

# Biblical Reflections and Prayers for the 'Eight Days'

## 5 June – 12 June 2011



Day 1 – Sunday 5 June

### THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM

#### Readings

Joel 2:21-22, 28-29

Psalms 46

Acts 2:1-12

John 14:15-21

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh

God is in the midst of the city

When the day of Pentecost had come

This is the spirit of truth

#### Commentary

The journey of this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity begins in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, at the beginning of the Church's own journey.

The theme of this week is "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers." The "they" is the earliest Church of Jerusalem born on the day of the Pentecost when the Advocate, the Spirit of truth descended upon the first believers, as promised by God through the prophet Joel and by the Lord Jesus on the night before his suffering and death. All who live in continuity with the day of Pentecost live in continuity with the earliest Church of Jerusalem with its leader, James. This church is the mother church of us all. It provides the image of the Christian unity for which we pray this week.

According to an ancient eastern tradition, the succession of the church comes through continuity with the first Christian community of Jerusalem, thus maintaining its fellowship with the apostles. The Church of Jerusalem in apostolic times is linked with the heavenly Church of Jerusalem, which in turn becomes the icon of all Christian churches. The sign of continuity with the Church of Jerusalem for all the churches is maintaining the "marks" of the first Christian community through our devotion to the "apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers."

The present churches of Jerusalem live in continuity with the apostolic Church of Jerusalem particularly in its costly witness to the truth. Its witness to the gospel and its struggles against inequality and injustice reminds us that prayer for Christian unity is inseparable from prayer for peace and justice.

#### For Reflection/ Discussion

- What do you know about the 'present church of Jerusalem'? What do you think it would be like to be this church?
- Do you feel any continuity/connection with the church in Jerusalem? How? Is this relevant or worth thinking about in 21<sup>st</sup> Century churches?
- Does the image of Christian unity portrayed in this passage resemble the Christian community to which you belong? Are the 'marks' of the first Christian community still visible in your church?
- How does/can your local church join with other churches in working for peace and justice?

#### Prayer

Almighty and Merciful God, with great power you gathered together the first Christians in the city of Jerusalem, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, defying the earthly power of the Roman empire. Grant that, like this first church in Jerusalem, we may come together to be bold in preaching and living the good news of reconciliation and peace, wherever there is inequality and injustice. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who liberates us from the bondage of sin and death. Amen.



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# Biblical Reflections and Prayers for the 'Eight Days'

## 5 June – 12 June 2011

Day 2 – Monday 6 June

### THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM

#### Readings

Isaiah 55:1-4

Psalms 85: 8-13

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

John 15:1-13

Come to the waters

Surely salvation is at hand

For in one spirit we were all baptized into one body

I am the true vine



#### Commentary

The Church of Jerusalem in the Acts of the Apostles is the model of the unity we seek today. As such, it reminds us that prayer for Christian unity cannot be for uniformity, because unity from the beginning has been characterized by rich diversity. The Church of Jerusalem is the model of unity in diversity.

The narrative of Pentecost in the Book of Acts tells us that there were represented in Jerusalem on that day all the languages and cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world and beyond. People heard the gospel in their diverse languages, and who through the preaching of Peter were united to each other in repentance, in the waters of baptism, and through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Or, as Paul would later write, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." It is not a uniform community of the likeminded, culturally and linguistically united people who were one in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, but a richly diverse community, whose differences could easily erupt into controversy. Such was the case between the Hellenists and the Hebrew Christians over the neglect of the Greek widows, as Luke relates in Acts 6.1. And yet the Jerusalem church was at unity within itself, and one with the Risen Lord who says "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit."

Rich diversity characterizes the churches in Jerusalem to this day, as it does around the world. It can easily erupt into controversy in Jerusalem, accentuated by the current hostile political climate. But like the earliest Jerusalem church, Christians in Jerusalem today remind us that we are many members of one body, a unity in diversity. According to the portrayal of the heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation 21:22-27 diversity and unity will be found in the new creation. They remind us that difference and diversity are not the same as division and disunity, and that the Christian unity for which we pray always preserves authentic diversity.

#### For Reflection/Discussion

- In what ways is your congregation diverse? United?
- In what ways are your local churches diverse? United?
- How could both unity and diversity be further developed for growth, enrichment and outreach, locally, regionally, nationally?
- Why do we find it so hard to embrace difference within the church universal? Why is visible unity within the Christian church so important?

#### Prayer

God, from whom all life flows in its rich diversity, you call your Church as the body of Christ to be united in love. May we learn more deeply our unity in diversity, strive to work together to preach, and build up the Kingdom of your abundant love to all, accompanying each other in each place, and in all places. May we always be mindful of Christ as the source of our life together. We pray in the unity of the Spirit. Amen.



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## 5 June – 12 June 2011

Day 3 – Tuesday 7 June

### DEVOTION TO THE APOSTLES' TEACHING UNITES US



#### Readings

Isaiah 51:4-8	Listen to me, my people
Psalms 119:105-112	Your word is a lamp to my feet
Romans 1:15-17	Eagerness to proclaim the gospel
John 17:6-19	I have made your name known

#### Commentary

The Church of Jerusalem in the Acts of the Apostles was united in its devotion to the apostles' teaching, despite the great diversity of language and culture amongst its members. This teaching Paul received from them in person less than two decades after Christ's resurrection. He sought to hand on this 'apostolic tradition' faithfully (see 1 Corinthians 15:1-8), calling it 'the gospel of God' (see Romans 1:1-3 for example). The apostles' teaching is exemplified by Peter's preaching in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. In his use of the prophet Joel, he connects the Church with the biblical story of the people of God, drawing us into the narrative that begins in creation itself.

Despite divisions the Word of God gathers and unites us. The apostles' teaching, the good news in all its fullness, was at the centre of unity in diversity of the first Church of Jerusalem. Christians in Jerusalem remind us today that it is not simply the "apostles' teaching" that united the earliest church, but devotion to that teaching. Such devotion is reflected in Paul identifying the gospel as "the power of God for salvation." (Romans 1:16)

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that God's teaching is inseparable from God's "justice for a light to the peoples." Or, as the psalmist prays, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart."

#### For Reflection/Discussion

- Most of us have favourite passages of scripture. Share one of yours with the group, and if possible, say why it is special for you.
- Do you consider yourself devoted to the Word of God? How do you express / live out that devotion?
- How does modern Biblical scholarship help us to better understand and appreciate the Word of God in Scripture?

#### Prayer

God of Light, we give you thanks for the revelation of your truth in Jesus Christ, your Living Word, which we have received through the apostles' teaching, first heard at Jerusalem. May your Holy Spirit continue to sanctify us in the truth of your Son, so that united in Christ we may grow in devotion to the Word, and together serve your Kingdom in humility and love. We pray in fellowship with the apostles and all those in Christ. Amen.



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## 5 June – 12 June 2011

Day 4 – Wednesday 8 June

### SHARING, AN EXPRESSION OF OUR UNITY

#### Reading

Isaiah 58:6-10

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry

Psalms 37:1-11

Trust in the Lord and do good

Acts 4:32-37

Everything they owned was held in common

Matthew 6:25-34

Strive first for the kingdom of God



#### Commentary

The sign of continuity with the apostolic Church of Jerusalem is “devotion to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers.” The Church in Jerusalem, having received the gift of the Holy Spirit, was led beyond the former distinction between what was ‘holy / sacred’ and ‘profane / unclean’. To be in fellowship (*koinonia*) means that all barriers are now down – because the Spirit has come, everything is now ‘open’ (*koinos* – cf Peter’s dream in Acts 10:9-16). And this *koinonia* had practical consequences – sharing, being open to one another. Acts states that ‘All who believed were together and had all things *koinos*; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute to all, as any had need’ (Acts 2:44-45). Today’s reading from the Book of Acts links such radical sharing with the powerful apostolic “testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”

Such a sharing of resources characterizes the life of Christian people in Jerusalem today. It is a sign of their continuity with the first Christians; it is a sign and a challenge to all the churches. It links proclamation of the Gospel, the celebration of the Eucharist and the fellowship (or communion) of the Christian community with radical equality and justice for all. In so far as such sharing is a testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and a sign of continuity with the apostolic Church of Jerusalem, it is equally a sign of our unity with one another.

There are many ways of sharing. There is the radical sharing of the apostolic church where nobody was left in need. There is the sharing of one another’s burdens, struggles, pain and suffering. There is the sharing in one another’s joys and achievements, blessings and healing. There is also the sharing of gifts and insights from one church tradition to another even in our separation from another, an “ecumenical exchange of gifts.” Such generous sharing is a practical consequence of our devotion to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship; it is a consequence of our prayer for Christian unity.

#### For Reflection/Discussion

- Try to think objectively and honestly – without being too lenient or too tough on yourself – about how open and accepting your congregation is of newcomers and ‘outsiders’. How could your church become a more welcoming place, and your services be more accessible?
- In many churches the shared use of property is a point of tension. Why is this so? What can be done to relieve the tension?
- How in your local congregation do you share burdens, joys and sorrows?
- What gifts have you received from other traditions in the church? What gifts does your tradition have to share with others?

#### Prayer

God of justice, your giving of the Spirit broke the bounds of what is holy. We thank you that you have given what we need, so that all may be fed, clothed and housed. Guard us from the sin of hoarding, and inspire us to be instruments of love, sharing all that you give us, as a witness to your generosity and justice. As followers of Christ, lead us to act together in places of want: where families are driven from their homes, where the vulnerable suffer at the hands of the powerful, where poverty and unemployment destroy lives. We pray in the name of Jesus, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



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# Biblical Reflections and Prayers for the 'Eight Days'

## 5 June – 12 June 2011

Day 5 – Thursday 9 June

### BREAKING THE BREAD IN HOPE

#### Readings

Exodus 16: 13b-21a

It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat

Psalms 116: 12-19

I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice

1 Corinthians 11:17-26

Do this in remembrance of me

John 6:53-58

This is the bread that came down from heaven ...

#### Commentary

From the first Church at Jerusalem until now, the 'breaking of bread' has been a central act for Christians. For the Christians of Jerusalem today, the sharing of bread traditionally speaks of friendship, forgiveness and commitment to the other. We are challenged in this breaking of bread to seek a unity that can speak prophetically to a world of divisions. This is the world by which we have all, in different ways, been shaped. In the breaking of bread Christians are formed anew for the prophetic message of hope for all humankind.

Today we, too, break bread 'with glad and generous hearts'; but we also experience, at each celebration of the Eucharist, a painful reminder of our disunity. On this fifth day of the Week of Prayer, the Christians of Jerusalem gather in the Upper Room, the place of the Last Supper. Here, whilst they do not celebrate the Eucharist, they break bread in *hope*.

We learn this hope in the ways God reaches out to us in the wilderness of our own discontent. Exodus relates how God responds to the grumbling of the people he has liberated, by providing them with what they need – no more, and no less. The manna in the desert is a gift of God, not to be hoarded, nor even fully understood. It is, as our Psalm celebrates, a moment which calls simply for thanksgiving – for God 'has loosened our bonds'.

What Paul recognises is that to break the bread means not only to celebrate the Eucharist, but to be a Eucharistic people – to *become* Christ's Body in the world. This short reading stands, in its context (1 Cor 10-11) as a reminder of how the Christian community is to live: in communion in Christ, determining right behaviour in a difficult worldly context, guided by the reality of our life in Him. We live "in remembrance of him."

As a people of the breaking of bread, we are a people of eternal life – life in its fullness – as the reading from John teaches us. Our celebration of Eucharist challenges us to reflect on how such an abundant gift of life is expressed day to day as we live in hope as well as in difficulties. In spite of the daily challenges for the Christians in Jerusalem, they witness to how it is possible to rejoice in hope.

#### For Reflection/Discussion

- In our various denominations, we don't all 'break bread' as sacrament in the same way or with the same frequency when we gather for worship. But when we come together in the name of Jesus 'with glad and generous hearts' there is sacramentality in what we do. Discuss.
- In what ways is the Eucharist a 'prophetic message of hope'?
- Paul speaks to the church in Corinth about right attitudes and ethical living in the community of Christ (1 Cor. 10). How does this transpose to our circumstances today, as we come to the Lord's Table?

#### Prayer

God of Hope, we praise you for your gift to us of the Lord's Supper, where, in the Spirit, we continue to meet your Son Jesus Christ, the living bread from heaven. Forgive our unworthiness of this great gift – our living in factions, our collusion with inequalities, our complacency in separation. Hasten the day when your whole church together shares the breaking of the bread, and that, as we wait for that day, we may learn more deeply to be a people formed by the Eucharist for service to the world. We pray in the name of Jesus, who gives himself to us in Word, sacrament and service. Amen.

# Biblical Reflections and Prayers for the 'Eight Days'

## 5 June – 12 June 2011

Day 6 – Friday 10 June

### EMPOWERED TO ACTION IN PRAYER



#### Reading

Jonah 2:1-9

Deliverance belongs to the Lord!

Psalm 67

Let the peoples praise you, O God!

1 Timothy 2:1-8

...prayers should be made for everyone,  
for kings and all who are in high positions...

Matthew 6:5-15

Your kingdom come, your will be done...

#### Commentary

Following devotion to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship and the breaking of the bread, the fourth mark of the earliest Church of Jerusalem is the life of prayer. Again, this new depth in prayer is made possible by the coming of the Holy Spirit. Before Pentecost, the disciples struggled to pray, asking Jesus time and again to 'teach us to pray' (e.g. Luke 11.1). Prayer is experienced today as the necessary source of the power and strength needed by Christians in Jerusalem – as everywhere. The witness of Christians in Jerusalem today calls us to a deeper recognition of the ways we face situations of injustice and inequality in our own contexts. In all this, it is prayer that empowers Christians for mission together.

For Jonah the intensity of his prayer is met with dramatic deliverance from the belly of the fish. His prayer is heartfelt, as it arises from his own sense of repentance at having tried to avoid God's will: he has abandoned the Lord's call to prophesy, and ended up in a hopeless place. And here God meets his prayer with deliverance for his mission.

The Psalm calls us to pray that God's face will shine upon us – not only for our own benefit, but for the spread of His rule 'among all the nations'.

The apostolic Church reminds us that prayer is a part of the strength and power of mission and prophecy *for the world*. Paul's letter to Timothy here instructs us to pray especially for those with power in the world so that we may live together in peace and dignity. We pray for the unity of our human societies and the oneness of humankind. Our prayer for unity in Christ reaches out to the whole world.

This dynamic life of prayer is rooted in the Lord's teaching to his disciples. In our reading from Matthew's Gospel we hear of prayer as a 'secret' power, born not from display or performance, but from humble coming before the Lord. Jesus' teaching is summed up in the Lord's Prayer. Praying this together forms us as a united people who seek the Father's will, and the building up of God's Kingdom here on earth, and calls us to a life of forgiveness and reconciliation.

#### For Reflection/Discussion

- What might be another expression for the 'Kingdom of God'? What are the signs of its presence?
- "The only thing that prayer can change is the one who prays." Do you agree or disagree? Discuss.
- What forms of prayer do you practise: Alone? With others?
- What opportunities are there in your area to come together and pray with Christians of other denominations? How can these opportunities be created and encouraged?

#### Prayer

God our Father, we rejoice that in all times, places and cultures, there are people who reach out to you in prayer. Above all we thank you for the example and teaching of your Son, Jesus Christ, who has taught us to long in prayer for the coming of your Kingdom. Teach us to pray better as Christians together, so that we may always be aware of your guidance and encouragement through all our joys and distress. We pray in the power your Holy Spirit. Amen.



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## 5 June – 12 June 2011

### Day 7 – Saturday 11 June LIVING IN RESURRECTION FAITH

#### Reading

Isaiah 60: 1-3, 18-22

Psalms: 118:1, 5-17

Romans 6: 3-11

Matthew 28:1-10

You shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates, Praise

I shall not die, but I shall live

...we have been buried with Christ by baptism into death...so we too might walk in newness of life

Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid...'

#### Commentary

The first Christians' devotion to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of the bread and the prayers was made possible, above all, by the life-giving Holy Spirit, bringing the power of the exalted Lord Jesus into their midst. This power is living still, and today's Jerusalem Christians witness to this. Whatever the difficulties of the present situation in which they find themselves – however much it feels like Gethsemane and Golgotha – they know in faith that all is made new by the truth of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.



The light and hope of the Resurrection changes everything. As

Isaiah prophesies, it is the transformation of darkness into light; it is an enlightening for all peoples. The power of the Resurrection shines out from Jerusalem, the place of the Lord's Passion, and draws all nations to its brightness. This is a new life, in which violence is put aside, and security found in salvation (God's wholeness – *shalom*) and praise.

In the Psalm we are given words to celebrate the central Christian experience of passing from death to life. This is the abiding sign of God's steadfast love. This passing from the terrors of death into new life is the defining reality of all Christians. For, as Paul teaches, we have, in baptism, entered into the tomb of Christ, having died with him so that we might live to share his risen life. We have died with Christ, and live to share his risen life. And so we can see the world differently – with compassion, patience, love and hope; for in Christ the present struggles can never be the whole story. Even as divided Christians, we know that the baptism that unites us is a bearing of the Cross in the light of the Resurrection through the Holy Spirit poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5)".

For the Christian Gospel this resurrection life is not some mere concept or helpful idea; it is rooted in a vivid event in time and space. It is this event we hear recounted in the Gospel reading with great humanity and drama. From Jerusalem the Risen Lord sends greetings to His disciples across the ages, calling us to follow Him without fear. He goes ahead of us.

#### For Reflection/Discussion

- What images of resurrection does our Australian context offer us? Of baptism?
- What experiences of transformation have you had in your life?
- What is your attitude towards fellow Christians baptised in other traditions? How does baptism unite us?
- At present, plant and animal species on our planet are becoming endangered and extinct at an alarming and tragic rate. We in the developed world in particular are party to and complicit in a massive act of 'uncreation'. Is it possible/responsible to preach a resurrection faith into this reality?

#### Prayer

God, Protector of the widow, the orphan and the stranger – in a world where many know despair, you raised your Son Jesus to give hope for humanity and renewal to the earth. Continue to strengthen and unify your Church in its struggles against the forces of death in the world, where violence against creation and humanity obscures the hope of the new life you offer. We pray in the name of Christ, who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, across all the ages. Amen.



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# Biblical Reflections and Prayers for the 'Eight Days'

## 5 June – 12 June 2011

Day 8 – Sunday 12 June

### CALLED FOR THE SERVICE OF RECONCILIATION



#### Readings

Genesis 33:1-4

Esau ran to meet Jacob, and embraced him...and they wept

Psalms: 96

Say among the nations, 'The Lord is King!'

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

God...reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation

Matthew 5:21-26

Leave your gift before the altar, and go: first be reconciled to your brother or sister...

#### Commentary

Our prayers of this week have taken us on a journey together. Guided by the scriptures, we have been called to return to our Christian origins – that apostolic Church at Jerusalem. Here we have seen devotion – to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. At the end of our reflections on the ideal of Christian community presented to us in Acts 2:42, we return to our own contexts – the realities of divisions, discontents, disappointments and injustices. At this point the Church of Jerusalem poses us the question: to what, then, as we conclude this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity are we called, here and now?

Christians in Jerusalem today suggest an answer to us: we are called, above all, to the service of *reconciliation*. Such a call concerns reconciliation on many levels, and across a complexity of divisions. We pray for reconciliation among Christians, so that the Church might be a sign and instrument for the healing of political and structural divisions and injustices; for reconciliation between Australia's first peoples, all who have come as immigrants, and those who come as refugees to these shores; for the just and peaceful living together of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim peoples; for the growing in understanding between people of all faiths and none. In our personal and family lives, too, the call to reconciliation must find a response.

Jacob and Esau, in the Genesis text, are brothers, yet estranged. Their reconciliation comes even when enduring conflict might have been expected. Violence and the habits of anger are put aside as the brothers meet and weep together. The recognition of our unity as Christians – and indeed as human beings – before God leads us into the Psalm's great song of praise for the Lord who rules the world with loving justice. In Christ, God seeks to reconcile to Himself all peoples. In describing this, Paul, in our second reading, celebrates a life of reconciliation as "a new creation". The call to reconcile is the call to allow God's power in us to make all things new, to be ambassadors of Christ's reconciliation.

Once again, we know that this 'good news' calls us to change the way we live. As Jesus challenges us, in the account given by Matthew, we cannot go on making offerings at the altar, in the knowledge that we are responsible for divisions or injustices. The call to prayer for Christian unity is a call to reconciliation. The call to reconciliation is a call to actions – even actions which interrupt our church activities.

#### For Reflection/Discussion

- To what or to whom are we called to be reconciled – as individuals; as churches; as a nation?
- What are 'the habits of anger'? How can they be put aside?
- Discuss the statement: "There can be no reconciliation without justice".
- Our national 'Week of Prayer for Reconciliation' is observed annually 27<sup>th</sup> May – 3<sup>rd</sup> June. Does your local church participate in this? have contact with indigenous people? Share what you know about what your denomination is doing in reconciliation, mission and co-operation with indigenous Australians.

**Prayer:** God of Peace, we thank you that you sent your Son Jesus, so that we might be reconciled to yourself in Him. Give us the grace to be effective ambassadors of reconciliation within our churches. In this way help us to serve the reconciliation of all peoples, particularly in your Holy Land – the place where you demolish the wall of separation between peoples, and unite everyone in the body of Jesus, offered on Mount Calvary. Fill us with love for one another; may our unity serve the reconciliation that you desire for all creation. We pray in the name of Christ, through whom God was pleased to reconcile all things in heaven and earth, making peace by the blood of the Cross. Amen.