This is not only a call to just witnessing, but echoes the sending of Luke 9, where proclamation is accompanied by a lifestyle of giving and service. A church which seeks to share the Good News must be open to offering more than the happily ever after of eternity; it must offer sustainable and ethical ways to abundant living in the here and now. Can you identify some of the core social issues which are plaguing your own context?

Where can the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ be experienced/re-enacted for those who are hungry and thirsty? As God seeks a righteous witness to share the news with others, are you available? What are you open to doing? Who are the persons of influence whom God has gifted you with so that the work of evangelism may begin?

Prayer:

Lord, the fields are as white as the ripened harvest. Equip us and send us out to impact communities for you, we pray. Amen.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Luke 4:18

TOPIC: Imperilled...

In 1838, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was formally ended in the British colonies. Now, having gone underground, slavery is just as prevalent internationally, and just as debilitating as it was in those days. There are subtle differences – Slavery is no longer the major source for any one country's GDP (gross domestic product), nor is it restricted solely to Euro-American slavers, African source points and Caribbean/American destinations. Rather, trafficking in persons (i.e. Human Trafficking/Modern-Day slavery) has corrupted several countries in the world, with Caribbean nations being Source, Destination and Transit Points for many who fall prey to this abuse of human rights.

Consider the case of those who are the enslaved in the following article -

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/modern-slavery-on-our-streets-campaign-libya-forced-labour-refugees-migrants-mediterranean-sea-a8009706.html>

How might the church become agents of transformation for the enslaved? And how do we practice incarnational witness as the body of Christ? In Mark 10:45, Jesus is presented as ransom for souls.

The Greek word transliterated 'lutron' speaks to the monies set aside for purchasing a slave into freedom. Christ's offer of freedom to the imprisoned and oppressed (Luke 4:18) is our point of reference for our reflection. Thus, as followers of Christ, we affirm, *'... that we participate in God's mission for the fulfilment of the promise of life in fullness. ... We are called to journey with God in our current world of ugly experiences of inequality and injustice to bear witness against the convergence of life killing systems of power and money.'*²

² CWM Framing of the Global Mission Agenda p.9.

Awareness raising and advocacy are two possible ways in which we may share the gospel with those who are oppressed. However, our acts of advocacy should not become bribes to coerce others to adopt our faith; rather by our work, others ought to experience Christ's love and worth.

- Who are the modern-day slaves in your context?
- How might we share the good news of Christ through acts of awareness and advocacy?
- How has your church been implicated in perpetuating modern-day slavery through its policies and/or investments?
- Identify TWO ways that your congregation may be actively engaged in evangelism through representation and advocacy.

Prayer:

God of Justice,

We ask for open eyes, discerning ears, supportive tongues and just hearts. Grant that we might be agents of transformation, offering life to those who are enslaved; challenging normal for those who enslave. Hear us we pray, in Jesus' name.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Luke 17:11-19

TOPIC: Plagued by the Plague

Have you ever experienced even a mild curiosity about the origin of nursery rhymes? Rhymes such as 'Ring around the rosie'¹ for example, referenced some prophylactic measures used during the outbreak of the Bubonic Plague during the Middle Ages. This disease was perhaps the first severe pandemic of that era, and efforts to eradicate the plague, have only managed to contain it to several places, including the USA and parts of Africa. Thus, in May/July evidence of singular cases in the continental USA was not apparent cause for concern.

Unfortunately, this changed somewhat when the problem shifted location to Madagascar, where several cases and deaths have been cited <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/16/health/madagascar-pneumonic-bubonic-plague-outbreak-continues/index.html>

Considering the toxicity of this plague, and its easy spread via air, rodents or fleas, the concern is valid. That it has mutated is of equal concern, as containment may not be as simple as desired. One infers that the Black Plague brings with it heavy contagion which realizes essential quarantines reminiscent of leprous communities in biblical times. Luke 17:11-19 invites careful discernment about affirming the humanity of the contagiously ill in an era of travel advisories and disease control. Further, healing has been a very strong/viable marketing and evangelistic element in charismatic and evangelistic circles within the last 50 years. What are the implications for the church when the Black Plague, like the less alarming illnesses, remains a very visible though painful aspect of our ministry? Modern missiology has little room for exploitative and showy impositions of aid. It seeks engagement for mutuality and collegiality in our partnerships.

¹ Wikipedia suggests that this rhyme has alluded to the Great Plague of 1655. This as the plague was betrayed by a 'rosy rash' and sneezing. Treatment and preventative mechanisms included the use of herbal posies. Although disputed by SNOPEs, it is feasible that there was the teaching element in this version especially with regard to cultural contextuality of a nursery rhyme/poem.

How might a mission partner effectively share his/her gifts and skills in a manner that is life-affirming for all stakeholders? In what ways might concerned churches be enabled in their offer of support/aid for those impacted by the Plague?

Traditionally, communicable diseases such as the Plague were perceived as God's punishment on an individual/family. How might contesting this notion be perceived as life-affirming and/or evangelistic? And, having established a precedent, how do we treat Ebola or HIV/AIDS? What does/should ministry to the caregivers look like?

Prayer:

Jesus, Resurrection and Life, infuse our psyche and hearts to be agents of healing and hope in times of dis-ease and distress. Open our ears and eyes to the very real needs, as we seek solutions, using our networks to foster transformation. Hear and mobilize us we pray.

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: John 4

TOPIC: Turn of(f) Phrase

Several years ago, an African nun met with a group of theologians in Rome. Although a Mother Superior (their title has been softened somewhat), she was not wont to wearing habits or any of the other garb that one would normally associate with Catholic women. Her response to one theologian's query regarding the choice of habit is worth pondering as we re-vision the How of Evangelism.

She cited an incident in London whereby she was sitting at Trafalgar Square and engaged in a conversation with a young lady. Soon, the conversation shifted to personal matters, and she counselled the troubled person as best she could. After receiving prayer, the young lady asked her profession, to which she responded honestly. Flabbergasted, the young lady asked about the absence of a habit and later agreed that she would not have felt comfortable approaching the sister were she in the habit.

Can a Christian evangelise more effectively in secular garb, and is the work restricted solely to clergy and trained laity? Why/not? What would you consider one of the greatest challenges to sharing the gospel with others? In the video attached, a pastor shares his own quirky method of introducing his faith to strangers.



VID-20171109-WA0001.mp4

Is that an approach you would consider using?

Like the nun, the minister's approach was engaging and connected with his audience in a 'safe' way. This might be an adaptation of Jesus' meeting with the Sychar Woman in John 4.

All cases cited place the evangelists WITHOUT the cloistered worship spaces. What does this say about effective evangelism?

Where are you most comfortable sharing your faith and what are your greatest fears/successes to date?

Consider rewriting the John 4 narrative from a postmodern perspective without changing the characters' identities.

Prayer:

Witnessing One
Send us forth in the byways
So others may find the highways
That lead to You
Be it one or two
Allow our witness to be ever true!

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

Evangelism

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 4:17

TOPIC: Whose News?

Have you ever watched the movie, Erin Brockovich? The one where one woman takes on 'The System' to secure the rights of a child afflicted with cancer resulting from pollution? Did you ever see yourself as a modern Erin Brockovich? Consider the following article and accompanying video clip about our sisters and brothers in Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/13/us/puerto-rico-superfund-water/index.html>

If we are called to be bearers of God's good news to the world, what is the news which we wish to share in a world upended by polluted waterways and disparate politics? We may wish to consider Jesus' call to repentance which was directed primarily at the materially rich and powerful; the instigators of toxic waste sites in spaces already inhabited by humanity. How do we read Matthew 4:17 when the powerful continue to abuse systems for their benefit to the detriment of the poor and disenfranchised? What are we asking persons to 'repent from' in order to 'be saved to new life in Christ'? Where are the socio-economic wildernesses in our contexts and how might we make straight God's way?

Although the evangelist is the bearer of good news; the message is not always interpreted thusly by those who stand to lose their income base. The call to bear witness to the Good News of Christ is also a recognition that in so doing, we are preparing to take up our cross, to be beheaded, to face persecution, peril, nakedness or sword. And we do so because we understand that God's kingdom is justice, peace and joy in the Spirit.

This may be the time to identify an issue which cries out for justice and peace in your context. Having done so, spend a season in discernment and prayer on the best way to present the good news such that peace is brokered on behalf of those whose human rights have been violated; and justice is meted out even to the power brokers.

Prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy²;

Rev. Nicole Ashwood
Ecumenical Partner

² Francis of Assisi Prayer of St Francis Stanza 1.

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 19:13-15

TOPIC: Let the children come forward!

The Bible Society of Egypt is one of the most energetic Christian settings I know. Every time I have visited this organization I am encouraged by its work. This is Egypt you know, where an estimated 94% of the population is Muslim! The Bible Society of Egypt reaches over 200,000 children every summer through their Kingo teams and Kingo festivals in the villages and city districts. It is celebratory. It is theatre. It is Bible story telling.

Kingo is a lion that kids ask questions. He answers by telling them Bible stories. It is a huge success. Nine teams are at work at any given time, going with their theatre truck from place to place. For the children it is great, but it is also an opportunity for the local Sunday school teachers, who have a role to play in the Kingo festivals, for they benefit from training in Bible story-telling as well.

It is hard to believe that despite all the turmoil in Egypt over the last seven years, that the Kingo project keeps going and growing. It links to other activities, like Bible World; a thrilling exhibition for kids, organized like a discovery tour, telling them where the Bible comes from and how it was composed. Over 10,000 kids a year visit the exhibition.

In Egypt, where many kids feel pressures, it is so important for them to be self-confident; to know the Bible stories and how the Bible was composed. It helps them to keep faith and to develop themselves as true citizens of a shared nation. The work of Bible Society of Egypt is an excellent example of how Christian communities can find ways of reaching out to our neighbours of other religious faiths. In what ways can you begin to reach out to your neighbours of other religions?

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we pray for Christian kids in Egypt, that they may know who you are for themselves. We ask you to bless the efforts of the Bible Society of Egypt and its staff, the Kingo teams and all other workers, who are so serious in sharing your story and your grace with the children. Just as you taught us long ago. Amen.

Feije Duim
Protestant Church in the Netherlands

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Luke 4:14-19

TOPIC: Into the Capillaries of Society

In 2011, I took leave from work and went for two months to Damascus to learn some Arabic and understand more about the churches in the Near East. It was at the start of the demonstrations that preceded the civil war which was “hijacked” by the foreign warriors of Daesh (Islamic State). Syria had its problems, but it was a delightful country, and Damascus was a lovely place to stay. It was a city of peace. When in the 14th century Antioch was threatened by outside forces, the three Patriarchs fled to Damascus which had been under Muslim leadership for ages before. Why? Because Damascus was a safe place to be. Churches could and did develop in relative ease. There were Christian villages in the most remote areas. Churches were present in every part of Syrian society; in the capillaries of the Syrian fabric of life.

Then the war started. Two thirds of the Syrian population were forced to leave their homes – both Muslims and Christians. The churches started to assist them, irrespective of their faith or political affiliation. Following Christ and the narrative of Luke 4, churches helped all victims simply because they were victims. Churches had the organization to do so, with congregations everywhere, young volunteers in the tens of thousands, spreading aid through the capillaries of society. They can do so, because this country is their home.

There is world-wide support for the Syrian churches to do this. The ACT Alliance takes a strong interest. The humanitarian organization of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch grew from 35 to 550 staff with nine warehouses all over Syria, and is now the biggest non-governmental aid organization active in Syria. International aid organizations line up to work with this church-based relief agency, because it knows all the places, has access to all points, and is trusted by all parties (yes, except the jihadists).

By doing this, the churches invest in an open future for Syria where there is space for everyone, based on need and not on religious affiliation. Let us pray that this dream may come true.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, let the dream of our sisters and brothers in Syria come true, so that once more they can live again in an inclusive society, with a place for all, whatever their religion, ethnicity or political background. Bless us in assisting them, so that their hands might be filled with what is needed to help. Amen.

Feije Duim
Protestant Church in the Netherlands

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 146

TOPIC: Resilience Fights Evil

Lahore, Pakistan, Easter Sunday afternoon 2016, after a day of worship many Christian families escape the heat in their homes by visiting the parks, as the city cools down in a leisurely afternoon. They are not the only ones. The park is full of cheering and playing children. The playground close to the entrance of the park, where kids can swing and slide, is filled with cries of joy, when an automated bomb explodes at the entrance. A few hours later the organization that claimed responsibility for the assault has said that they targeted the Christians who were celebrating Easter. In reality, however, more non-Christian children were killed or hospitalized than Christian children, but this is how propaganda works. Over 60 people died, over 200 were injured. It was a terrible bloodshed.

It was all over my Facebook page. Young people of the Church of Pakistan used the national symbol of the Menara Pakistan (the Pakistan tower) and wrote under it: Pray for Lahore. They made it a national issue. Is that strategy? No, it is conviction. These attacks make life in Pakistan miserable. The assaults ruin the fabric of life and have to stop.

A week later the youngsters of the Church of Pakistan organized an interfaith prayer meeting with Muslim, Christian and Hindu leaders praying together on Sundays – same time, same place. They prayed for all the victims of this brutal and criminal attack. A sign of hope in the midst of despair; of love in the midst of hatred; of faith in the midst of betrayal. They acted as it says in Psalm 146: trusting the Lord, that he is the righteous king for eternity with enough faith and hope, to share their love with others.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, bless your churches in Pakistan. Bless young and brave Pakistani Christians, who translate anger and frustration into actions of faith, hope and love. Let them touch hearts and minds towards a peace that outgrows our imagination. Amen.

Feije Duim
Protestant Church in the Netherlands

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 5

TOPIC: Shared Futures

We have a choice: do we choose the story of hope or the story of despair? When we hear about the hardships churches in other countries experience, we pity them. We all would like to be the heroes that help them escape hardship by nailing their governments or any group we might hold responsible, as if they are instruments of the Devil - the Russians, the Turks, the Muslims. Western Christians especially like to find out who is guilty of causing suffering so as to ensure the safety of Christians and get them out of trouble. So when war broke out in Syria, we were quick to frame it as a war of Muslims against Christians (which it wasn't at all). The Islamists liked this and tried to promote this thinking among Christians, as it helped them in framing their own terrible actions as a legitimate struggle against the crusaders.

But the churches in the Middle East did not like this at all. They said: "Look what you are doing. You are alienating us from our own societies where we lived two thousand years. We are not the only victims, our Muslim neighbours are as much victims as we are. We should not condemn them, but assist all victims of violence, whoever they are. We belong here in these lands. The soil is part of us. We will not leave but we will serve and claim our right to stay. Instead of putting us up against our neighbours, please help us to assist them, so that we can build a society where there is place for everyone. Help us to stay." Let us not stand empty-handed. Their story was not a story of martyrdom, it was a story of hope and life. Christian organizations in the Netherlands sat down together to reframe their message in this way.

They think, like Patriarch John, who cites Matthew when he talks about the humanitarian work of his church: "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

Prayer:

Dear Lord, teach us to be more careful in naming and shaming others when we see our brothers and sisters suffer. Teach us to listen to them and assist them in what they need. Thank you for the Churches in Syria that spread such a powerful message of hope and love. Amen.

Feije Duim
Protestant Church in the Netherlands



Face to Face, India, 2016.

My prayers and reflections on this week

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 104: 31-35

TOPIC: Interfaith Learning

July 2017 in Bossey near Geneva, the World Council of Churches organized a course for young academics from the three branches of the Abrahamic tradition: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They came from all over the world: Africa, Asia, Middle East, America and Europe. The issues at stake were how the different traditions look at questions of peace and co-existence. It was about how to coexist with others who are rooted in one's own tradition. I was invited to present a lecture. Young eager talents! What a privilege to challenge them to come out of their comfort zones and pursue new avenues of practical interfaith cooperation.

Can traditions learn from each other? I was thrown back in time to a phase when I was teaching anthropology of religion at a seminary in West Papua. As we were in the middle of a project to transform traditional Papuan music into church hymns, I came across Psalm 104. Psalm 104 is a product of different religious traditions interacting. The original text came from Egypt and in interaction with Hebrew traditions gained new insights and grew into a most beautiful Psalm which celebrates God's greatness.

Often in interfaith encounters, we tend to explain our own tradition to others. But as in Psalm 104, one discovers you can build new things; learn from each other; and build on each other's stories, using the beauty in one tradition to enrich another. This is what I saw happening among the participants in the course at Bossey, which reminds us of another Psalm (133). This Psalm praises the experience of living together in love. Living together in love has the potential to create new things, new insights, new ideas of how we can make this world a hospitable place for everyone. Let us bring thanks to the Lord for granting us different traditions.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we thank you for your work among different people of the world. We thank you for granting humankind different traditions that can enrich each other. Be with young people who experience this, and make them into pillars of hope in this troublesome world. Amen.

Feije Duim
Protestant Church in the Netherlands

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 104: 31-35

TOPIC: Interfaith Inspiration

We heard the frightening story of the assaults in Paris on Friday, November 13, 2015. At the Bataclan Theatre and in the streets of Paris, over a hundred people died in a concerted attack on humanity. This was just one episode out of many assaults on humanity in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Indonesia, Bosnia, Pakistan, Syria, Turkey, Nigeria, Cameroon, Spain and Great Britain. We saw the typical reaction of the public and governments. There was repression, followed by more repression. And we said: "This doesn't help. Religion may not be the real cause, but it is at least heavily involved as a factor." Where are we as faith based organizations? What can we do?

In the old days, people had their mechanisms to prevent violence without a huge apparatus for repression. They kept peace in other ways, building trust between communities. Traditional societies engage in all kind of social contracts, involving each other, building their own resilience against incitement. Take the Moluccas in Indonesia, where in many villages one can only build a mosque if the head of the building committee is a Christian, or a church when it is a Muslim. People of different faiths force one another to engage, and build cooperation in order to develop trust. After the government abandoned them, and heavy fighting broke out between Christians and Muslims, the people took their own measures. In a nutshell they put warlords of either side in charge together. They had to deliver leadership and reconciliation together for both communities. They forced the leaders and themselves into a shared future.

Can we use that idea and develop it into a tool? Can we build resilience in communities against incitement by creating development programmes in which people of different faith take joint responsibility? Yes we can. We call the programme "Shared Futures". We tried it in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. It works! It is how churches and faith-based organizations can make a difference... by creating shared futures.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, please bless all efforts in which people of different faith employ joint initiatives in their societies, in order to build resilience in their communities against hate speech and incitement. Let us be creative and lead the way leaving repression behind and embracing love. Amen.

Feije Duim
Protestant Church in the Netherlands

Interfaith and Ecumenism

SCRIPTURE: Acts 11: 19 -26

TOPIC: Christian Presence and Witness

The Church of Antioch on the Syrian coast was the first Christian Church in the world. Here the followers of Christ were called Christians for the first time. It started with the preaching of Barnabas and Paul. From Antioch the church spread through the Near and the Middle East, into Europe and Asia. The old Churches in South India are the Asian heirs of Antioch. In the Near East nowadays we have Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox (of the former kingdom of Silicia on the Mediterranean coast, destroyed by the Turks in 1915). There are the Eastern Catholics: Maronites, Melkites and Chaldeans; there are Assyrians and Protestants. Damascus is their central city, the domicile of the three Patriarchs of Antioch. In 2011, the region started to [quake] again under political, religious and nationalistic unrest. Christians and churches once again became victims of violence. The fear of 1915 had returned.

In May 2013, we met in Beirut: churches of the region and churches from around the world, to encourage, to find ways, to pray together and to hug each other in an ecumenical gathering, exploring ways to strengthen the Christian presence and witness in the Middle East. The churches in the region were engaged in one of the biggest church-based humanitarian aid programmes ever. They were actively supported by the ACT Alliance (the international church network for humanitarian assistance and development).

During a break, I walked with Armenian Bishop, Armash Nalbandian of Damascus, along the walls of the historic Punisian harbour of Biblos on the Lebanese coast. He told me about life in Damascus and shared how difficult it was for his flock to keep courage. They felt so alone. He felt so alone. He asked me, not for money but for signs of solidarity to share with his members, so that they would feel less lonely.

This is ecumenism – that we share our pain and encourage each other world-wide through signs of peace, prayer and support.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we pray for churches in the Middle East. We have them to thank for the growth of early Christianity. But it is so difficult now due to harsh circumstances. Show us ways to support them, by prayer, by signs of hope, by financial aid for their enormous humanitarian endeavour for all victims of violence and a shared future. Amen.

Feije Duim
Protestant Church in the Netherlands

Advent

This Advent season, we are invited to Hear God's cry which calls us to see the world into which we have been sent with the message of hope.

The Star and Creation

Advent begins with Hearing God's cry in the fullness of Creation, in the intended harmony of Creation. Advent anticipates the consummation of light and life in the new creation of Jesus and reassures the earth and the heavens, that all is well, all of life is gathered up in the cosmic promise of Christ. In whom Earth and Heaven was created, will be renewed and through whom all flesh rejoice. All is well.

Yet, all is not well. The harmony of creation is drowned out beneath the sound of a million logging lorries, oil drills, and mining trucks. By the sights and sounds of ever expanding consumption of finite resources. The rest of the earth is shattered with ever increasing global temperatures, catastrophic climate events like Hurricanes and sea level rises, and species extinctions. One part of the earth's community is causing a deadly fever in the earth's body and the Creator is crying for it to stop, for the human parasite responsible to embrace its interdependent place under the light of heaven and hear what God is crying in the dying light of many species, lands and habitats.

Suggestions for Prayer:

Find a moment at night to be beneath the heavens and be still. Gather your senses to discern the Creator's love and pain. Look for a star like the Magi of old who saw and heard in it the promise of the coming of a new moment.

Light a candle to symbolise the call God has placed on you to come out into the light and announce the love at the heart of creation, which needs our love for she is so wounded.

Speak Lord

Announce where you are hurting and hoping,
leading and alighting
that I may be touched and transformed
by a voice of the wilderness
showing me where Christ comes.

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Advent

The Angel

The writer of the Hebrews reminds people of God that the usual means for the angel of God to come is through the stranger in our midst, (Hebrews 13:2). So, for all our images of a heavenly being, all golden figures, and feathered wings, the angel is in fact a figure of vulnerability and comes in need of hospitality. The angel seeks to share a message, but, it can only ever be received when that vulnerability is honoured, not exploited. And the holy visitor met not as an inconvenience, or a burden, or a scrounger but as the means and moment for strangers to become friends, a house to become a home, a meal, a feast. Thus, first and foremost the angel is a sign of what can be discerned and discovered through community and communion.

The angel is a representation of ourselves to ourselves. A reaching out and an embracing. A word of need prompting a word of invitation. A face turned out and a face turned in. The angel comes before the community, and remains unbidden, unwanted, unwelcome. But if one turns in recognition of need then the whole community finds itself on the very verge of blessing.

We think the strange angels in our advent story, the angelic host are shown in heaven singing, but they are mirrored on earth in shepherds tending their flocks. The shepherds were an unwelcome bunch, they didn't keep the law, and were even excluded from the law because they could not keep its commands. These strangers, and their odd blessing, and their underlining of humanity to humanity remain ever present. But many in churches refuse to see them, welcome them or want them. They cannot see the rich blessing that a Trans-person brings, for example. There are many who fail to see the God given opportunity that those who are least 'like us' offer for all to be transformed into our truest selves: a people ready to hear God speak in strange new accents and embrace change and transformation.

Suggestions for Prayer:

Find a place where you can see people come and go. Watch the crowds and the individuals who pass. Contemplate them and see them in love and bless them.

Light a candle to symbolise yours is a house of welcome
A haven of hospitality for those others reject
That it might lead the weary and unwanted
To make your house a home

Speak Lord
Announce where you are hurting and hoping,
leading and alighting
that I may be touched and transformed
by a voice of the wilderness
showing me where Christ comes.

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Advent

Mary on the Edge

How was Mary's news greeted, when it became audible or more likely visible? This ridiculous story to distract from a girl clearly caught out sleeping around! What were the whispers and cat-calls in her village? 'Well she's made her own bed'. 'Silly tart'. 'I always knew she was no better than her mother'. Did she meet in with cold hauteur? Composed and self-possessed, refusing to sacrifice her dignity to the small mindedness of the sanctimonious, the religious and the moralising?

Has the self-righteousness of a religious community begun to overwhelm her? Has their criticism of her sexual choices made her ashamed? Is she contemplating the future, fearful and ready to harm herself and her unborn child? Have her neighbours jumped to the conclusion that this is a misfortune, common to girls of her class? Will the community have to make room for some bastard child, mixed in parentage, fortunes, race?

If so, perhaps this is the moment the words of the strange angel stir in her an outrageous outspoken courage. 'Hail Mary'. Not Hail Caesar, Hail Mary. 'God has richly blessed you'. Is this the experience that stirs her defiant magnificent spirit? Were there none in her community to celebrate with her? No one to revel in the pure joy of this unexpected gift? No one who, having heard the voices of the Prophets, could hear in Mary's tremendous news the restating of a divine promise to save? Only Mary's one voice rings out, derided and disbelieved: God has brought down mighty kings from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands. He has kept the promise he made to our ancestors, and has come to the help of his servant Israel. (Luke 1:52-54) Until her cousin confirms the news that the Our God is merciful and tender, he will cause the bright dawn of salvation to rise on us and to shine from heaven on all those who live in the dark shadow of death, to guide our steps into the path of peace. (Luke 1:79)

And so the voice of God, which can only be announced by disbelieved individuals and despised minorities goes unheard by those who forget God is centred at the edge, amongst those we exclude and gossip about.

Suggestions for Prayer:

Recall some moment of gossip you have shared; harm or disrespect uttered in words or silences and write one on the palm of your hands to symbolise how we do harm through our words.

Light a candle for there are many in the darkness of depression who hate themselves because of the things people have said about them.

Speak Lord

Announce where you are hurting and hoping,
leading and alighting
that I may be touched and transformed
by a voice of the wilderness
showing me where Christ comes.

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Advent

'No' means no, 'yes' means yes

The #metoo campaign has raised a cry of indignation and disgust over men sexually harassing and assaulting women and men. This cry is also God's cry. The media has focused on celebrities but **#metoo** cry is revealing something we all know, (women especially), it is widespread and endemic to all our workplaces, homes, churches and communities. It is a cry which pierces to the heart of the patriarchy of so many societies. **#metoo** has spread as people have defiantly spoken out sharing their experience of gender injustice. It is stirring a demand for an end to sexism in the work place, whether that is an office or a film set. These voices call for an end to sexual violence in the marital bed, a denunciation of historic sexual slavery in Korea and current in South Sudan, femicide in Peru, male rape in Libya.

The hyper-sexualising which surrounds women, and to a certain extent children in the midst of Empire and Capitalism confront us in Mary's strong embodiment of God's promise to end, in his body, injustice, violence and war, scorn, prejudice and pride. Her body cries of a Word which is coming, which will send the rich away empty and give the poor good things. A Word which will cry out for life, for Mary has been filled with the Spirit and is bringing forth the first sign of the New Creation, the Son of the Most High God, Jesus.

The Greco-Roman world also announced the birth of sons of god, Caesar made such claims for his own children, Zeus was a prodigious progenitor of sons. Luke knew this, and his writing of the curious courtship of Mary and conception of Jesus develops especially in contrast to the Imperial myths of gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon. Zeus was a prodigious progenitor because he was a serial rapist. The stories of Leda and Europa depict Zeus entrapping, overpowering and raping women to bear sons of god. The **#metoo** of Leda and Europa is a **#notmetoo** for Mary. **#notmetoo** for Yahweh. And a cry for gender justice as vital to the new creation embodied in Christ and born of Mary.

Suggestions for Prayer:

Find a moment to consider your body in nakedness, that you were once a baby borne of a mother, a family, a community. Consider also that this body is yours. And no one can lay claim on it, and neither can you claim theirs.

Light a candle to seek and symbolise the courage it takes to stand up to violence and discrimination.

Speak Lord

Announce where you are hurting and hoping,
leading and alighting that I may be touched and transformed
by a voice of the wilderness showing me where Christ comes.

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Advent

Hands of God

Did God hand down from heaven the infant Christ child? Or did some mega-stork drop to earth the magical baby, untouched by the trauma of birth, floating down borne on a divine wind? Does the Christ-child not come in holy travail, nurtured in uterus, in Mary's brave body till the hormones trigger the passing of the child into a new and unknown world?

Did the arms of the midwife bring Mary's child to her arms and breast? Hands that having helped Baby Jesus emerge from the birth canal offer him into the embrace which alone will reassure and confirm a bond began when those little hands and feet fluttered in the womb of Mary. Did Mary's hands pass her precious child into the reluctant hands of a yet to be converted Joseph? The dad, who having not fathered the baby, has tried to hide his doubts and silence his male ego, fearing Mary has made a cuckold of him. Until his hands hold this perfect child and he humbles himself to the sole power of a child to make a father of a man.

And yet the hands are ours, handing on the child and the story, seeking to pass on generation to generation the promise God has made to be with us. To hear the cry of God is to hear our sacred texts and share them. We hear God in our stories, songs and celebrations, and sense the nearness of God and yet the space between us. These are our hands as we too reach out, responding to his voice, as he bids us: 'Put your hands here and believe'.

Suggestions for Prayer:

Find a moment, hold and touch something or someone precious. And hold and touch something you have discarded today. Reflect on who and what is precious.

Light a candle to symbolise your willingness to pass on the precious message of the hope of Christ.

Speak Lord

Announce where you are hurting and hoping,
leading and alighting
that I may be touched and transformed
by a voice of the wilderness
showing me where Christ comes.

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Advent

Massacre

Perhaps we have celebrated in tenderness and joy the birth of the Christ-child. The news of his birth has stirred in us again a warmth at life's inherent miracle. The Christmas story has spoken, a child has cried, a mother has sung a sweet lullaby and a father has wept tears of joy and wonder. Matthew is unwilling to leave us with a Church Nativity Play, but reveals to us what hearing God's cry amplifies. Matthew confronts us with parents' cries of deep anguish and tears. The news of a rival King is cause for terror in the palace and in terror the palace lashes out, inflicting the forces of death on the first signs of life. So, we listen to parents crying for the (Palestinian/Rohingya/Dalit/Mindano/Black) children murdered by soldiers and police in Bethlehem, in Myanmar, in India, the Philippines, the US and beyond.

Matthew's exposure of Herod as a cold-blooded killer, whose instincts are entirely self-seeking, reminds us that Empires are not steeped in peace but soaked in blood. And so are those who seek an alternative. Herod hoped that the rival king child would be murdered in some Bethlehem home, by a loyal unquestioning Herodian or IDF soldier, or by some unblinking unerring drone operated from afar. But, he also wanted the populace to get the message that resistance is futile, the Empire will not fall to peasants and upstarts.

Matthew confronts us with the kingdom a child is murdered by, to convert us to the murdered child and the kingdom he leads us towards. Matthew brings together the horror and the hope. And the cries of families, neighbours, communities, mother-father-God, demanding 'why?!' Yet in heaven's halls, bedecked for the celebration of a birth, God's cry must also be in deep anguish for the consequences visited on so many innocents, and God cries, wondering, 'What have I started?' Hearing God's cry is not simply the listening for a command we must follow, or a still small voice bidding us 'come', it is to enter into God's own anguish. We are

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to hold the hand not just of the tiny baby God of the manger, but hold tight to our bosoms the snotty God wailing and howling at the resulting massacre. And with this falling apart grieving God find ourselves filled with tears and anger at how cruel this world can be and the cost to the innocent and the Divine.

Suggestions for Prayer:

Find a moment to wrap yourself in a cloth or blanket, to feel enfolded. Remember the many who mourn and weep. Contemplate God's own grief and envelop God in the safeness you can feel and find in this moment.

Blow out the candles as a sign of the work and witness ahead to kindle light and hope in the midst of injustice.

Speak Lord

Announce where you are hurting and hoping,
leading and alighting
that I may be touched and transformed
by a voice of the wilderness
showing me where Christ comes.

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley
Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Advent

Reflection and Meditation

Let us seek a moment of quiet, amongst many voices:

Voices which tell us of our world:

Profit is everything
 Politics is pointless
 Shopping is redemption
 Mexicans are criminals
 Migrants are scum
 Muslims are extremists
 Black lives don't matter
 Women are toys
 Queers are abnormal
 The earth is to be exploited
 Resistance is futile
 There is no alternative

Let us make room:

For the broken to speak
 The rock to cry out
 The unspoken text to find its counter voice

Let us light candles for:

Those who make themselves partners in God's mission
 People of all identities
 Who witness in their lives, bodies and gifts
 to all that empire oppresses and all that God would liberate

Let us Pray:

Come Lord, decree of love
 Grow louder in light
 And summon us to your side
 Into radical love and action

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley
 Mission Secretary, Council for World Mission

Celebrating Christmas in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 7: 14

TOPIC: God with us

Atrocious acts against Dalits in India are not new. Dalits in India are people who are discriminated against and inhumanly treated on the basis of their birth. They have been given the lowest place in religion, society, economics, and politics. They were called untouchables, outcasts for thousands of years. Recently a number of Dalit research scholars were not treated equally and one of them, Rohith Vemulla, ended his life. High caste professors were not willing to work with Dalit scholars under them. A Dalit groom was allegedly beaten for 'daring' to take a decorated car to his wedding venue. A 25-year-old pregnant Dalit woman and her family were beaten in Gujarat after they refused to dispose of the carcass of a cow.

Today the text refers to Immanuel which means 'God with us'. This is regarded as the prophecy of the coming Christ. We learn about 'God with us' from many examples in the Old Testament. One example is God's call to Moses through the burning bush, summoning him to go to Pharaoh to demand the release of the Hebrew people. Another is of King Jehoshaphat of Judah who wins an impossible battle against his enemies, and his army doesn't have to fight at all. "Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow, go out against them, and the Lord will be with you" (2 Ch 20:17). And there are many more examples of the difference God's presence made.

How is this promise of Immanuel relevant to the oppressed in general and Dalits in particular?

In the season of Christmas, this passage is a prophecy of the promised presence of the Lord and deliverance no matter the situation faced by God's people. Today we are challenged to take the message of 'God with us' to those who are oppressed, including those whose mere touch is considered cursed. We have to remind and reassure them of their inheritance in God and that God is with them all the time.

Questions:

1. How do you feel when someone is discriminated against on the basis of their birth in a certain caste?
2. Have you witnessed any such incidents in your church/locality?
3. How can the message of Immanuel be a message of solidarity?

Prayer:

Dear God we thank you for your presence with us all the time. Strengthen us that we may proclaim this promise to the world and especially those who are oppressed on the basis of their birth. Amen.

Rev. Ashish John Archer
Church of North India

Celebrating Christmas in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Luke 2: 30-31

TOPIC: Lord of Hope

The farmers in India are agitating for their agricultural loans to be expunged. The rains have deserted them; they suffered huge losses and have no money to repay loans. The wealthy get away with large loans but the poor farmers are hunted by the bank and government officials to repay their loans. They are in a hopeless situation and are so desperate to be heard they are using unique methods such as drinking their urine and eating rats.

We live in a world of uncertainties. A small ray of hope can be life changing. Here is a confession of Simeon's faith, that this child in his arms is the Saviour. Everything we hope for is centered in the person of Jesus Christ. Note how Simeon describes him: He is "the consolation of Israel" (2:25). He is "the Lord's Christ," the one prophesied of throughout the Old Testament (2:26). He is God's "salvation" (2:30), "a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel" (2:32). He "is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel" (2:34).

Isaiah says those who were walking in darkness saw light. This light is our Lord. Today people are stuck in hopeless situations which are impossible to escape from. Simeon is an old man who has put his hope in the promises of God. This was no ordinary newborn! He was the fulfillment of God's promises to His people. Therefore, the mission of the church should be to bear the gospel of hope, Christ, in this modern world of hopelessness. The mission is to bring that needed ray of hope to those at the margins who need the assurance that God will bring salvation for those who are least expecting it. We have to ensure that God's salvation in Christ, prepared for all peoples is realized by all peoples.

Questions:

1. What is God's will for those living in hopeless situations?
2. How is Christ relevant in such situations?
3. How can we become instruments of hope in our own contexts to people living in hopelessness?

Prayer:

Dear God, strengthen us to be instruments of hope to the people who need it most. We pray for hope of a better tomorrow, better life, love, and kindness. Amen.

Rev. Ashish John Archer
Church of North India

Celebrating Christmas in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Luke 1: 38

TOPIC: Remodeling Understanding

Today women strive for equality and equal opportunities. Across the world women are objectified, mocked and oppressed. The head of the most powerful country has a history of objectifying and insulting women. India is no better. In many universities and colleges men decide what is good for women to wear on campus. Fathers and brothers decide what and where they study, whom to befriend, and ultimately marry. Those who rebel against their family (usually the male members) are beaten, ostracised, and, in some instances, killed.

Against this background, note the text for today where Mary surrenders to the wishes of God-sent angel. She says, as the servant she will do whatever she is told. When we think of the women of the ancient world, our first emotional response is usually pity. There was so much they could not or were not allowed to do. The men assumed the leadership roles especially in spiritual matters. The women seemed only fit for cooking and bearing children. Perhaps a few women, 'blessed' financially and socially, may have been able to enjoy some of the benefits of the male world. They were second class citizens and treated as commodities. It could be said that being born a woman in those days was a burden if not a curse.

Women today are expected to answer in the same way as Mary and surrender to their lords, the males of the family, and the society. However, we fail to understand that Mary agreed to God's will and became a part of a grand plan of salvation of all humanity. The angel who announced the Lord's wish has departed. Men are neither angels nor gods.

The mission for the church in the modern world should be the emancipation of women in such situations and to become the voice of the voiceless. A lot is being done but a great deal is still to be done. Let us work together towards equality where men and women can both surrender to the Lord and neither can be subjugated by another.

Questions:

1. What is the status of women in your society?
2. What steps can be taken by local congregations to remodel the understanding of the people?

Prayer:

Dear God, we pray for those suffering because of sexism and male chauvinism. Help us to understand that everyone is equal in the sight of the Lord. Give us strength to become the voice of the voiceless. Amen.

Rev. Ashish John Archer
Church of North India

Celebrating Christmas in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:10-11

TOPIC: Reasons to be Courageous

A 16-year-old died and three other young men attacked by other passengers on a train in Haryana and then thrown off the train just 20 kilometers from Delhi. This appeared to be a hate crime. Two years ago, a mob killed a farm worker Mohammed Akhlag over 'rumours' that his family had stored and eaten beef. This is the new environment in India. People are killed by the cow vigilantes on suspicion of their eating or storing beef. People are afraid of carrying cattle and eating their choice of food even if it is permitted by the constitution.

Even in this, the scripture commands that we should not be afraid - Moses' assurance to the Israelites (Deut. 31:8), the Lord's encouragement to Joshua (Josh. 1:9), God's call of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:8), and Jesus' comforting the disciples (Matt. 14:27). Today the angel assures the shepherds not to be afraid. Fear is so pervasive in our lives. The Lord comes with the message 'fear not'. It was not a new message from heaven but one reassured and renewed in Christ. Throughout his ministry He told his disciples not to be afraid. He came to deliver humanity from its fears.

How can people not fear when they are living in an environment of fear? How can the families of lynch victims not fear and rejoice instead? The church has to stand with the families of victims and speak against this increasing public injustice. As the Body of Christ, we have to rethink the strategies for our mission in this scenario.

This Christmas, mission needs to keep in focus those who are living in the shadow of fear in many countries. When people embrace the message to 'fear not' only then will they be ready to receive the good news of the coming of our Lord.

Questions:

1. What are the recent issues in your locality which cause people to fear?
2. What is your Christian responsibility towards those living in fear?
3. What can be the message of joy for the people living in fear?

Prayer:

Dear God we thank you for your message to fear not. Help us to realize this message is for us and all who live in fear. Strengthen us to speak against injustices and to bear your good news of joy and prosperity. Amen.

Rev. Ashish John Archer
Church of North India

Celebrating Christmas in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Luke 4:17-21

TOPIC: Mission and Poverty

Jesus proclaimed in the synagogue of his hometown the messianic words of Isaiah 61, which refers to Leviticus 25: the year of the jubilee. The jubilee established freedom for slaves and enabled land to be returned to its original distribution every fifty years, as if each generation of Israelites needed to experience receiving the land as a gift from God.

This "ideal," grounded in the Law and not realized in history, became part of the messianic expectation in Isaiah: to be fulfilled in the time of the Messiah. On an ordinary Sabbath day in Nazareth, Jesus says this Scripture is fulfilled with him. Jesus' listeners understood very well what he was talking about; note that this passage ended with the narrative of the first attempt to murder Jesus (see Lk 4: 28-30). The God who manifests Himself in favour of the poor upsets the established order.

People who are poor are deprived of basic necessities of life- food, shelter, and clothes. Our Lord grew up in poverty. He was born in a manger and was raised by a carpenter. He experienced poverty first hand. He can be identified with the poor.

Modern churches are growing in money, material resources, and political power. What is the response of the followers of the One who proclaimed "...he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor", and identified himself with the poor. Are we bringing the good news to the poor? Are we doing anything other than praying (James 2: 15-17)? Are we biased towards the rich and neglect the poor among us?

Our renewed understanding of mission this Christmas should go beyond reaching the unreached, loving everyone equally, and caring for the poor among us. We should also stand against the unjust structures of society and government policies which add to the misery of the people. Prayer with action for the poor and against injustice should be norm for the mission of our church today. Only then will the Lord's manifesto be fulfilled among us and through us for all.

Questions:

1. What is our attitude to the poor as a church?
2. How can our Lord Jesus be identified with the poor?

Prayer:

Dear God our sustainer, help us to understand that our Lord who was born in poverty stood against the established structure for the poor. May we follow his footsteps and be his true disciples in modern times. Amen.

Rev. Ashish John Archer
Church of North India



Life in Fullness, a collaboration of six artists, Global Painting Retreat, 2016.

My prayers and reflections on this week

Celebrating Christmas in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 33: 15-16

TOPIC: Need of Transparency

According to the Transparency International website, many governments in Asia Pacific fail to stop corruption and 900 million people are paying bribes. India stands very low in the corruption perceptions index 2016 at 79th place scoring only 40 points out of 100. This statistic alone is enough to prove that the level of corruption is very high. Protests against seemingly endemic corruption in India are common. In past years, a series of anti-corruption campaigns mobilised widespread public support. In August 2011, tens of thousands demonstrated in support of the creation of a new ombudsman with the power to investigate politicians and senior bureaucrats. The Guardian reported that some states in India have taken the initiative to fight corruption. One poor north-eastern state of Bihar, has been posting online videos of personal statements by victims of bribes, in which they name corrupt officials. Officials believe the fear of exposure will stop those accused of corruption. In 2011 two farmers fed up with bribery demands emptied three bags filled with snakes in a busy tax office in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

Today's text talks about corruption. A true follower of Christ is expected to hear, act, and agree to honest ways and fair conduct. They should not gain from acts of oppression, should refuse to give and receive bribes, and should pay no attention to slander and evil deeds.

A serious current concern within our country is that of corruption. There is a rise in corrupt practices which is making the life of the commoners difficult every day. Laws are insufficient; corruption cannot be eliminated without people rethinking their ways.

Therefore, this Christmas the mission of the church in these situations should be to "conscientize" people against corruption. Standing against the unjust practices and committing to transparent behavior in accordance with God's will for justice and truth, we help those who are victims of corruption.

Questions:

1. Do you feel corruption exists in your society?
2. What are the reasons that corruption grows in the society?
3. What steps can be taken to end corruption and set an example for the world to follow?

Prayer:

Dear God help us to mend our ways that our actions will be transparent and just; that we may be useful to the society. Help us also to shun the ways which are harmful for people, particularly those who are weakest in society. Amen.

Rev. Ashish John Archer
Church of North India

Celebrating Christmas in the Context of Empire

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 30: 21

TOPIC: God's Help

In the past few days we have been looking at and focusing our devotions on victims within the society. We have seen issues which are hurting many people in society. We need strength and encouragement to stand against the unjust structures of the world. It will require a special determination and courage to do what is right and walk in God's desired ways. God expects us to walk in God's ways, follow God's paths, and never succumb to worldliness and sins of humanity. Our God is a God who always expects the best of us and never abandons us. There is a voice which always guides God's people.

In the past days we reflected on our responsibilities in the reshaping of mission in order to bring about change and liberation for the people who are in bondage as a result of the evils of the world. The task is difficult and we require the hand of God in order to overcome all the hindrances. We have reflected on what we must do and the text today talks about walking with the help of God.

The walk requires greater engagement than mere talking. The scripture helps us to discern the way to walk. We are expected to walk in the way which pleases God with the help given by God.

Therefore, our mission this Christmas season should be to open ourselves to hearing God's voice which guides us to walk in God's way. By listening to God's leading voice and walking in the way fashioned by God, we will be able to fulfill all the goals we have talked about in the past days. We will get strength to stand upright, speak the truth, and do what is right in the sight of God.

Questions:

1. Have you ever experienced the God's guidance in your life?
2. How has God been challenging you over this past week through these reflections?
3. How will the promise of God's help make a difference to your response to the ways you have been challenged?

Prayer:

Dear God our sustainer, help us to understand that our Lord who was born in poverty stood against the established structure for the poor. May we follow his footsteps and be his true disciples in modern times. Amen.

Rev. Ashish John Archer
Church of North India

Keeping Vigil

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 26:37-46

TOPIC: Watching for the New Year

Tonight, we will wait for the new year, this last night of the year is called "Watch Night and its traditions have interesting antecedents.

On the night of Dec. 31, 1862, free black people living in the Union States met in church and safe spaces, while thousands of their enslaved black sisters and brothers prayed on plantations in America — waiting for President Abraham Lincoln to sign the Emancipation Proclamation into law. The Emancipation Proclamation was signed on January 1, 1863, changing the status of over 3 million people who were enslaved in southern states in America from slave to free. Any slave who escaped the control of the Confederate government, became legally free.

Another tradition in the Methodist church is a covenant service which could be celebrated as a Watch Night Service. The service focuses on a call to renew our covenant with God in response to God's grace to us and is modeled from Wesley's 1755 first covenant service.

Matthew 26:37-46 on the 'eve' of his crucifixion, Jesus experiences his own "Watch Night", when he asked his disciples to accompany him to the garden where he took time to pray. He asked them to "stay" and "keep watch" with him, but returned to find them sleeping.

Jesus was disappointed and asked them "could you not watch with me one hour?" (vs 40). He warned "watch and pray so that you do not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (vs 41).

"Watch" used three times in the reading and is increasingly urgent. First, "watch," as in observe, next "watch" as in be awake, and finally, "watch" as in be alert.

Do Jesus' words resonate with us tonight? In 2018 what do we see in our lives, community, and world? Are we awake to become God's instruments of change to bring fullness of life to God's creation?

As we approach 2019 are we alert to signs of the times around us? How prepared are we to respond bring healing to our broken relationships?

Let us hear Jesus' appeal to be awake and alert. Let' notice our world around us and challenge ourselves to find God's purpose for our lives as we approach 2019.

Prayer:

God who is the beginning and end of all things. Hear us as we celebrate your blessings this past year and bring your comfort to those who suffered losses in this past year.

Open our eyes to be awake to you as we approach another new year, confident in your promise to equip us for the challenges and year ahead.

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Face to Face 2015



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