

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

28 May-4 June, 2017



BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS FOR THE EIGHT DAYS

*Reconciliation – the love of Christ compels us
(cf. 2 Corinthians 5:14-20)*

Prayer

Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we thank you for this week of prayer, for being together as Christians and for the different ways we have experienced your presence. Let us always praise your holy name together so that we may continue to grow in unity and reconciliation. Amen.

Day 1 *One has died for all (2 Corinthians 5:14)*

Isaiah 53:4-12	He gave his life as an atoning sacrifice
Psalms 118:1,14-29	God did not abandon me to death
1 John 2:1-2	Christ died for all
John 15:13-17	Giving his life for his friends

Commentary

When Paul was converted to Christ, he came to a radical new understanding: one person has died for all. Jesus did not just die for his own people, not merely for those who sympathized with his teachings. He died for all people past, present and future. Faithful to the Gospel, many Christians down the centuries have laid down their lives for their friends. One such person was the Franciscan Maximilian Kolbe, who was imprisoned in the concentration camp at Auschwitz and who in 1941 willingly gave up his life so that a fellow prisoner could live.

Because Jesus died for all, all have died with him (2 Cor 5:14). In dying with Christ, our old way of life becomes a thing of the past and we enter into a new form of existence: abundant life – a life in which we can experience comfort, trust and forgiveness, even today – a life which continues to have meaning even after death. This new life is life in God.

Having come to this realization, Paul felt compelled by the love of Christ to preach the Good News of reconciliation with God. Christian churches share in this same commission of proclaiming the Gospel message. We need to ask ourselves how we can proclaim this gospel of reconciliation in view of our divisions.

God's reign, when suffering will be transformed into joy. On that day, the Church will be revealed in her beauty and grace as the one body of Christ. Wherever we gather in the Spirit to sing together about the fulfillment of God's promises, the heavens break open and we begin here and now to dance to the melody of eternity.

As we can already experience this presence of heaven, let us celebrate together. We may be inspired to share images, poems and songs from our particular traditions. These materials can open up spaces for us to experience our common faith in the hope for God's Kingdom.

Questions

1. How do you envision 'heaven'?
2. Try to answer the "what if" questions in the first paragraph of today's commentary. Where do they lead you? What would be involved in reaching this scenario?
3. Which hymns, songs, stories, poems, metaphors and pictures from your tradition give you the feeling of participating in the reality of God's eternity?
4. How do you understand the statement: "As we can already experience this presence of heaven, let us celebrate together"?
5. Fill in the blanks:
In as much as we can let us celebrate together.
In as much as we cannot let us work/pray/weep together.

hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy”.

We pray in the name of Christ Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

DAY 8 *Reconciled to God*
(2 Corinthians 5:20)

Micah 4:1-5 In the last days justice will reign
Ps 87 Glorious things are spoken of God
Revelation 21:1-5a God will make a new heaven and a new Earth
John 20:11-18 Meeting the risen Christ leads to personal mission

Commentary

What if? What if the prophecies in the Bible actually came true? If the wars between people stopped and if life-giving things were to be made out of the weapons of war? What if God's justice and peace reigned, a peace which was more than simply the absence of war? If all of humanity came together for a celebration in which not a single person was marginalized? What if there really was no more mourning, no more tears, and no more death? It would be the culmination of the reconciliation that God brought about in Jesus Christ. It would be heaven!

Psalms, canticles and hymns sing of the day when the whole perfected creation finally arrives at its goal, the day when God will be “all in all”. They tell about the Christian hope for the fulfillment of

Questions

1. What does it mean to say that Jesus died for all?
2. The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “I am a brother to another person through what Jesus Christ did for me; the other person has become brother to me through what Jesus Christ did for him.” How does this affect how we view others?
3. What are the consequences of this for our daily living? For ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue?

Prayer

God our Father, in Jesus you gave us the one who died for all. He lived our life and died our death. You accepted his sacrifice and raised him to new life with you. Grant that we, who have died with him, may be made one by the Holy Spirit and live in the abundance of your divine presence now and forever. Amen.

DAY 2 *Live no longer for themselves*
(2 Corinthians 5:15)

Micah 6:6-8 God has told you what is good
Ps 25:1-5 God of my salvation, show me your ways
1 John 4:19-21 We love because God first loved us
Matthew 16:24-26 Those who lose their life for my sake will find it

Commentary

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have been freed from the need to create our own meaning and from living only out of our own strength. Rather, we live in the life-giving power of Christ, who lived, died and rose again for us. When we 'lose' our life for his sake, we gain it.

The prophets were constantly faced with questions concerning the right way to live before God. The prophet Micah found a very clear answer to this question: "To do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." The author of Psalm 25 knew that we cannot do this by ourselves and cried out to God for guidance and strength.

In recent years, social isolation and increasing loneliness have become important issues in many contemporary societies. Christians are called to develop new forms of community life in which we share our means of livelihood with others and nurture support between generations. The Gospel call to live not for ourselves but for Christ, is also a call to reach out to others and to break down the barriers of isolation.

Questions

1. How do you understand the statement: "When we 'lose' our life for his sake, we gain it"?
2. How does our culture tempt us to live only for ourselves rather than for others?
3. In what ways can we live for others in our daily life?
4. What are the ecumenical implications of the call to live no longer for ourselves?

The ministry of reconciliation includes the work of overcoming divisions within Christianity. Today, many Christian churches work together in mutual trust and respect. One positive example of ecumenical reconciliation is the dialogue between the Lutheran World Federation and Mennonite World Conference. After the dialogue results were published in the document "Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ", the two organizations held a penitential service together in 2010 followed by further reconciliation services throughout Germany and in many other countries.

Questions

1. Where does the idea that we need reconciliation with God come from?
2. "God always gives the grace needed for the healing of broken relationships." Is this the reality of your experience? Where is God when there seems to be no reconciliation or healing?
3. The commentary gives an example of ecumenical reconciliation in the German context. Can you think of any recent Australian examples?
4. Where do you see a need for further reconciliation in our context? How might we respond to this?

Prayer

God of all goodness, we give you thanks for reconciling us and the whole world to yourself in Christ.

Empower us, our congregations and our churches in ministries of reconciliation.

Heal our hearts and help us to spread your peace.

"Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair,

us to greater unity.

Through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

DAY 7 The ministry of reconciliation
(2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

Genesis 50:15-21 Joseph is reconciled with his brothers
Ps 72 God's kingdom brings righteousness and
 peace
1 John 3:16b-21 God's love compels us to love
John 17:20-26 Jesus prays for the unity of his church

Commentary

Reconciliation between God and human beings is the key reality of our Christian faith. Paul was convinced that the love of Christ compels us to bring God's reconciliation to bear in all aspects of our life. Today this leads us to examine our consciences in relation to our divisions. As the story of Joseph demonstrates, God always gives the grace needed for the healing of broken relationships.

The great reformers such as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, as well as many who remained Catholics, such as Ignatius of Loyola, Francis de Sales and Charles Borromeo, sought to bring about renewal in the Western Church. However, what should have been a story of God's grace, was also marred by human sinfulness and became a story of the rending of the unity of God's people. Compounded by sin and warfare, mutual hostility and suspicion deepened over the centuries.

Prayer

God our Father, In Jesus Christ you have freed us for a life that goes beyond ourselves.

Guide us with your Spirit and help us to orient our lives as sisters and brothers in Christ who lived, suffered, died and rose again for us, and who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

DAY 3 *We regard no one from a human point of view*
(2 Corinthians 5:16)

1 Samuel 16:6-7 The Lord looks not at outward appearances but at the heart
Ps 19:7-13 The commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes
Acts 9:1-9 Saul becomes Paul
Matthew 5:1-12 The Beatitudes

Commentary

Encountering Christ turns everything upside down. Paul had that experience on the road to Damascus. For the first time he could see Jesus for who he really was: the Saviour of the world. His point of view was changed completely. He had to lay his human worldly judgment aside.

Encountering Christ changes our perspective as well. Nevertheless, we often linger in the past and judge according to human standards. We make claims or do things "in the name of the Lord" that in reality may be self-serving. Throughout history, both rulers and the

Churches themselves have misused their power and influence to pursue unjust political goals.

Transformed by their encounter with Christ in 1741, the Christians of the Moravian Church (Herrnhuter) answered the call to regard no-one from a human point of view by choosing to 'submit to Christ's Rule'. In submitting ourselves to the rule of Christ today, we are called to see others as God sees them, without mistrust or prejudice.

Questions

1. Where can I identify a Damascus experiences in my life?
2. It's one thing to recognize that God wants us to be reconciled to each other as one in Christ. But how (If at all) does this relate to people of other faiths? To our own Indigenous peoples?
3. Can we assume to know how God views other Christians, let alone people of other faiths and spiritualities?
4. What changes when we try to view other Christians or people of other faiths as God views them?

Prayer

Triune God, you are the origin and goal of all living things.
Forgive us when we only think of ourselves and are blinded by our own standards.

Open our hearts and our eyes.

Teach us to be loving, accepting and gracious, so that we may grow in the unity which is your gift.

To you be honour and praise, now and forever. Amen.

In the Old Testament, God was faithful and merciful to the people of Israel, with whom he established a covenant. This covenant remains: "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29).

Jesus, who inaugurated the new covenant in his blood, was a son of Israel. Too often in history, our churches have failed to honour this. After the Holocaust, it is the distinctive task of the German Churches to combat anti-Semitism. Similarly, all churches are called to bring forth reconciliation in their communities and resist all forms of human discrimination, for we are all part of God's covenant.

Questions

1. Read the first paragraph of today's commentary again ... and again.
2. What is the first paragraph talking about? When have you experienced reconciliation with yourself? Between yourself and another? Between yourself and God? In your own understanding of another confessional tradition?
3. What does the idea of 'covenant' mean to you?
4. What do you think it means to call Jesus a "son of Israel"?
5. How do we as Christian communities understand being part of God's covenant?
6. What forms of discrimination do our churches need to address in our societies today.

Prayer

Merciful God, out of love you made a covenant with your people.

Empower us to resist all forms of discrimination.

Let the gift of your loving covenant fill us with joy and inspire

Prayer

Triune God, you reveal yourself to us As Father and creator, as Son and Saviour, and as Spirit and giver of life, and yet you are one.

You break through our human boundaries and renew us.

Give us a new heart to overcome all that endangers our unity in you.

We pray in the name of Christ Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

DAY 6 *God reconciled us to himself* (2 Corinthians 5:18)

Genesis 17:1-8	God makes a covenant with Abraham
Ps 98	The world has seen the victory of God
Romans 5:6-11	God reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ
Luke 2:8-14	Proclamation of the good news

Commentary

Reconciliation has two sides: it is fascinating and terrifying at the same time. It draws us in so that we desire it: within ourselves, with one another and between our different confessional traditions. We see the price and it scares us. For reconciliation means renouncing our desire for power and recognition. In Christ, God graciously reconciles us to himself even though we have turned away from him. God's action goes beyond even this: God reconciles not only humanity, but the whole of creation to himself.

DAY 4 *Everything old has passed away* (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Genesis 19:15-26	Don't look back
Ps 77:5-15	God is always faithful
Philippians 3:7-14	Forgetting what lies ahead
Luke 9:57-62	Keep your hand on the plough

Commentary

We often live out of the past. Looking back can be helpful and is often necessary for the healing of memories. It can also paralyze us and prevent us from living in the present. Paul's message here is liberating: "everything old has passed away".

The Bible encourages us to keep the past in mind, to draw strength from our memories and to remember what good God has done. However, it also asks us to leave the old, even what was good, in order to follow Christ and live a new life in him.

During his year, the work of Martin Luther and other reformers is being commemorated by many Christians. The Reformation changed much in the life of the Western Church. Many Christians showed heroic witness and many were renewed in their Christian lives. At the same time, as scripture shows, it is important not to be limited by what happened in the past, but rather to allow the Holy Spirit to open us to a new future in which division is overcome and God's people is made whole.

Questions

1. What could we learn by reading together the history of our Christian divisions and mutual mistrust?
2. Do we agree with the statement: "Paul's message here is liberating"? In what way?

3. Sometimes, breaking with the past can be like an assault and the grief involved like an abyss. What is it like to face and go into an unknown future? What helps us to do this?
4. What must change in your church so that divisions can be overcome, and that which unites can be strengthened?

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, the same, yesterday, today and forever. Heal the wounds of our past, bless our pilgrimage towards unity today and guide us into your future, when you will be all in all, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen.

DAY 5 *Everything has become new* (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Ezekiel 36:25-27	Receiving a new heart from God
Ps 126	Being filled with joy
Colossians 3:9-17	Being renewed in Christ
John 3:1-8	Being born in the Spirit

Commentary

Paul encountered Christ, the risen Lord, and became a renewed person – just as everyone does who believes in Christ. This new creation is not visible to the naked eye. Instead it is a reality of faith. God lives in us by the power of the Holy Spirit and lets us share in the life of the Trinity.

By this act of new creation, the Fall is overcome and we are brought into a saving relationship with God. Truly amazing things can be said about us: as Paul said, in Christ we are a new creation; in his resurrection death is overcome; no person or thing can snatch us out of the hand of God; we are one in Christ and he lives in us, in Christ we are “a kingdom and priest: (Rev 5:10) as we give thanks to him for overcoming death and we proclaim the promise of the new creation.

This new life becomes visible when we allow it to take shape and live it out in “compassions, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” It must also become apparent in our ecumenical relationships. A common conviction in many churches is that the more we are in Christ, the closer we are to each other. Especially on this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we are reminded of both the achievements and tragedies of our history. The love of Christ compels us to live as renewed beings in actively seeking unity and reconciliation.

Questions

1. What helps you to recognize that you are a new creation in Christ? What are some of the visible and tangible, as well as the invisible, effects?
2. What do you understand by ‘the Fall’? Is this a helpful (theological) concept for you? Unhelpful? In what way?
3. Where do the descriptors “compassion, kindness, humility...” come from?
4. Do you agree that “the more we are in Christ the closer are to each other”? In your experience, is the complement also true, that the closer we are to each other, the more we are in Christ?