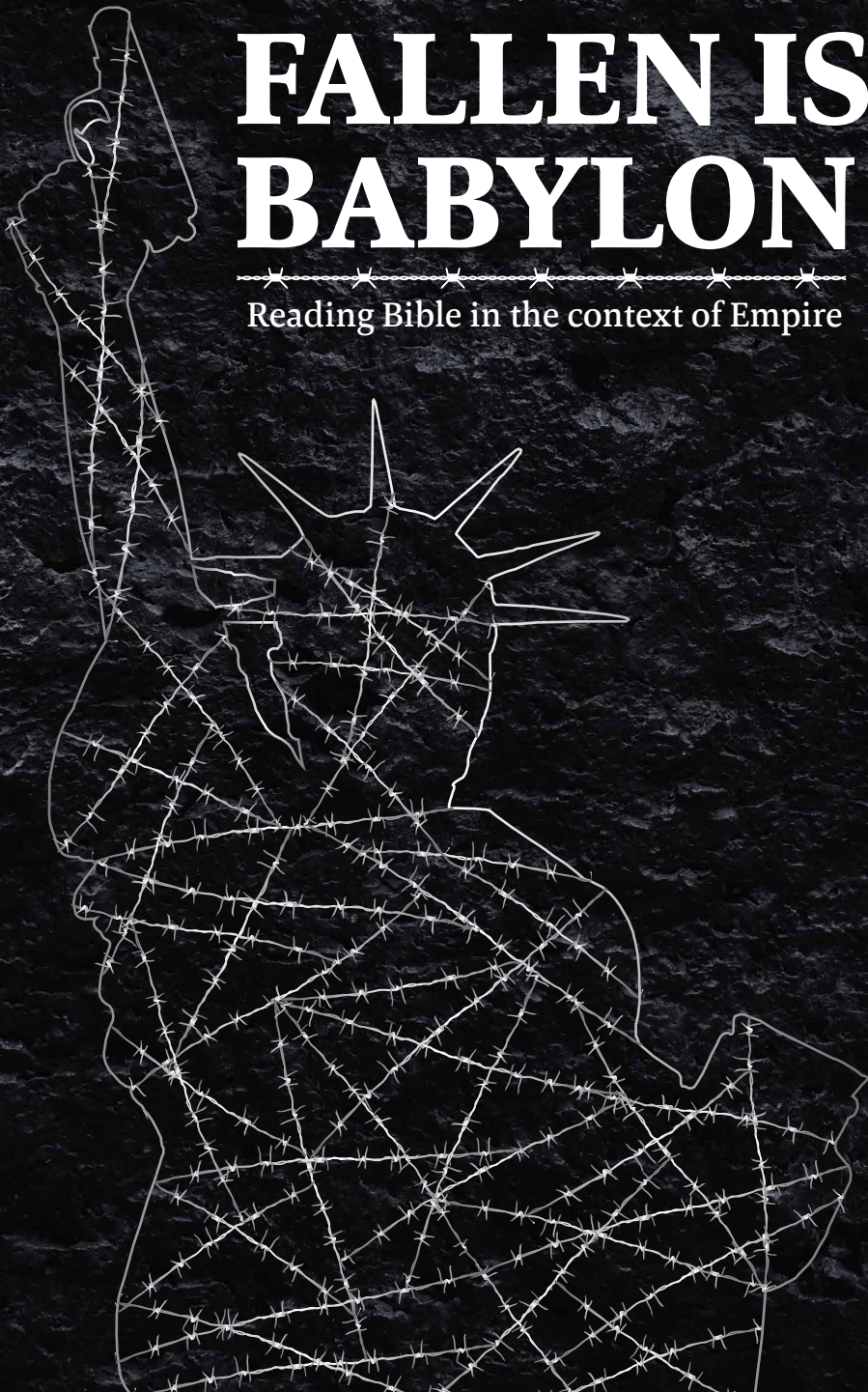


Reading Bible in the context of Empire







FOREWORD

Then I saw another angel flying high in the air, with an eternal message of Good News to announce to the peoples of the earth, to every race, tribe, language, and nation. He said in a loud voice, "Honour God and praise his greatness! For the time has come for him to judge all people. Worship him who made heaven, earth, sea, and the springs of water!" A second angel followed the first one, saying, "She has fallen! Great Babylon has fallen!" (Revelation 14: 6 – 8).

The book of Revelation is a story of inspiration for those who live on the margins of society and a message of sobriety, even warning, for those who believe that absolute power resides in human crafty schemes and politics. The dispirited and broken-hearted will discover that God has a plan for their vindication and the high and exalted will know that the "mighty (have) fallen and the weapons of war perish" (2 Sam 1: 27). The message is essentially about the coming of a "new Jerusalem" (Rev 21: 2), "another world" (Arundhati Roy) where a flourishing environment and peace, goodwill and justice for all define God's creation.

Babylon has fallen! The author of Revelation, who lived in the midst of the terrifying power of empire and its persecution of any and all who resisted her, makes this claim twice. Within a few years of this prophetic pronouncement, Rome had indeed fallen. Empire was humbled by the resistant spirit of movements within its colonised lands, movements like the one stirred up by Jesus of Nazareth. And yet, everyone, including the prophet of this message, cried when Babylon fell (Rev 18). What is meant to be a time of celebration for the oppressed victims of empire is equally a time of desolation. No one seems to win.

So, we come, in our era of empire, to announce the good news to a hurting world that Babylon has fallen! This is a statement of encouragement and hope for the weary, the battered and bruised of our time. It is also a warning of the great pain and sorrow inflicted on everyone, both the oppressed and the oppressor, when systems and structures are allowed to divide and eventually destroy society. 'Babylon has fallen' is therefore an invitation to all to embrace a different way of being in community, opening the way to a new epistemology, marked by the experience of life is fullness by all.

How can we say Babylon is fallen? We do so because in the face of dominant powers we believe in the ultimate power of God, who is counter-creating in our midst a new heaven and earth, who in the company of peasant girls is working to bring the powerful down from their thrones (Luke 1: 52) and to bridge the divide by challenging the oppressors to confess wrongdoing, make reparation and open the door to the new (Luke 19: 1-10).

We have the witness of the biblical text to remind and inspire us that Babylon has fallen. The claims, powers and blandishments of empire are empty and bring not blessing but curse. As we approach the text we realise in glaring details that empire is behind the text, in the text and in front of the text. However, thankfully, the dynamic of God's people, in the midst of empire, shapes the drama of both testaments and our interpretations of the text.

How can we say Babylon is fallen? We do so by being part of what subverts it, and reveals its shame, its charade and its life-denying vices. In 2010, CWM embarked on developing a theology and programme of mission which took empire as its main interlocutor. As we survey the threats to life and to God's sovereignty, in 2019, we felt it was timely to revisit our theology of mission in the context of empire and to once again call this to the attention of our member churches and partners.

CWM offers this set of bible studies as a new resource to enable conversations about how God is stirring up life-changing and system-changing moments and movements in our midst. I commend it for study, discussion and, above all, action as we invite the world beyond Babylon to break in upon us in hope, light and joy.

Rev Dr Collin Cowan
General Secretary
Epiphany 2019

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ACT 1

SUBVERTING EMPIRE'S POWER OVER MINDS AND BODIES





SUBVERTING EMPIRE'S CLAIM THAT HUMANITY IS THE CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSE

THE CLAIMS OF THE EMPIRE:

"There is no indigenous territory where there aren't minerals. Gold, tin and magnesium are in these lands, especially in the Amazon, the richest area in the world. I'm not getting into this nonsense of defending land for Indians. [indigenous reserves] are an obstacle to agri-business. You can't reduce indigenous land by even a square meter in Brazil" Jair Bolsonaro in Campo Grande News, April 22, 2015

This is the attitude at the heart of Empire when it comes to creation. It is a resource to be endlessly exploited. The impact of humanity on our environment has been latterly catastrophic and coincides with industrialisation and the emergence especially of consumerist hyper-capitalist economies.

On Earth, human activities are changing the natural greenhouse. Over the last century the burning of fossil fuels like coal and oil has increased the concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂). This happens because the coal or oil burning process combines carbon with oxygen in the air to make CO₂. To a lesser extent, the clearing of land for agriculture, industry, and other human activities has increased concentrations of greenhouse gases. <https://climate.nasa.gov/causes/>

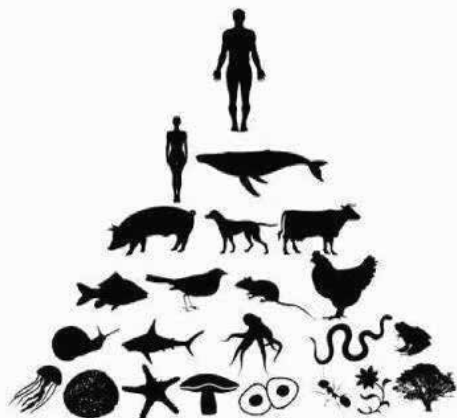
The world renowned naturalist, Sir David Attenborough, spoke at the 2018 Climate Summit in Poland:

"Right now, we are facing a man-made disaster of global scale. Our greatest threat in thousands of years. Climate change. "If we don't take action, the collapse of our civilisations and the extinction of much of the natural world is on the horizon."

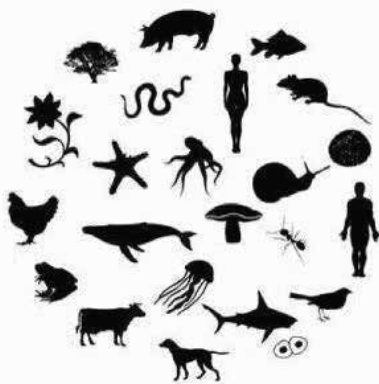
"The world's people have spoken. Their message is clear. Time is running out. They want you, the decision-makers, to act now," The People have spoken. Leaders of the world, you must lead. The continuation of our civilisations and the natural world upon which we depend, is in your hands. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-46398057>

Humanity thinks it is at the centre and top of creation, that its resources and life are destined and designated only to service humankind's needs and desires. We live as if we are outside creation, observing it, othering it, limiting its own agency and unique given-ness. Even Sir David Attenborough's comments reveal a view that humanity having harmed the earth is the 'messiah' which can save it. Yet, really we just need to stop harming it, live in harmony with it and creation together will restore fullness and wholeness of life.

EGO



ECO



RE-READING OUR TEXTS



Job 39 verses

[God spoke to Job]

Do you know when mountain goats are born? Have you watched wild deer give birth?

Do you know how long they carry their young? Do you know the time for their birth?

Do you know when they will crouch down and bring their young into the world?

In the wilds their young grow strong; they go away and don't come back.

Will a wild ox work for you? Is he willing to spend the night in your stable?

Can you hold one with a rope and make him plow? Or make him pull a harrow in your fields?

Can you rely on his great strength and expect him to do your heavy work? Do you expect him to bring in your harvest and gather the grain from your threshing place?

Was it you, Job, who made horses so strong and gave them their flowing manes?

Did you make them leap like locusts and frighten people with their snorting?

Does a hawk learn from you how to fly when it spreads its wings toward the south?

Does an eagle wait for your command to build its nest high in the mountains? It makes its home on the highest rocks and makes the sharp peaks its fortress. From there it watches near and far for something to kill and eat.

**WAKE UP
HUMANS
YOU'RE
ENDANGERED
TOO.**





When Psalm 8 asks, “what are human beings, that you think of them?” Job 39 should be offered in answer to temper the self-reverence of humanity. The mystery of Divine Love is not limited to humanity, and the particular place humanity places itself in needs to be relativized by the mountain goats, wild ox, horses, hawks and eagles. And more. The mission of Divine Love is also not so limited, for all of creation plays their part in the mission of transformation wrought by the Creator’s Divine Spirit. God takes joy in the life of all creation, and all of creation’s life is under the promise of renewal and liberation from bondage to decay.

The argument between Job and God hinges in part on the self-reverence of Job, not only because his suffering has made him self-centred, so has his gender, privilege and mind set. As a wealthy, educated land owning male, he had become accustomed to being at the comfortable pinnacle of his society and community. As the book opens, we hear that Job owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants. The text tells us, without irony, that ‘this man was the greatest of all people of the east’ (Job 1:3) His enormous herds surely qualified him to know what animals need and what they are for. But God silences the one who imagines all relationships and knowledge comes through the transactions of ownership, status and service. The drama then continues in which not just the benefits of Job’s privilege are torn away but so is the theology of his privilege also. (This becomes so terrible and unimaginably that the editor/writer is forced to return them to Job at the end!)

Job’s attitudes are echoed in Empire, especially in terms of dominating nature, family and possessions. A view that is assumed, without question, is the natural order of things and even divinely inspired. The fruit of this in the 21st Century is the real possibility that humanity will destroy not just the habitat which nurtures the lives of polar bears, tigers, gorillas, turtles, whales but the habitat of the whole inhabited earth, humans included especially.

The question becomes then what is creation that you think so little of it? Estimates to the size of the ‘Pacific Plastic Garbage Patch’, range from 700,000 square kilometres (270,000 sq mi) (about the size of Texas) to more than 15,000,000 square kilometres (5,800,000 sq mi) (about the size of Russia). The United Nations Ocean Conference estimated that the oceans might contain more weight in plastics than fish by the year 2050.

The World Council of Churches new affirmation on mission and evangelism, *Together Towards Life*, challenges us to make these connections and so place the agency of creation and climate justice at the heart of mission:

22. We need a new conversion (metanoia) in our mission which invites a new humility in regard to the mission of God's Spirit. We tend to understand and practice mission as something done by humanity to others. Instead, humans can participate in communion with all of creation in celebrating the work of the Creator. In many ways, creation is in mission to humanity; for instance, the natural world has a power that can heal the human heart and body. The wisdom literature in the Bible affirms creation's praise of its Creator (Ps. 9:1-4; 66:1; 96:11-13; 98:4; 100:1; 150:6). The Creator's joy and wonder in creation is one of the sources of our spirituality (Job 38-39).

23. We want to affirm our spiritual connection with creation, yet the reality is that the earth is being polluted and exploited. Consumerism triggers not limitless growth but rather endless exploitation of the earth's resources. Human greed is contributing to global warming and other forms of climate change. If this trend continues and earth is fatally damaged, what can we imagine salvation to be? Humanity cannot be saved alone while the rest of the created world perishes. Eco-justice cannot be separated from salvation, and salvation cannot come without a new humility that respects the needs of all life on earth.

AREAS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:



The world's leading climate scientists have warned there is only a dozen years for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5C, beyond which even half a degree will significantly worsen the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people.

What are implications does climate change have in your community and region?

What is your church/congregation doing to engage with this?

Reflect on the questions around Psalm 8, "What are human beings?" What is creation to you?

The Bible describes a state of mutuality between the Creator and the Creation, and the joy creation takes in the Creator, (Ps. 9:1-4; 66:1; 96:11-13; 98:4; 100:1; 150:6). Do you think the creation takes joy in you? Is it glad when you awake and go about your life? Will it miss you when you are gone?

Where do you see signs of the new creation breaking through Babylon's cracked concrete?



SUBVERTING EMPIRE'S CLAIMS FOR MALE AUTHORITY

THE CLAIMS OF THE EMPIRE:

Empire builds a system of dominance through the consolidation of power and influence that is exclusively for men and their benefit. When power is embodied and visualised it is typically in masculine form, so that even and especially the divine is understood to be the epitome of male power. We call this system patriarchy. Patriarchy carves out an oppressive and discriminatory environment where men hold primary power; access and control predominant roles of leadership; function as the authoritative voice on moral, social, political and religious issues. To simply put it, Empire is patriarchal.



Image | "Saint Mary Magdalene" - Franciscan Media

Patriarchy is a manifestation of Empire because it privileges male authority by placing male voices as authoritative, credible, powerful and competent. It diminishes the voices of women which are deemed subjective, dubious, illegitimate, inferior, and contentious. The acceptable responses for women under male authority are of obedience, submission, compliance and silence. When men demonstrate traits such as assertiveness and decisiveness, they are praised and celebrated. On the other hand, women who demonstrate the similar traits are penalized, censored and deemed as trouble-makers.



Matthew 28:1-15 (NRSV)

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he[a] lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead,[b] and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

¹¹ While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. ¹² After the priests[c] had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, ¹³ telling them, "You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' ¹⁴ If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." ¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.

The discovery of the empty tomb by Mary Magdalene and Mary reminds us that from the early Christian beginnings as a movement of the disinherited and 'disprivileged'. This pericope places women as the only witnesses to the empty tomb of Jesus. They made history by becoming the first apostles whose proclamation of good news humiliates and threatens the male authority of the Chief Priests.

The women's testimony was a dramatic experience. And one can say it was highly unbelievable. The earth shook. An angel appeared. The guards fainted out of fear. The women were tasked to tell the disciples that Jesus is not dead. A resurrected Jesus appears. And the women made audacious claims that they were commissioned by Jesus to fearlessly give instruction to the men to head to Galilee where they will see him. This placed women in the position of power. This turns the tables against patriarchy in disrupting the subordinated status of women. This made the men, even the powerful religious elites, listen to the women.

The women's testimony challenged male authority, privilege, and status quo. To add insult to injury, the women's narrative positioned them as privileged because it was to them first that Jesus chose to share his risen presence. Matthew points out how quickly Patriarchal power moves to rubbish the claims of women. Matthew records the Chief priests bribing the guards to create strife and hostile rumours around Jesus' death and resurrection. This is done to reinstate their legitimacy to power and undermine the women's testimonies – an effort to discredit and cast doubt against the women. The male disciples are also quick to provide their own witness to confirm what otherwise from the women alone would be unbelievable.

Jesus's teachings and ministry were counter-cultural and subversive of the oppressive systems of his day. The community he sought to build through his disciples was meant to be the first fruit of this, thus it was called to be a community of all genders, races and classes. This was already a scandal to many in Jesus' time and after, (Mark 2:16, Luke 7: 35ff). Jesus' punishment of death on a cross was an exhibition of the death of those who rebelled against the priestly power of the Temple of Jerusalem and the Roman authorities. Intimidation, violence, aggression, threat and oppression are the tools of Empire. His death sentence was a way to silence him and anyone who wanted to follow in his rebel rousing way. Yet, in this pericope, we find that it is the women who followed in his ways. They were rebelling against patriarchy. They were proclaiming that women can have power, access and control. They were flipping the script of what women ought to be – submissive, silent and insignificant. And with them in this rebellion is Jesus, instigating this new order through the first witnesses he chose.

Till today, women in both religious and political spheres struggle to be heard, respected and recognized. But their ongoing struggle offers liberation to all the community. Southeast Asian women conscripted into sexual slavery by the Japanese during the second world war have been silenced for decades. Their testimonies of the sexual abuses against them were contested and discredited. But now they are speaking out, as we see in South Korea. Women navigate contested landscapes where their leadership is under scrutiny, denied or deemed illegitimate. Some churches refuse to recognize the ordination of women, others who do ordain women still find in practice that women ministers face more challenges to their ministry than their male counterparts. While there are increasingly more women in leadership, they are the exceptions to the norm. They have beaten the odds against patriarch and misogyny. But what would it take for these odds to change?

AREAS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:



The text invites us to reflect on how fully the whole church community participates in the leadership and life of the church

What are the issues around the leadership of women in your church? Why is it like that? Whose interests are kept when women continue to be silenced? The silence of men around the affirmation and including of women into leadership is complicity. For the men reading this, how are you reminded of your relationship with patriarchy – to dismantle or support it?

“To the privileged, equality feels like oppression”. Is that how the discussion feels about churches as inclusive communities? What are the joys and benefits to communities where there is just and full participation by all?

Jesus was creating a new peoples’ movement, calling together peoples and groups Imperial and Patriarchal society kept down and apart. Jesus mixed with all kinds of people and brought them into a new relationship with each other and with God. Does this describe your church, as a congregation as a denomination? Why is that?

What are we called to do when church becomes Babylon?



Empire makes its claims not only on 'land' but also on 'being'. It seeks to occupy the personal space as well as the public space, and to especially dominate and cow minorities it sees as 'abnormal' or subversive of its power and norms. As a result, it also seeks to co-opt the majority to its values and attitudes. The church, which used to be outside of Empire, has become deeply complicit in this, and is a particular force occupying bodies and souls.

[This statement was drafted in late August 2017, during the annual conference of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, at the Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center in Nashville, Tennessee. The statement was published online on August 29, 2017. It was signed by more than 150 evangelical Christian leaders]

WE AFFIRM that self-conception as male or female should be defined by God's holy purposes in creation and redemption as revealed in Scripture.

WE DENY that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is consistent with God's holy purposes in creation and redemption.



Article 8

WE AFFIRM that people who experience sexual attraction for the same sex may live a rich and fruitful life pleasing to God through faith in Jesus Christ, as they, like all Christians, walk in purity of life.

WE DENY that sexual attraction for the same sex is part of the natural goodness of God's original creation, or that it puts a person outside the hope of the gospel.

Article 10

WE AFFIRM that it is sinful to approve of homosexual immorality or transgenderism and that such approval constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness and witness.

WE DENY that the approval of homosexual immorality or transgenderism is a matter of moral indifference about which otherwise faithful Christians should agree to disagree.

Article 13

WE AFFIRM that the grace of God in Christ enables sinners to forsake transgender selfconceptions and by divine forbearance to accept the God-ordained link between one's biological sex and one's self-conception as male or female.

WE DENY that the grace of God in Christ sanctions self-conceptions that are at odds with God's revealed will.

"I would like to remind and warn all organisations and institutions that campaign and pretend to protect homosexual interests ... we are going to arrest whoever is involved and charge them in courts of law ... Those who teach such things do not like us, brothers. They brought us drugs and homosexual practices that even cows disapprove of" President of Tanzania John Magufuli, June 2017

The governor of Dar es Salaam, Paul Makonda, urged his citizens to start reporting people that they suspected to be LGBTQ to the police so that they could be rounded up. "I have information about the presence of many homosexuals in our province," He added: "Give me their names. My ad hoc team will begin to get their hands on them next Monday."

RE-READING OUR TEXTS



When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. ² Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. ³ Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. ⁴ Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armour, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. ⁵ David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; as a result, Saul set him over the army. And all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved.

³⁰ Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan. He said to him, 'You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness?' ³¹ For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Now send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die.' ³² Then Jonathan answered his father Saul, 'Why should he be put to death? What has he done?' ³³ But Saul threw his spear at him to strike him; so Jonathan knew that it was the decision of his father to put David to death. ³⁴ Jonathan rose from the table in fierce anger and ate no food on the second day of the month, for he was grieved for David, and because his father had disgraced him.

³⁵ In the morning Jonathan went out into the field to the appointment with David, and with him was a little boy. ³⁶ He said to the boy, 'Run and find the arrows that I shoot.' As the boy ran, he shot an arrow beyond him. ³⁷ When the boy came to the place where Jonathan's arrow had fallen, Jonathan called after the boy and said, 'Is the arrow not beyond you?' ³⁸ Jonathan called after the boy, 'Hurry, be quick, do not linger.' So Jonathan's boy gathered up the arrows and came to his master. ³⁹ But the boy knew nothing; only Jonathan and David knew the arrangement. ⁴⁰ Jonathan gave his weapons to the boy and said to him, 'Go and carry them to the city.' ⁴¹ As soon as the boy had gone, David rose from beside the stone heap[e] and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He bowed three times, and they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more. ⁴² Then Jonathan said to David, 'Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the Lord, saying, "The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, for ever."' He got up and left; and Jonathan went into the city.



Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. ²⁴ O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

1 Sam 18: 1 – 5, 20: 30 – 42, 2 Sam 1: 23 – 27



Human Love.

Human Rights.

There can be nothing more imperial than denying the realities, complexities and relationships of other: My theology says you cannot be gay so you must not be gay etc. This is at the heart of the Nashville Statement and others like it. And these supposed faith affirmations tie up with and feed into repressive and violent policies, like those in Tanzania and elsewhere round the world.

Lying behind much of this repressive legislation was British colonial legislation imposed on countries during the Imperial era. From 1860 onwards, the empire spread a specific set of legal codes and common law throughout its colonies, among them laws proscribing male-to-male sexual relations. The British Empire drafted these penal codes with a moral, religious mission in mind. The intention was to protect local Christians from “corruption” and correct and Christianise “native” custom. Of the 71 countries with such a law still on the books in 2018, at least 38 of them were once subject to some sort of British colonial rule. Enze Han, author of “British Colonialism and the Criminalization of Homosexuality,” said the laws were partly the product of a strict Victorian moral code, which defined any sexual activity not for procreation as taboo. “(The British also) had this conception that the ‘Orient,’ the non-Western subjects, were overly erotic and over-sexed, and that’s the reason why they were worried young colonial officers going abroad would be corrupted by those sexual acts,”.

The strict Victorian-era laws brought in by British colonists often clashed with decades, or even centuries of complex local cultural attitudes to sexuality. India, in particular, had traditionally maintained a flexible, non-prescriptive view of sexuality and gender roles. But the British administrators paid little attention to local attitudes when they criminalized same-sex relations in 1860, and declared the country’s centuries-old old custom of transgender hijras to be “unnatural.”

This colonial legislation continues to be in force in a number of CWM contexts. In Africa in: Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia and Zambia. In the Caribbean in Guyana and Jamaica. In East Asia in Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore. In the Pacific in Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu. In South Asia: Bangladesh.

Religious powers are organising against LGBTQ people and their human rights. There is an odd inter-faith 'alliance' over this agenda where conservative leaders of different religions act together to deny the rights of LGBTQ people to full personhood. This is often happening in contexts and with communities which would be suspicious of inter-faith action. Sacred texts are marshalled to terrorise and to justify oppression while other texts are silenced. This is to use the text in Imperial ways, because we do not own the text or its many meanings. It is easy to dehumanise our opponents in the midst of this issue in churches at the moment, yet this will always result in sin and separation, and especially the sin and separation of homophobia.

It is natural and right that all people who enter the sacred text find dimensions of themselves. This is what makes our texts eternal and never new. This is not threatening but deeply moving. Especially, when it comes to the story of David and Jonathan which is unashamedly open about the range, reality and complexity and simplicity of deep and intimate love, especially between people of the same gender. Texts like this one in Samuel invite us back to meeting people in their God given complexity, to reassessing our attitudes and to confront systems which demand people conform to norms imposed by the de-humanising power of Empire. There is debate about the nature of their love for each other. Queer readings interpret it is as it appears, an homoerotic same-sex relationship. Heterosexist interpreters will not countenance this and insist it is a platonic brotherly relationship. But, surely none of us can deny how deeply loving it is, and is perhaps the one time when David's love is honourable and not exploitative, as it is with Bathsheba, Michal and Abishag.

Queer readings are inconvenient to Imperial readings of the text, which is precisely why the church should be open to such readings. The love of David and Jonathan is Queer because it is surely homoerotic but certainly because it is subversive. Queer is to describe ways of being, loving, relating and doing which are subversive and counter-imperial. The relationship is drawn against Saul, Jonathan's father and Israel's king, who sees David as a threat and wants him dead. This is the experience of many queer folk, that they are seen as threats and fear and face violence and even death. This means that the forces of the state are ranged against David and Jonathan. So are the forces of patriarchy. When Saul turns on Jonathan, he names Jonathan's mother as the perverse and rebellious one, (v.30). Saul is the very embodiment of imperial and patriarchal power and intolerance, so any reading of this text has to be in opposition to this. Thus, Jonathan and David, in their love for each other, embody the counter loving alternative to the repression, control and order of Empire and Patriarchy. This counter love is Queer, and it deeply and powerfully resembles God's counter love, which is Queerest of all.

Rev Dr Collin Cowan, the General Secretary of CWM writes:

If our communities are drawn fully and deeply from all kinds of people then we can speak authentically and believably of Christians loving the world. In such communities we see it is homophobia which needs to change, not LGBTQ people. The love we all long for, a love which doesn't judge, is inspired by the grace each receives in being affirmed fully as followers of Christ. Inclusive communities empower because they send people into doing justice sensitised by the needs of those we live amongst. The key to seeing the new things that Jesus is doing in our world depends on making room for those who Jesus dwells amongst: the poorest and the marginalised in our societies. Our living in community with diverse people tests whether we are loving like Jesus and reveals the changes Jesus seeks to make in our world. There are vital and urgent contributions to the mission of God which only LGBTQ people can make, especially as they challenge churches to embody Jesus' life of radical love. LGBTQ people should not be cast away by religious communities but be affirmed in all parts of our communities, including the church.

AREAS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:



If you were a contemporary of David and Jonathan, what would you advise them to do about their relationship? On the reading of the text do you think it was just platonic?

Why would it matter if David and Jonathan were gay? Can't we let people find themselves in the biblical text as they are and see we are all included in the redemptive work of God?

What are the issues around LGBTQ in your place? What is at stake in your opinion?

'I invite CWM member churches to recognise in the LGBTQ members of its churches, families, communities and nations equal persons God loves fully and calls to follow freely as they are and bring an end to the culture of homophobia in churches', (Rev Dr Collin Cowan). How do you respond to this?

The 'fallenness' of Babylon is not sexual diversity but sexual violence. The church is just as fallen. With whom can we begin to rebuild the loving communities Christ calls us to be?



SUBVERTING EMPIRE'S CLAIM THAT BORDERS ARE SACROSANCT, THAT MIGRATION IS A CRIME

THE CLAIMS OF THE EMPIRE:

Migrants have become easy targets for politicians and the media. And the manipulation of tension and suspicion is a smoke screen to prevent powerful people and systems being unmasked. These are some of the claims and quotes:

'Many Gang Members and some very bad people are mixed into the Caravan heading to our Southern Border. Please go back, you will not be admitted into the United States unless you go through the legal process. This is an invasion of our Country and our Military is waiting for you!' Donald Trump on the Migrant caravan from Honduras heading to the US Oct 29th 2018

"We have no country if we have no border," Trump said during the third presidential debate on Oct. 19, 2016, reiterating his desire to build a wall. "We have some bad hombres here and we're gonna get 'em out ... You wouldn't believe how bad these people are. These aren't people, these are animals, and we're taking them out of the country at a level and at a rate that's never happened before." May 16, 2018



"It's certainly not our goal to separate children, but I do think it's clear, it's legitimate to warn people who come to the country unlawfully bringing children with them that they can't expect that they'll always be kept together," US Attorney General Jeff Sessions Sept 2018

"Africa will have ten times as many young people as Europe. If Europe doesn't do anything, they are going to kick in our door." Viktor Orban Hungarian Prime Minister—March 15, 2018,

Let's not forget, the Syrian who comes to us has still his Syria, the Afghan who comes to us has still his Afghanistan [...] But if we lose our Germany, then we have no more home!" Björn Höcke, head of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AFD)

RE-READING OUR TEXTS



Ruth said, 'Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!' ¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. ¹⁹ So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, 'Is this Naomi?' ²⁰ She said to them, 'Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mārà, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?' So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Ruth 1: 17 - 20



The migrations at the heart of the Book of Ruth hinge on the same injustices and tragedies as today. Naomi and her family leave Bethlehem because of famine and leave Israel for Moab as climate refugees. They then return as economic migrants after the deaths of Naomi's husband and sons. Ruth has to risk prostituting herself for her mother in law. They risk all for their families and become a test of the generosity and justice of their neighbours, like all migrants. The people of Bethlehem don't fare as well as the people of Moab, who seem to accept without difficulty Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon and Chilion, who even marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Yet when Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem no one seems to mention the duties Naomi's family have to them, and even when Boaz takes Ruth for himself, he confesses he has known for sometime that they are family. Yet he has been content to let her work like a beggar in the fields and to offer herself for sex in his bed. But Ruth's arrival as a migrant into Bethlehem becomes a vital link for the coming of Jesus, not just as his great-great-great grandmother, but because it gives him an ironic claim on a home town which the 'heavenly migrant' then escapes because of political violence.

UN and regional human rights experts met in March 2018 to consider the rise in xenophobia and urged States, civil society organisations and activists to work to overcome violence and hatred.



"Vile discourses of explicit hate and ideologies of racial supremacy have moved from the fringe to the mainstream. Racial, ethnic and religious bigotry fuels human rights violations, including extreme violence against minorities, and against refugees, migrants, stateless persons, and internally displaced, including people of African descent, with a particularly acute effect on women, and sexual and gender diverse populations. This bigotry is unashamed," said a statement issued by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The experts said "the assault on the human dignity of millions around the world had reached alarming proportions". It cited examples such as crowds of youths marching to neo-Nazi chants in Charlottesville, Warsaw, and Berlin, to the racist and xenophobic attitudes of politicians in the highest levels of office worldwide; from the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims, to the excessive use of military force to police communities of African descent in different parts of the world.

They said urgent global attention must be paid to the structural economic, political and legal conditions that stoke racism and xenophobia among populations that perceive minorities and non-nationals as threats.

"It also means confronting the fact that the rise of populist nationalism is a product of widespread loss of faith in establishment politics that privilege elites, as well as the offensive, xenophobic rhetoric of extremist ideologues," the experts said.

"This is especially evident in the context of backlash in different regions of the world to refugees and involuntary migrants, where gaps in existing international legal frameworks combine with short-sighted national policies to reinforce chaotic and dangerous movements. This chaos heightens anti-migrant anxieties."

It is incumbent on states, including through the ongoing negotiations for the Global Compacts for Migration and on Refugees, respectively, to provide legal pathways for migration and to take the other concrete steps necessary to create an international framework that prioritises substantive equality for all, they said.

The experts said the language of discrimination and intolerance had now become common-place in the media and even in mainstream national political discourses, and they called on States and other actors to redouble their efforts to address the factors contributing to the increase in racial discrimination and inequality.

"Putting an end to racial profiling by law enforcement agents is just as urgent as putting an end to violent hate crimes perpetrated by private actors," the experts said. "Denouncing xenophobic Muslim bans implemented through immigration policies that rely on offensive and flawed assumptions about entire religious groups, is just as urgent as denouncing explicit Islamophobic or anti-Semitic statements made by political leaders.

"Putting an end to the forced displacement and cultural extinction of racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples that results from government and multinational corporation-driven extraction and construction projects, is just as urgent as addressing the resurgence of neo-Nazism," the statement concluded.

<http://www.panapress.com/Rise-in-racism,-xenophobia-is-alarming,-warn-UN-right-s-experts--12-630543034-34-lang4-index.html>

AREAS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:



What are the factors driving migration in your context? Are migrants welcome in your place? Why?

Who has spoken out for migrants and listened to them? Who has stood up to the bigots in your place?

How have churches been engaged in the issues? Only in terms of pastoral care for refugees, or not even that?

Empire has done all it can to invade borders, and makes sure that money and capital can easily cross borders. But yet it whips up fear and hate around the migration of people, especially the people its systems impoverish. Do you have any reflections on why this is?

Migration reveals the xenophobic heart of Empire. Are there communities of love, life and tolerance which reveal Babylon has fallen? Could yours be one of them?



Image | "O Little Town of Bethlehem" - Banksy (London).

ACT 2

SUBVERTING EMPIRE'S POWER OVER SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES





SUBVERTING EMPIRE'S CLAIMS TO SAY WEALTH SHOULD BE REWARDED

THE CLAIMS OF THE EMPIRE:

The economy of Empire privileges capital over all other factors, most especially labour. It is typically argued that government actions that set wages or regulate commerce will restrict profit and lead to capital flight. Minimum wages or wage control will make employers leave the market or substitute workers with machines. Increase a marginal tax rate and workers will supply less labour; investors, less capital. Form a union and the unionized firm will face competitive disadvantages that will put it out of business. Provide a safety net benefit to someone and they'll work less. Tax a polluter and you'll crash GDP. Tax a financial "innovator" and credit markets will dry up. Conversely, cut back on a tax rate, a safety net program, the minimum wage, the unionization rate, financial oversight, and growth, jobs, and liquidity will flourish. In such a system the needs or rights of human or natural resources are secondary to profit maximisation



Profit maximization is an important overall goal that drives everything that a business does while producing and trading material values: investment in productivity enhancing technology and employee training and motivation and a relentless pursuit of innovation to develop new products and services and to increase the quality of the existing ones while lowering costs.

Such actions to maximize long-term profits of course benefit the company itself—its shareholders—in terms of increased share value, dividends, and investment in future productivity and profitability. But such value creation for the shareholders can only be achieved by creating value for customers: new products and services, higher quality, and lower prices. And value for customers can only be created by productive, motivated, and fairly compensated employees, with the help of reliable suppliers who also pursue profit maximization and therefore want to trade value for value.

Such a situation is a win-win for all parties, as opposed to trying to artificially restrict profit maximization.

Profit maximization makes human flourishing possible, and therefore, it is moral.

<https://www.capitalismmagazine.com/2017/05/the-virtue-of-profit-maximization/>

In such a system account only needs to be made to the shareholder, all of whom are equally invested in a model which believes only in capital profit.

¹⁴ For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." ²¹ His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." ²³ His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." ²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." ²⁶ But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹ For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Matthew 25: 14 – 30



Read carefully, this is a parable about the profit incentive and the prioritising of capital, it is an uncannily prescient parable about capitalism in our times, which has resulted in the most astonishing wealth inequalities. Typically the parable of the talents is read as a parable about a life in mission. It has been seen as an exhortation to Jesus' disciples to use their God-given gifts in the service of God, and to take risks for the sake of the Kingdom of God. These gifts have been seen to include personal abilities ("talents" in the everyday sense rather than the technical sense in the text which is simply a currency term), as well as personal wealth. Using our talents in God's services leads to blessing. Failure to use one's gifts, the parable suggests, results in God's judgment.

It is treated as an allegory with these key parts:

The Master is Christ.

The journey of the master to another place and his return (Matt. 25:14, 15, 19; also in Lk. 19:12, 15) speaks of Christ's going away to Heaven at his ascension and his return at the time when he comes again.

Slaves are entrusted with a 'mission' while the Master is away on his journey. In this the church should seek the growth of the Master's interests in his absence. There is an economy of salvation here, a capital given that requires profit, it is even given the analogy of reaping and harvesting the Kingdom.

Upon the Master's return there is to be an accounting of their activity (Matt. 25:19; also Lk. 19:15). This is the Judgment Seat of Christ, where faithfulness is tested and rewarded and unfaithfulness is punished. The unfaithful servant has been allegorised into backsliding Christians and for some he represents the Jews, who seek a supercessionist vision of God's people.

But there is an underlying economy of salvation : Faithfulness brings Profit and unfaithfulness brings Loss, and by extension Blessing or Damnation. It is an economic vision of discipleship.

There are so many issues with this text and with this reading of the text. Infact, this reading of the text is an Imperial reading and we should resist it above all. First of all, Empire makes itself known in this reading of the text because we assume that in the allegorical reading of the story the Master must be Jesus. If there is a King or a Master our first and uncritical thought is he must be Jesus/God. This cosy coterminous reading is the product of centuries of centring Church on the powerful. But it belies who is Jesus, the one who came to serve, and especially the one who came to put first the last. Matthew and Luke are setting us a test.

On hearing this parable, the text is quizzing us, where do you place Jesus? How is this like the Kingdom of God when it sounds more like the Kingdom of Caesar? Can we only value the worth and contribution of people in monetary terms? If so, how much is enough, would thirty pieces of silver be enough for example? Let us notice especially the location Matthew and Luke give their parable. It is on the eve of Holy Week, we are but days away from Judas betraying Jesus to Empire for hard cash, from Jesus himself having to account for his life to the Master Pilate and being thrown into outer darkness, crucified beyond the city wall.

When we equate Jesus with the Master in our text, we are doing something bizarre and disturbing. It is all the more bizarre and disturbing because we do it unconsciously. Our software is set to this mode of reading. The rather useless servant tells us what the Master is like: 'I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed'. The Master quickly goes on to confirm this tyrannical persona verbally and practically as he casts out the one he despises and holds of no account. Is this how we want to describe Jesus/God? Is this our testimony, our Good News? Infact there are many people the Church has targeted for evangelism who would tell us that is exactly what we say he is like and exactly how we have behaved. But, the Jesus of the church is often unrecognisable to the Jesus of our text. He, who was the victim of Empire, who was ultimately no use to the forces of political and religious power has more in common with the servant thrown out than the Master returned home. (Think Suffering Servant Isa 53: 3)

In my reading Jesus is not the Master but the rather useless servant. The rather useless servant does not co-operate with the economic system dictated to him. He is not afraid to speak truth to power when confronted and he pays the true price of this economy: exclusion, impoverishment and death. The rather useless servant is not useful to the Master unlike his more compliant colleagues who are well socialised to this meritocratic system of achievement and profit. This lack of utility is a profound point in the parable and prompts and permits the Master's cruelty and condescension. There is a theory that the exposure of Christianity to the Roman world forced it to emphasise the utility of Jesus. Romans worshipped gods on the basis of the protection and intervention they could offer the worshipper. It was itself an economic system in which gifts were given as propitiation to win favour. Imperial Christianity began to ape this with stories, liturgies and prayer functioning in similar ways that offered reward via the name of Jesus. This is ironic in itself because the persecution of the early Church was based on the threat it posed to the system of 'Pax Deorum' (the divine peace) the Roman gods bestowed on Rome when Rome served the gods well. Reciprocity is the key but here the rather useless servant refuses to join in and pays the consequences. It is clear that Jesus was not useful to Pilate or to Caiaphas, both systems would have worked with him if he had worked with them. But Jesus's contrary attitudes to economy, wealth, tax and power and to worship, discipleship, God and power could not be co-opted to an Imperial model until it was domesticated by the Church.

AREAS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:



What are the economic issues in your place. Who is profiting from them and why? Who is losing?

Who or what should profit from our work and life?

Should CWM, or any of our organisations make account in terms of the profit of their capital? What alternative models of 'profit and loss' or 'investment' should we consider?

What are we to use our 'talents' for? To profit an economy which doesn't sustain life or call it to account?

Consume less: Live more. What do you think about this slogan? If you could adopt such a spirit would you begin to see Babylon fall?



SUBVERTING EMPIRE'S CLAIMS TO BRING PEACE

THE CLAIMS OF THE EMPIRE:

'Peace through Strength' is how Donald Trump describes his military policy at a speech in South Korea on Nov 8th 2017. It's a slogan which goes back to Emperor Hadrian. Empire claims to offer peace through security. Empire conquers and co-opts land, system, society, body, mind and soul using violence in many forms. Resistance is quelled and populations pacified so they can better contribute to the Imperial machine and system. Empire likes to offer the benefits of its vision of peace, but really it is seeking its own profit. Money is to be made from conflict and militarisation. Sales of arms and military services by the world's largest arms-producing and military services companies totalled \$374.8 billion in 2016. US companies increase their share of total arms sales in 2016 to \$217.2 billion.



There are 60 countries around the world engaged in some kind of war and military conflict. That is nearly a third of the world. According to the Global Militarisation Index, the ten countries that have the highest levels of militarization for the year 2016 are Israel, Singapore, Armenia, Russia, South Korea, Kuwait, Jordan, Cyprus, Greece and Brunei. These countries allocate particularly high levels of resources to the armed forces in comparison to other areas of society. Two of these are in CWM member church contexts.



³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." ³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" ⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. ³ He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him anymore, even with a chain,⁴ for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. ⁵ Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. ⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; ⁷ and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." ⁸ For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" ⁹ Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." ¹⁰ He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. ¹¹ Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; ¹² and the unclean spirits begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." ¹³ So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea. ¹⁴ The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. ¹⁵ They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. ¹⁶ Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. ¹⁷ Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. ¹⁸ As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. ¹⁹ But Jesus refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." ²⁰ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Mark 4: 35 – 5: 20

This looks like one of the many healing stories in which Jesus brings a suffering individual release and new life. It comes as an extension of the reach of Jesus, beyond the Jewish territories, as he comes through storm to bring peace in the Gentile territories east of Galilee. In fact, the initial story of Jesus stilling the storm on the lake provides us with an important and ironic backdrop. On a first reading it seems we are simply to see Jesus' power to bring peace to the storms of the lake and the mind. But, both passages have two key words that suddenly give it new dimension. **Peace** and **Legion**. These are Roman Imperial symbols. The centrality of these concepts in the story show Jesus's reach is being extended beyond and against that of Rome and Empire.

Jesus, like the readers of Mark, (based in Rome) would have been quite used to seeing the soldiers of the Roman Legions and hearing the claims that they brought Peace, the Pax Romana (Roman Peace). Such news was declared through acts of 'evangelion' from the Roman Emperor and his deputies. (This is the origin of our word Evangelism, which described all the Imperial announcements made by Roman Governors and Generals telling the Empire what new good thing the Emperor had done). Here these two words are brought together and countered by Jesus, who challenges the peace and security of Rome and her legions. These texts are inviting us to see through them into a deeper reality, to grasp how the Lordship of Christ was and is a challenge to Legion and this Empire.

Having announced the Pax Christi (the Peace of Christ) to the turbulent waters of Galilee, a border is crossed into Gentile territory and this peace must be tested. Immediately Jesus' Lordship is both recognized and denied by those forces possessing the man Jesus meets. In this man we meet the consequences of being possessed by Legion. He is a symbol of those occupied and intoxicated by Empire. With him we meet a number of ironies and contrasts:

The man is found amongst the graves. Empire is filled with monuments to power and glory. Think of our image of a place like Rome, filled with ancient antiquities. Empire claims to be the place of power and life, it is here exposed as the place of madness and death. The halls of Empire are really the sites of death. The gospels theologically and socially contest the notion that the Roman Empire, despite its claims, is the manifestation of God (or the gods') sovereignty, presence, agency and blessing. Matthew 24:27-31 echoes Daniel 7 where God destroys the reign of all empires with their pomp and glory to replace them with the never-ending reign of God.

The man breaks his own chains. This man possessed by Legion appears before Jesus unfree at the same time as being apparently unbound. He is able to break chains but not live in peace, freedom and fullness. Empire claims to be the only way to peace, but its methods, dreams and desires are all anti-social and self-destructive. The fruit and fuel of Empire is alienating and ultimately self-destructive.

The possessing spirit is named Legion. Here the point is not just that there are many demons, but that they are Imperial. This is a reminder also that there are many Empires, and many faces to Empire. It is also an idolatrous parody of the divine self. In Genesis, for example, God speaks of the divine self as a plural, (Genesis 1: 26 at Creation and Genesis 3: 22 at the Fall). This Imperial power is revealed as an idolatrous pretender, present in multiple ways.

Legion's questions reveal the nihilism rooted in Imperial power. What have you to do to with me, Son of the Most High God? The Lordship of Jesus is at once questioned and confirmed. Perhaps it echoes the early confession of faith 'Jesus is Lord', which, while liturgical, was actually political, because it was to deny the Lordship of Caesar. Here, Legion makes the claim that Christ should be subservient to Caesar. Empire's claims are made over God, revealing its own spiritual power and its anti-Religious instincts. These were the claims the mission of the early church constantly confronted as they spread the Gospel of Jesus. We have to confront them too, though we have had a centuries long accommodation of Empire that when we have been asked by power, 'What has the Son of the Most High God' got to do with us?', we have said: 'Nothing', because we have made our faith a mere private matter disconnected from the political and social realities of our time.

Jesus makes clear what Legion has to do with him, by sending him out and liberating the person possessed, returning to him his humanity, dignity and community. Jesus unmask the power of Legion as demonic and destructive and parodies what lies ahead ultimately for Imperial powers: an unclean, unholy headlong rush to disaster. This is Empire ridiculed as Pork, as far from the Most High God as you can get!

This subversive joke casts Empire down and out. And our attention turns then to a man whose life matters. The healing offered here is the vindication of the humanity and worth of the person Empire has so abused. Preyed upon by Imperial power, this man's humanity has been denied and disrespected by military and police forces, and by neighbours and by-standers. To him Jesus offers renewed life, refreshed in dignity and worth, returning to him his personhood, his humanity, symbolized here in peace of mind, renewed relationships with neighbours, and fresh purpose in the counter Imperial movement of Christ.

Such a healed person is no longer a vehicle for Empire, no more a vessel for Legion's death obsessed idolatrous force. His allegiance is now to Jesus and the Life in fullness that he has begun to experience. Thus the man is released from the death obsessed Pax Romana into the life filled Pax Christi Peace of Christ and is then empowered to invite a fresh community of counter empire amongst the borderlands of Galilee.

The reaction of the man's neighbours further underline that something dangerous and subversive has occurred. Instead of desiring Jesus to stay, they beg him to leave. They fear the backlash from Legion and can see this is trouble in their midst because they have made an accommodation with Legion. One fears again that the man now healed will experience a further ostracism for offering an unpalatable hope and challenge to live without Legions power.

AREAS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:



The text invites us to reflect on living in peace in the midst of madness, violence and militarisation

Would you say your community is living in peace? And the wider world? Why? How can you imagine the church speaking 'peace' in such contexts? Who is speaking 'peace' in your context? Does the church support them?

What are the issues around militarisation in your place and region? How much is your national military spending versus social spending?

Empire is fuelled by maddening, destructive and possessing spirits. Where do you see signs of this today?

How can the church live with the knowledge that Babylon has fallen and so engage these spirits and invite healing?





SUBVERTING EMPIRE'S THAT THE EMPEROR IS ABOVE CRITICISM

THE CLAIMS OF THE EMPIRE:

Authoritarian power will not tolerate challenge or critique. President Trump has famously branded all media which criticises him as "Fake News". In Feb 2017 he tweeted: 'The nation's news media "is the enemy of the American people." SICK!' He revisited this rhetoric responding to criticism that his politics was emboldening racists and fascists because of the attack on the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh: 'There is great anger in our Country caused in part by inaccurate, and even fraudulent, reporting of the news. The Fake News Media, the true Enemy of the People, must stop the open & obvious hostility & report the news accurately & fairly'. President Trump Oct 29 2018.



He blames victims frequently. After the Tree of Life synagogue shooting Trump commented: "If they had protection inside, the results would have been far better." Emperors claim to speak from the pinnacle, for the majority, as shown by the incoming President of Brazil: Jair Bolsonaro: 'Since we are a Christian country, God above all. This history of a secular state doesn't exist, no. The state is Christian and the minority that is against it can leave. Let's make a country for majority! The minority must bow to the majority. Law must exist to defend the majority! The minority suits itself [to the law] or just disappears. 8 February 2018.



- ¹ *Praise the Lord!*
Praise the Lord, O my soul!
- ² *I will praise the Lord as long as I live;*
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
- ³ *Do not put your trust in princes,*
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
- ⁴ *When their breath departs, they return to the earth;*
on that very day their plans perish.
- ⁵ *Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,*
whose hope is in the Lord their God,
- ⁶ *who made heaven and earth,*
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith for ever;
- ⁷ *who executes justice for the oppressed;*
who gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets the prisoners free;
- ⁸ *the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.*
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.
- ⁹ *The Lord watches over the strangers;*
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
- ¹⁰ *The Lord will reign for ever,*
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the Lord!

Psalm 146

Israel's faith was restless in the midst of Imperial power. Israel's prophets regularly berated the power of empires that exiled them, or indeed, and often its own kings. Even the normally loyal Priestly tradition voices its criticisms, especially in the Psalms. Israel's temple was founded by King Solomon and so Israel's faith was often in tension with royal influence. Israel developed a theology which claimed the king was the embodiment of Israel's election. Israel succumbed, like Christianity, to the temptation to liken God to a King, even if he was the only King to honour, (and thus by definition the Emperor). But at the same time the Bible also warns against Kings:

So, Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ He said, 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹² and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.

¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵ He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers.

¹⁶ He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle[b] and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷ He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸ And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.'

1 Sam 8: 10 - 17

The King would be present in the worship life of the Temple. So, it must have been quite remarkable to be sat there in the full pomp of kingship and hear the cantor intone Psalm 146: 'Do not put your trust in princes ...'

The claims that the rest of the Psalm make are also uncomfortable listening for the monarch who was called to protect his people and his land. This Psalm is speaking truth to power. It is coupled with other voices in the History and Prophetic traditions which expose the tyrannies and injustices of royal rule.

Israel's faith is even courageous enough to speak truth to God, and to question and even denounce the failure of God to act.

Ps 22

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

² *O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest*

Speaking truth to power is vital if God's people are to have integrity in the midst of Empire. But, they are often silent and complicit with Empire, believing God and the Emperor are on the same side. Instead it often falls to renegades and rebels to speak the truth, and also to the media. The World Press Freedom Index (WPFI) lists seven CWM contexts in the bottom half of its index of 180 countries. Zambia is placed at 113, Zimbabwe at 126, Myanmar at 137, India at 138, Malaysia at 145, Bangladesh at 146 and Singapore at 151.

The WPFI terms Singapore as an "Intolerant government" marked by 'self-censorship'. The Political Editor of the largest Singapore newspaper, The Straits Times, Li Xueying, was allegedly reassigned from her role in August 2018 after the Government complained about the critical tone of her journalism. We should also note that the UK is only listed at 40, because of its extensive and 'extreme surveillance legislation'.

A continued heavy-handed approach towards the press (often in the name of national security) has resulted in the UK keeping its status as one of the worst-ranked Western European countries in the WPFI.



The government began to implement the Investigatory Powers Act—the most extreme surveillance legislation in UK history—with insufficient protection mechanisms for whistleblowers, journalists, and their sources. Home Secretary Amber Rudd repeatedly threatened to restrict encryption tools such as WhatsApp and announced plans to criminalise the repeated viewing of extremist content. Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 remained on the books, presenting cause for concern since the law's punitive cost-shifting provision could hold publishers liable for the costs of all claims made against them, regardless of merit. Both the Conservative and Labour parties restricted journalists' access to campaign events ahead of the June 2017 general election, and BBC political editor Laura Kuenssberg received extensive online abuse and threats, resulting in her being assigned bodyguards to cover the Labour Party conference. Offshore law firm Appleby sued the BBC and The Guardian for breach of confidence over the Paradise Papers source materials, making them the only two media outlets out of 96 in 67 countries to have analysed the Paradise Papers and taken to court. (<https://rsf.org/en/united-kingdom>)

Noam Chomsky places an important qualification to 'speaking truth to power'. He asserts that 'power knows the truth already, and is busy concealing it'. It is the oppressed who need to hear the truth, not the oppressors. This highlights the urgent and essential role worship and liturgy can play in the growing authoritarian politics of our generation. This is why minorities are so important, because their lives and voices reveal the truth about our societies and especially the ways Empire is using power to oppress and deny the lives, rights and realities of others.



AREAS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:



The text turns us to critique our societies from the perspectives of the oppressed and this means especially making room for minorities in our communities.

Minorities often hold up an uncomfortable mirror to the communities where they live. What do ethnic or sexual minorities reveal about your community? Is the church a safe place for vulnerable minorities?

Who is speaking truth to the powerful and the powerless in your context?

How does your church speak truth to political power?

How does your church speak truth to economic power?

How does your church speak truth to religious power?

Can you see the ways this speaking truth reveal that Empire is false, broken and fallen?

THIS IS YOUR POWER!

Access to information and fundamental freedoms.





SUBVERTING EMPIRE'S CLAIM THAT HUMAN RIGHTS ARE UNNECESSARY

THE CLAIMS OF THE EMPIRE:

Empire is the systematising of anti-social power on behalf of the elites. This is most evident in terms of respecting human rights. The US has pulled out of the United Nations Human Rights Council, calling it a "cesspool of political bias". Nikki Haley, the US envoy to the UN described the council as a "hypocritical and self-serving organisation" that displayed "unending hostility towards Israel". After the terrorist attack in Manchester, UK in June 2017, Theresa May, the prime minister stated: "Let us remember those who died and let us celebrate those who helped, safe in the knowledge that the terrorists will never win – and our values, our country and our way of life will always prevail." "If our human rights laws stop us from doing it, we will change the laws so we can do it." "Hitler massacred 3 million Jews ... there's 3 million drug addicts. There are. I'd be happy to slaughter them." President of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte made this comment during a September 2016 press conference. Trump praised Duterte for doing an "unbelievable job on the drug problem". General Tito Kanavian, new Head of the Indonesian Police, is implicated in grievous human rights violations in West Papua and infamously claimed in 2016 that "police have the authority to violate human rights while on duty." He is the man appointed by the Indonesian Government to oversee an investigation of human rights abuses in West Papua.





Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hephher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh son of Joseph, a member of the Manassite clans. The names of his daughters were: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. ² They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said, ³ 'Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. ⁴ Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brothers.'

⁵ *Moses brought their case before the Lord. ⁶ And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ⁷ The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them. ⁸ You shall also say to the Israelites, 'If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. ⁹ If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. ¹⁰ If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. ¹¹ And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the Lord commanded Moses.'*

Numbers 27: 1 – 11



Reading this text one of reminded of the quote of Martin Luther King Jnr: 'Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed'. Thus, it is the daughters of Zelophehad came forward in act of courage and defiance. These women confront, Moses, the figurehead of political and religious power in their community. They do so as women who were not considered legally equal to men under the laws and attitudes of Patriarchy and Judaism. Moses goes straight to the LORD, probably expecting the sound of Divine derision, but instead is told clearly that the LORD believes in the human rights of women and men.

Moses may have feared he was opening the community to controversy and change. But actually, this was a wise investment in a vulnerable community. We know that Women's economic participation and their ownership and control of productive assets speeds up development, helps overcome poverty, reduces inequalities and improves children's nutrition, health, and school attendance. Women typically invest a higher proportion of their earnings in their families and communities than men. But they need access to the full range of credit, banking and financial services and facilities essential to more fully develop their assets, their land and their businesses.

The cost of confronting patriarchal and religious power is a constant for women still. Five Catholic nuns in India are protesting the rape of one of their sisters by a Bishop. They are holding a sit in and have been joined by other women and men to demand justice. "The Church has not given us justice. Neither have the police or government. So, we will fight. We feel that it was the Church which forced us onto the streets," Sister Anupama of the Missionaries of Jesus, one of the protesters, told the Times of India Sept. 8. A nun of the congregation has said that Bishop Franco Mulakkal of Jullundur raped her during his May 2014 visit to her convent in Kuravilangad, in Kerala state. In a 72-page complaint to police, filed June 29, she alleged that the bishop sexually abused her more than a dozen times over two years. Sister Anupama told the Times of India that "many times the sister was sexually abused by Bishop Mulakkal and we had reported it to the Nuncio; they didn't even send an acknowledgement on receiving our complaint. We also reported directly to Rome but even they haven't responded."

Christians should have a particular affinity to human rights. Jesus was tried and executed not by anarchy and atheism, but by the forces of religion and law and order. His was an illegal trial under a number of Human Rights conventions:



Article 5.

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6.

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7.

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8.

Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9.

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10.

Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11.

(1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.

(2) No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

Victims of HR Violations among Church People (Jan 2001-Present) 41 church people killed including 17 clergy

1. GERTRUDE CURAMEN

08 October 2001 – one of the victims of the massacre of five fisherfolk in Pantabangan, Nueva Ecija, member, United Methodist Church.

2. LEO GALLARDO

08 October 2001 – one of the victims of the massacre of five fisherfolk in Pantabangan, Nueva Ecija, member, United Methodist Church Youth Fellowship.

3. PASTOR JOSE BUENDIA

19 November 2003 – former Born-Again Pastor.

4. ISAIAS MANANO

28 April 2004 – Leader of the UCCP-Christian Youth Fellowship (CYF)

5. JOEL BACLAO

10 November 2004 –member of UCCP, coordinator of Andurog Mayon, the Relief and Rehabilitation work of the NCCP for victims of the Mayon Volcano eruption.

6. JUANCHO SANCHEZ

16 November 2004 – Massacre of 7 workers and supporters of Hacienda Luisita strike, including Juancho Sanchez, leader of UCCP-CYF Tarlac.

7. VICENTE OLEA

23 November 2004 – 71-year old UCCP member in San Vicente, Palawan.

8. ABE SUNGIT

5 February 2005 –leader of indigenous people in Palawan, member of United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) – IDPIP (Indigenous People's Program), Karapatan-Palawan and PAGSAMBATAN.

9. FR. WILLIAM TADENA

13 March 2005 – priest of Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI) and PCPR in Tarlac; Fr. Tadena was an active supporter of the Hacienda Luisita workers.

10. PASTOR HABLITO SOLINA

11 April 2005 – a church worker of People's Missionary Church.

13. REV. RAUL DOMINGO

20 August 2005 – Pastor of UCCP in Palawan.

14. JOSE “Pepe” MANEGDEG III

28 November 2005 – Regional Coordinator of the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines, a former staff of the Regional Ecumenical Council in the Cordillera (RECCORD), and the Clergy and Laity Formation of the Philippines (CLFP).

15. JUNICO HALEM

6 December 2005 – member of UCCP and Bayan Muna municipal coordinator in Aluran, Misamis Occidental.

16. MATEO MORALES

24 January 2006 – lay worker for the Religious of the Good Shepherd's Tribal Filipino Ministry, which assists Banwaon and Manobo tribal communities in Agusan del Sur.

17. NESTOR ARINQUE

7 March 2006 – chairman of a local peasant organization which is an affiliate of Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas or Peasant Movement of the Philippines (KMP), a nationwide farmer's organization in the Philippines. Arinque was also an active member, and previously the local church council chairman of the UCCP in Mabini, Bohol.

18. REV. JEMIAS TINAMBACAN

May 9, 2006 – UCCP Pastor and KASIMBAYAN member.

19. PASTOR ANDY PAWICAN

May 21, 2006 – Licenciante Pastor of UCCP Pantabangan, Nueva Ecija.

20. NOEL NOLI CAPULONG

May 27, 2006 – Member of UCCP Calamba, Laguna and Chairperson of the Christian Witness and Service of UCCP Northeast Southern Tagalog Conference, former staff of the NCCP.

21. TITO MARATA

17 June 2006 – Tito Marata was the provincial officer of the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines and a member of the Farmers for Agrarian Reform Movement.

22. PASTOR MADONNA CASTILLO

20 July 2006 – A Pastor of the UCCP Manila North Conference, one of the founders and an organizer of the Samahan ng mga Nagkakaisang Magsasaka ng Echague, a municipal chapter of DAGAMI (Danggayan Dagiti Mannalon iti Isabela, a provincial alliance of farmers organizations in Isabela); Former ANAKPAWIS Isabela Spokesperson, graduate of ETS.

23. REI MON GURAN

31 July 2006 - an active youth leader of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) in Sorsogon. He was also a provincial coordinator of the League of Filipino Students (LFS) in Albay, Spokesperson of the Education for All Movement (E4ALL), staff writer of PEGASUS, official student publication of Aquinas University and member of Bicol Academe Against Betrayal of Arroyo (BABA Movement) when he was assassinated.

24. PASTOR ISAIAS STA. ROSA

03 August 2006 – Isaias Sta. Rosa of Malobago, Daraga, Albay, Pastor of the United Methodist Church

25. Bp. ALBERTO B. RAMENTO, DD.

03 October, 2006 - Iglesia Filipina Independiente, 9th Obispo Maximo Chair, Supreme Council of Bishops

26. RENATO “ATONG” PACAIDE

02 March 2007- UCCP Member.

27. REV. FILIMINO CATAMBIS

22 January 2008 - Pastor, UCCP in Mahaplag, Leyte Province.

28. FR. CECILIO LUCERO

06 September 2009 – Roman Catholic Priest, Catarman, Samar.

29. BENJAMIN “BENJIE” BAYLES

14 June 2010 – IFI lay leader

30. JOVELITO AGUSTIN

15 June 2010 - a lay minister in the Parish of Saint Andrew the Apostle, and the Diocesan President of the Laymen of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (LIFI)

31. RABENIO SUNGIT

5 September 2011 – UCCP Lay Leader in Quezon, Palawan

32. FR. FAUSTO TENTORIO, PIME

17 October 2011 – Roman Catholic Priest based in Diocese of Kidapawan

33. JIMMY LIGUYON

02 April 2012 - UCCP Local Church Council Leader

34. WILLEM GEERTMAN

03 July 2012 - Dutch Lay missionary based in Angeles City, Pampanga

35. WILLERME TORADO AGORDE

19 February 2017 – Executive Committee Member of Promotion of Church People's Response – North Cotabato

36. ERNING AYKID

15 September 2017 – IFI Lay leader and a Barangay Official of Brgy. Binli (Proper), Bulalacao, Oriental Mindoro

37. PERFECTO “BOY” HOYLE

16 November 2017 – UCCP Lay Pastor, Purok-4 Barangay Canaway, Kitcharao, Agusan del Norte

38. PASTOR LOVELITO QUIÑONES

03 December 2017 at around 8:00 p.m. - Pastor of Kings Glory Ministry, Sitio Anapla, Brgy. Don Pedro, Mansalay, Mindoro Oriental

39. FR. MARCELITO "TITO" PAEZ

04 December 2017 – Roman Catholic Priest, Provincial Coordinator of the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines – Central Luzon

40. FR. MARK ANTHONY YUAGA VENTURA*

29 April 2018 – Roman Catholic Priest of Gattaran, Cagayan, Archdiocese of Tuguegarao

41. FR. RICHMOND NILO*

11 June 2018 – Roman Catholic, parish priest of St. Vincent Ferrer Parish in Zaragoza, Nueva Ecija, and Financial Administrator of the Diocese of Cabanatuan.

AREAS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:



What is the history of the struggle for human rights in your context? Who are the martyrs we should bless and remember?

Politicians and media globally have been criticising human rights legislation. Some religious leaders have also been vocal criticising HR legislation because they feel it forces them to accept 'western values' about the rights of women and sexual minorities? What are the issues in your place?

Do you think the powers that be in your context can be trusted? Who has power over the powerful?



According to the UNWomen: '[Rural] women are key agents for development. They play a catalytic role towards achievement of transformational economic, environmental and social changes required for sustainable development. But limited access to credit, health care and education are among the many challenges they face. These are further aggravated by the global food and economic crises and climate change. Empowering them is essential, not only for the well-being of individuals, families and rural communities, but also for overall economic productivity, given women's large presence in the agricultural workforce worldwide' <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/rural-women-day/2013> Gender justice actually creates greater justice. But it is frequently resisted. How has the #metoo movement shown itself in your context? What are the gender justice issues in your context? Is the church an important ally or antagonist in this?

How can men participate in the fall of Babylon?

ACT 3

SUBVERTING EMPIRE'S POWER OVER VISION AND SPIRITUALITIES





SUBVERTING EMPIRE'S CLAIMS TO CREATE ORDER...

THE CLAIMS OF THE EMPIRE:

Empire claims to be the arbiter, pinnacle and guarantee of order. This is manifest first of all in its political and military power. But, underpinning this are ideological claims which suggest Empire also has an epistemological priority over its rivals. The operation of life and society under Empire is presented as naturally and self-evidently the best.

We can see this in the claims Capitalism makes for letting the Market decide how all facets of our life and society function. This has meant the dismantling of many of our local and national economies and societies. In their place economies and societies of this new order have been blessed and created. No alternative is possible thanks to the military, economic, political and epistemological power of empire.

RE-READING OUR TEXTS



Genesis 1:1 – 2:2:

¹ In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God[b] swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶ And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' ⁷ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸ God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹ And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹ Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so. ¹² The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴ And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so. ¹⁶ God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰ And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' ²¹ So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.' ²³ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴ And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, 'Let us make humankind[c] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth,[d] and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

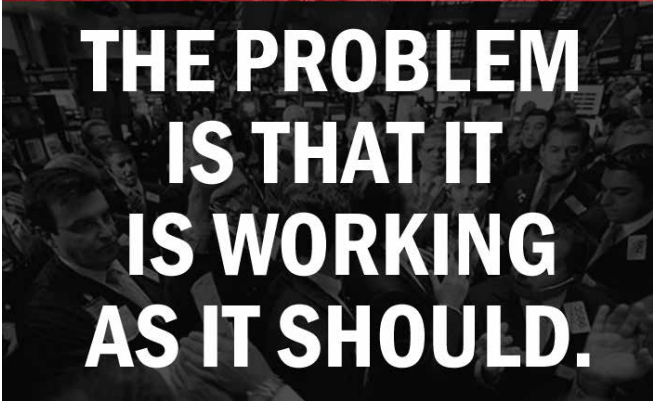
²⁷ So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them. ²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' ²⁹ God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.' ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. ³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

² Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ² And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.

The creation accounts in Genesis have become disputed territory of late between literalist believers and atheist scientists. But, this is because the Genesis accounts have been cropped from their context and made to stand as a scientific stating of the origins of the universe, or a philosophy of first principles. Gen 1: 1 – 2:2 is not so much a creation story, as a counter-creation story. The first creation story in Genesis is countering an existing Chaos, (Gen 1:1), and calls into being all that is from all the 'anti-is'. This 'Anti-is' is Empire.



**THE PROBLEM
ISN'T THAT THE
CAPITALIST SYSTEM
IS BROKEN.**



**THE PROBLEM
IS THAT IT
IS WORKING
AS IT SHOULD.**

The persistent structure and repeating poetry of the first creation account in Genesis is referencing and subverting texts from the Babylonian empire, and its vision of creation. This text is the Enuma Elish, where the theology of the Babylonian empire outlined life emerging from the violent confrontation between Marduk and Tiamat. The Enuma Elish tells that the destiny and creation of humanity was for the service of the Babylonian deities, and especially the Imperial and victorious, Marduk. Marduk was the patron deity of Babylon.

There is much similarity between the Genesis Priestly creation narratives and the Babylonian Enuma Elish. In both stories, creation follows divine action and speech. Darkness precedes the creative acts. In both stories, light exists before the creation of the sun, moon, and stars. In Enuma Elish the symbol of chaos is the goddess Tiamat who personifies the sea. Genesis refers to the “deep.” tehom, which is linguistically related to Tiamat. In both stories, there is a division of the waters above and below. The sequence of creation is similar, including the division of waters, dry land, luminaries, and humanity, all followed by rest.

This Creation account is usually attributed to the ‘P’ source, the Priestly writers. They shaped their accounts during the Babylonian exile, where the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures were edited. They lived under the Babylonian empire and were exposed to all its influences, claims and demands. So, the parallels with the Enuma Elish are deliberate as are its significant differences. In Genesis, it is humanity which is given dominion over creation, not the gods. God’s act of creation is without violence and the underlying relationship between Creator and Creation is harmony. This is the sign and source of Yahweh’s power, who did not have to be granted any power from other celestial beings, unlike Marduk.



The Enuma Elish, was an Imperial text, a monument to Marduk and to Babylon and its temple, and was read on the fourth day of the Babylonian New Year festival.

Genesis comes then as a counter-Imperial text and is conceiving God as Creator but most importantly as Counter-Creator. Genesis’s priestly imagination is not looking to rival Marduk with Yahweh, a divine being who is ‘more Marduk than Marduk’, mega-Marduk as it were. The exiled priests are seeking to counter Marduk and Babylon’s violence and domination with a vision of power that brings creation and harmony out of chaos. Babylon’s chaos.

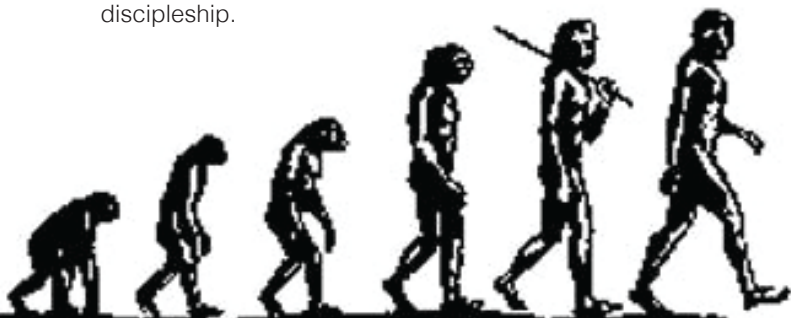
This is a counter-Imperial vision of Creation, in which a subjugated people imagine alternative worlds to that allowed them by Empire. Thus Genesis 1:1 – 2:2 is an un-doing of Empire and its claims that Imperial power is the ineluctable principle for life on the earth.

AREAS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:



Discussions need to be contextually relevant so we are only suggesting areas for discussion and reflection. Readers should develop as they see best.

The text invites us to reflect on climate change, authoritarianism and discipleship.



The writers of Gen:1:1 – 2:2 saw a wisdom in the life of Creation which contested the power of Emperors and confirmed the love of the Creator. What is the wisdom of creation in your place?

We see in this text the Bible positioned as a counter narrative to dominant oppressive authoritarian voices which tell us what to think and do and believe. Many people say this is what the Bible actually does, and religious people especially. Do you hear the Bible being used to challenge authority or to buttress it? In what ways?

The conclusion of Gen 1: - 2:2 is that life is fulfilled in Shalom not conquest. Has this any application for discipleship in your place?

Where do you see communities living out alternative values and ways to that of Empire? Can you see in them that Babylon has fallen?





SUBVERTING EMPIRE'S CLAIMS TO DEFINE GOOD NEWS

THE CLAIMS OF THE EMPIRE:

In the media and political climate of Empire these would be the main elements of any Good News announcements:



Image | "Sale Ends" - Banksy (London, 2007).

These are guaranteed to deliver a happy population and usher us into the transcendent joy of shopping. Salvation is attained through the operation of an economic doctrine in which private spending saves the economy through consumption. 'Consumption in fullness' is available to all of us, or at least to the Chosen. The new testament of economic grace contends with the sin of public spending which, unchecked, damns us through overburdening capital. Thus, sacrifice is called for from the public/the poor/the 'unchosen' through Austerity, even as we do all we can to look young, slim and beautiful.

All of these glittering prizes in fact mask Economic growth as an acceleration of inequalities the environmental disaster stoked by excessive consumer lifestyles and the life in emptiness granted to the poor through austerity politics. Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights made a report on the UK in Nov 2018. He concluded:

The UK government has inflicted “great misery” on its people with “punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous” austerity policies driven by a political desire to undertake social re-engineering rather than economic necessity, the United Nations poverty envoy has found.

Philip Alston, the UN’s rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, ended a two-week fact-finding mission to the UK with a stinging declaration that levels of child poverty were “not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster”, even though the UK is the world’s fifth largest economy,

About 14 million people, a fifth of the population, live in poverty and 1.5 million are destitute, being unable to afford basic essentials, he said, citing figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. He highlighted predictions that child poverty could rise by 7 percentage points between 2015 and 2022, possibly up to a rate of 40%.

Austerity Britain was in breach of four UN human rights agreements relating to women, children, disabled people and economic and social rights. “If you got a group of misogynists in a room and said how can we make this system work for men and not for women they would not have come up with too many ideas that are not already in place,”.

The limit on benefits payments to only the first two children in a family was “in the same ballpark” as China’s one-child policy because it punished people who had a third child. Cuts of 50% to council budgets were slashing at Britain’s “culture of local concern” and “damaging the fabric” of society. The middle classes would “find themselves living in an increasingly hostile and unwelcoming society because community roots are being broken”.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/nov/16/uk-austerity-has-inflicted-great-misery-on-citizens-un-says>



In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.²⁸ And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.³⁰ The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ *and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,*

⁴⁸ *for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.*

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ *for the Mighty One has done great things for me,*

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ *His mercy is for those who fear him*

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ *He has shown strength with his arm;*

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,*

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ *he has filled the hungry with good things,*

and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ *He has helped his servant Israel,*

in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ *according to the promise he made to our ancestors,*

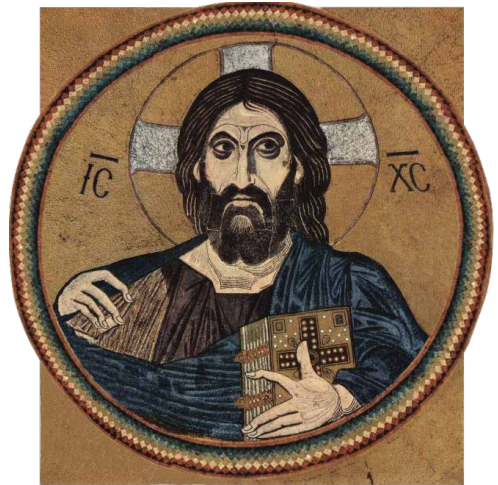
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Luke 1: 26 – 33, 47 – 55



One of the by products of the Church becoming Imperial was that it lost sight of the subversive nature of the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When the early church coined this language of Good News and Gospel it was quoting the Imperial language of Evangelion. The later Church adopted this language without seeing its nuance or understanding its ironic force. The Good News of the Empire was usually the announcement of some great victory for the Emperor and an expansion of Empire's territory. It was especially the statement of the power and even the divinity of the Emperor. The Gospels make claims for Jesus and his birth which echo the Priene Inscription, an historical Imperial 'evangelion' of Caesar Augustus:

'It seemed good to the Greeks of Asia, in the opinion of the high priest Apollonius of Menophilus Azanitus: "Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a saviour, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world that came by reason of him," which Asia resolved in Smyrna.'



The Priene Evangelion claims Augustus as Son of God, a divine being. Thus, the Church comes to make the same claim for Jesus. Christianity's evangelion has been interpreted as a counter claim to this, that Jesus, not Caesar, is the true Son of God. But this is not to question the language and power concept of Empire just to offer a new Caesar, the proper Caesar, the 'uber-Caesar', who the early church depicted and modelled on Zeus as Jesus Christ Pantocrator.

This 'Uber-Caesar'/ Christ Pantocrator is a far cry from the Jesus of the Gospels who refused to call fire down from heaven on Samaritan villages that wouldn't offer him hospitality, (Luke 9:54) or call for legions of angels to set him free from the High Priest's men, (Matt 26:53). The Church after Constantine philosophised the Good News of Jesus into 'life after death' and announced this to show why Christianity was better than Judaism, paganism or heresy. The outcome was building a church which was not a threat to the status quo, but its guarantor. Was this the Magnificat Mary imagined? Did Jesus bring the Emperor down from his throne in order to take it for himself?

In the mouth of Mary and of her son, Jesus, the evangelion of the kingdom of God something deeply subversive and ironic. It announced the kingdom of one who is not recognisably a king, (Matt: 25: 31ff), and so, far from confirming the category of kingship, is upending it. This is the kingdom of the last not for the first. The Gospel writers are all writing under Empire, and even in the light of the police action by Rome to destroy the Second temple in Jerusalem. We should note then that this use of the phrase 'evangelion' was deeply politicised, and it was proposing Good News for and from poor people, announcing life which pulls down Empire

Thus, it is that the angel comes to a peasant girl, not a princess. Even the encounter in Luke 1 mimics Roman greetings to a superior. The Latin 'Ave Maria', echoes the approach to the Emperor: 'Ave Caesar'. The 'Most High' who is promised to Mary, is the last and the least of all, a son born out of wedlock to two vassals of Rome, whose chief purpose is to be silent and pay tax as demanded. God is working out an alternative world far from the centre of power. This new thing God is doing begins with people and in locations Empire barely knows and is quick to despise. From the margins of Empire, comes not a new Empire, but the means to life beyond Empire. This is good news for and from those Empire-builders reject as worthless. In such locations God is at work against what Rastafari calls the 'Shitstem' offering the beginnings of a new world an alternative life, filled with dignity, grace and peace.



AREAS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:



The evangelical piety which fired the founders of the LMS left injustice unchallenged as they sought to send missionaries who would proclaim the Gospel but 'disclaim all political views and party designs; abhorring all attempts to disturb order and government in this or any other country', (George Burder, London Missionary Society founder). Can we really think of the life changing nature of Jesus in only personal terms? What other life-changing elements would you include?

'He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty ...' Who is this Good News for in your place? For whom is this not Good News?

Where can you see signs of God's alternative world coming or being announced or demanded?

How does your church approach evangelism? How is it inviting a life modelled on Jesus which turns today's Empire upside down?

How can we announce the Good News that Babylon is fallen?



SUBVERTING EMPIRE'S CLAIMS TO DEMONISE RELIGIOUS AND MINORITY ETHNIC IDENTITIES

THE CLAIMS OF THE EMPIRE:

"My true feelings are very very simple. I want peace and harmony in Rakhine. It's the responsibility of every government to maintain a position of integrity and fairness. We have to be fair to all communities. We have always maintained this that we don't condemn either of the communities. We condemn actions that are against the rule of law and that are against the humanitarian needs of all people. But we have never condemned communities as such." – Aung-San-Suu-Kyi, State Counsellor Myanmar <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/daw-aun-g-san-suu-kyi-politics-crises-quotes.html>

When asked: We have a problem in this country; it's called Muslims", "When can we get rid of them?" "You know, a lot of people are saying that, and a lot of people are saying that bad things are happening out there. We're going to be looking at that and plenty of other things."

Donald Trump Sept 17th 2015

"We're having problems with the Muslims, and we're having problems with Muslims coming into the country... You need surveillance. You have to deal with the mosques, whether you like it or not."

Donald Trump March 22nd 2016

"China must and will be united, which is an inevitable requirement for the historical rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in the new era," President Xi Jinping China on Taiwan Jan 2nd 2019



**Deut 20:16-18**

"But when you capture cities in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, kill everyone. Completely destroy all the people: the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, as the Lord ordered you to do. Kill them, so that they will not make you sin against the Lord by teaching you to do all the disgusting things that they do in the worship of their gods."





We live in an age of intolerance driven by misguided national and religious pride. State Counsellor of Myanmar Aung San-Suu Kyi, and Nobel prize winner denies all knowledge of the genocide against Rohingya, despite the overwhelming evidence of international agencies.

1. The gross human rights violations and abuses committed in Kachin, Rakhine and Shan States are shocking for their horrifying nature and ubiquity. Many of these violations undoubtedly amount to the gravest crimes under international law. They are also shocking because they stem from deep fractures in society and structural problems that have been apparent and unaddressed for decades. They are shocking for the level of denial, normalcy and impunity that is attached to them. The Mission concludes that these abusive patterns are reflective of the situation in Myanmar as a whole.

UN Fact-Finding Mission Report Aug 2018

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=23575&LangID=E>

700,000 have fled the destruction of their homes and persecution in the northern Rakhine province of Myanmar (Burma) for neighbouring Bangladesh since August 2017.

The Rohingya, who numbered around one million in Myanmar at the start of 2017, are one of the many ethnic minorities in the country. Rohingya Muslims represent the largest percentage of Muslims in Myanmar, with the majority living in Rakhine state. Rohingya have their own language and culture and say they are descendants of Arab traders and other groups who have been in the region for generations. But the government of Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist country, denies the Rohingya citizenship and even excluded them from the 2014 census, refusing to recognise them as a people. Myanmar state sees them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. At least 6,700 Rohingya, including at least 730 children under the age of five, were killed in the month after the violence broke out, according to Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF). Amnesty International says the Myanmar military also raped and abused Rohingya women and girls. At least 288 villages were partially or totally destroyed by fire in northern Rakhine state after August 2017, according to analysis of satellite imagery by Human Rights Watch. Satellite evidence shows many areas where Rohingya villages were reduced to rubble, while nearby ethnic Rakhine villages were left intact. Human Rights Watch say most damage occurred in Maungdaw Township, between 25 August and 25 September 2017 - with many villages destroyed after 5 September, when Myanmar's de facto leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, said security force operations had ended.

The domineering attitudes of Imperial power is found around the world. China continues to operate repressive policies inside and outside the nation. The people of Taiwan face the prospect of further aggression from a Chinese Empire unwilling to recognise the self determination of peoples and nations it claims for itself. According to Amnesty International, The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination's highlighted serious human rights violations against ethnic minorities in China including:

- The arbitrary, prolonged and incommunicado mass detention of Uighurs under the pretext of countering terrorism and religious extremism, with estimates of the numbers of detained ranging from “tens of thousands to upwards of a million”.
- The broad and unclear definition of terrorism, extremism and separatism in Chinese legislation, which has the “potential to criminalize peaceful civic and religious expression” targeting ethnic minority groups, in particular Muslim Uighurs and Buddhist Tibetans.
- The marginalization of the use of Tibetans' and Uighurs' own languages and punishment of Tibetan language advocacy.

The fate of estimated up to one million people is unknown and most of the detainees' families have been kept in the dark.

China has intensified its campaign of mass internment, intrusive surveillance, political indoctrination and forced cultural assimilation against the region's Uighurs, Kazakhs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/china-systematic-repression-of-ethnic-minorities-laid-bare-in-un-findings/>

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/09/china-up-to-one-million-detained/>



The Guardian has also reported the increased persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in Asia. The persecution of Christians in China is the worst it has been for more than a decade, with at least 50 million people expected to experience some form of repression this year as the government tightens its controls over religious worship, according to a global monitoring body. The crackdown on religion in China is part of a pattern of increasing Christian persecution across Asia over the past five years, Open Doors said in its 2019 World Watch List, which ranks 50 countries. One in three Christians face high levels of persecution in Asia, with India entering the top 10 for the first time.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/16/one-in-three-christians-face-persecution-in-asia-report-finds>

And yet as we read such stories with trepidation and horror, we find the same stories and worse, their justification, in our own texts. Empires have found religious power useful and religious leaders have found Imperial power all too tempting. The vital significance of the Empire critique is to alert us to our complicities with oppressive power, our silences like Aung San Suu Kyi, or the ways we ingratiate ourselves with hatred and ignorance like those behind Trump and others, and the ways we have wanted our form of Christianity to be the only faith in the world.

Imperial logic in Israel in the Biblical era and now gives no room to the original Canaanite and fellow Palestinian peoples. Divine authorisation is given to the systematic vilification and destruction of their culture, claims, dreams and histories. Dominant and domineering religious desires in texts like Deuteronomy have no respect for the diverse non-conformity of the human spirit or indeed the Divine spirit. Instead they demand a unity based on the norms and claims of one part of the people. Yet, Jesus claims wherever two of three are gathered he will come. This points not to maths, but to the fundamental heterogeneity needed of mind, person and spirit to invite and engage the divine presence.

AREAS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:



Do you see Christianity in competition with other religions and mission as the way we show that the others faiths are wrong, so that one day all the world will proclaim Christ as their personal Saviour? Why?

What are the issues about religious freedom in your area? How does your church engage in these issues?

Why do we assume in our era that the presence of different religions in a community result in intolerance and violence? Telok Ayer Street in Singapore marks out a neighbourhood of religious harmony. Several major places of worship – a mosque, Indian Muslim shrine, Chinese temple and church – have made this street, a short 350m-long stretch between Boon Tat Street and Cecil Street, their home for more than a century. Is that possible where you are. Why?

Religious and ethnic minorities receive the blame for many social ills. How does that show itself in your community? How does your church engage in these issues?

Freedom is what we have—Christ has set us free! Stand, then, as free people, and do not allow yourselves to become slaves again, (Gal 5:1) What are the key elements of the freedom Christ gives us, and how could this nurture love, healing and community through mission? Are these real signs amongst you that Babylon has fallen? If they are not amongst you, where are they?





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Registered in Singapore Unique Entity Number 201206146Z

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