

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

8 - 15 May, 2016

*“Called to proclaim
the mighty acts
of the Lord”*

(cf. 1 Peter 2:9)



Photo: Denise Stevens

BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS FOR THE EIGHT DAYS

Called to proclaim the mighty acts of the Lord

(cf. I Peter 2:9)

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”



National Council of
Churches in Australia

The call to be *God's people*

St Peter tells the early Church that in their search for meaning prior to encountering the Gospel they were *not a people*. But through hearing the call to be God's *chosen race* and receiving the power of God's salvation in Jesus Christ, they have become *God's people*. This reality is expressed in Baptism, common to all Christians, in which we are born again of water and the Holy Spirit (cf. John 3:5). In Baptism we die to sin, in order to rise with Christ to a new life of grace in God. It is an ongoing challenge daily to remain aware of this new identity in Christ.

Hearing of God's *mighty acts*

Baptism opens up an exciting new journey of faith, uniting each new Christian with God's people throughout the ages. The Word of God – the Scriptures with which Christians of all traditions pray, study and reflect – is the foundation of a real, albeit incomplete, communion. In the shared sacred texts of the Bible, we hear of God's saving acts in salvation history: leading his people out of slavery in Egypt, and *the great mighty act* of God: the raising of Jesus from the dead, which opened new life to all of us. Furthermore, prayerful reading of the Bible leads Christians to recognise the *mighty acts* of God also in their own lives.

Response and proclamation

God has chosen us not as a privilege, though it is a privilege to be one of God's people. He has made us holy, but not in the sense that Christians are more virtuous than others. He has chosen us to fulfil some purpose.

We are holy only insofar as we are committed to God's service, which is always to bring his love to all people. Being a priestly people means being in service to the world. Christians live this baptismal calling and bear witness to God's *mighty acts* in a variety of ways:

Healing wounds: Wars, conflicts and abuses have wounded the emotional and relational lives of the people of many countries. God's grace helps us to beg forgiveness for the obstacles that prevent reconciliation and healing, to receive mercy, and to grow in holiness.

Searching for truth and unity: Awareness of our common identity in Christ calls us to work towards surmounting the obstacles and answering the questions that still divide us as Christians. We are called, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, to share our experiences and so discover, that in our common pilgrimage, Jesus Christ is among us.

An Active Commitment to Human Dignity: Christians who have been brought *out of darkness* into the *marvellous light* of the Kingdom recognise the extraordinary dignity of all human life. Through common social and charitable projects we reach out to the poor, the needy, the addicted and the marginalised.

Resources and suggestions for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2016 have been prepared by Christian groups in Latvia.

Representatives of a variety of ecumenical projects in Latvia were asked to reflect on the chosen theme and the experience of their work.

Their reflections form the basis of the materials offered for the 'Eight Days'.

As you/your group works through these studies, try to identify experiences you have had that give rise to similar thoughts, possibilities and convictions.

Day 1 *Let the stone be rolled away*

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| Ezek 37:12-14 | I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. |
| Ps 71:18b-23 | Your power and your righteousness, O God, reach the high heavens. |
| Ron 8:15-21 | We suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. |
| Matt 28:1-10 | He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. |

Commentary

Today's reflections are prepared by the Catholic Youth Centre of the Archdiocese of Rīga, and spring from their experience of organising an Ecumenical Way of the Cross, a very influential annual ecumenical event in the life of Latvia. This experience prompts reflection on what the passion and resurrection mean in the Latvian context, and what are the Lord's mighty acts that baptised Christians are called to proclaim.

- Latvia's Soviet history continues to cast a shadow over the people of this nation. There is still much grief and pain; wounds inflicted which are difficult to forgive. All of this is like the large stone, which covered the mouth of Jesus' tomb. Wounds such as these imprison us in a spiritual grave.
- But if, in our suffering, our pain is united to his pain, then the story does not end here, locked in our graves. The earthquake of the Lord's resurrection is the earth-shaking event that opens our graves and frees us from the pain and bitterness that hold us in isolation from one another.

- This is the mighty act of the Lord: his love, which shakes the earth, which rolls away the stones, which frees us, and calls us out into the morning of a new day. Here, at this new dawn we are re-united with our brothers and sisters who have been imprisoned and hurting too. And like Mary Magdalene we must “go quickly” from this great moment of joy to tell others what the Lord has done.

Questions

1. What are the events and the situations of our lives and the circumstances that make us lock ourselves in the grave – in sadness, grief, worries, anxiety and despair?
2. What keeps us from accepting the promise and joy of the resurrection of Christ?
3. How ready are we to share the experience of God with those whom we meet?
4. What ‘mighty acts’ of God have you seen or heard of in your life-time?
5. In what ways do we see and respond to God’s ‘mighty acts’: in worship, in song, in prayer, and in work for justice and peace?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you have always loved us from the beginning, and you have shown the depth of your love in dying for us on the cross and thereby sharing our sufferings and wounds. At this moment, we lay all the obstacles that separate us from your love at the foot of your cross. Roll back the stones which imprison us. Awaken us to your resurrection morning. There may we meet the brothers and sisters from whom we are separated. Amen.

DAY 2 *Called to be messengers of joy*

- Is 61:1-4 The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed.
- Ps 133 How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!
- Phil 1:1-5 Make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.
- John 15:9-12 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Commentary

In the Soviet era a Christian presence through public media was impossible in Latvia. After independence, Latvian State Radio began broadcasting Christian programmes with a focus on unity and mission, providing a forum for leaders from diverse churches to encounter one another. This public witness of mutual respect, love and joy contributed to the spirit of Latvian ecumenical life. The experience of the creators of Christian programming at the Latvian State Radio inspired this reflection.

- The joy of the Gospel calls Christians to live the prophecy of Isaiah: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has appointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed”. We long for Good News to mend our broken hearts and to release us from all that binds us and makes us captive.

- When we are saddened by our own suffering, we may lack the vigour to proclaim the joy that comes from Jesus. Nevertheless, even when we feel unable to give anything to anyone, by bearing witness to the little that we have, Jesus multiplies it in us and in the people around us.
- In the Gospel Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love” and “love one another as I have loved you”. It is in this way that we discover his joy in us, so that our joy may be complete. This mutual love and mutual joy is at the heart of our prayer for unity. As the psalmist says, “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”

Questions

1. What smothers joy in the world and in the churches?
2. What can we receive from other Christians so that Jesus’ joy may be in us, making us witnesses of the Good News?
3. Who are ‘the oppressed’ in our country today? What would be ‘good news’ to them? How can we be part of the mending of broken hearts?
4. “The unbinding of the oppressed also frees the oppressor.” Discuss.

Prayer

God of love, look upon our willingness to serve you despite our spiritual poverty and limited abilities. Fulfill the deepest longings of our hearts with your presence. Fill our broken hearts with your healing love so that we may love as you have loved us. Grant us the gift of unity so that we may serve you with joy and share your love with all. This we ask in the name of your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

DAY 3 *The witness of fellowship*

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| Jer 31:10-13 | They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion. |
| Ps 122 | Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: May they prosper who love you. |
| 1 Jn 4:16b-21 | Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. |
| John 17:20-23 | That they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me. |

Commentary

For over a decade Chemin Neuf, an international Catholic community with an ecumenical vocation, has been present in Latvia, with both Catholic and Lutheran members. Together they experience the joy that comes from fellowship in Christ, as well as the pain of disunity. As a sign of this division, they place an empty paten and chalice on the altar during evening prayer. Their experience inspired this reflection.

- Division amongst Christians is an obstacle to evangelisation. The world cannot believe that we are Jesus' disciples while our love for one other is incomplete. We feel the pain of this division when we cannot receive together the body and blood of Christ at the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity.
- The source of our joy is our common life in Christ. To live our life of fellowship every day is to welcome, love, serve, pray and witness with Christians from diverse traditions. It is the pearl of great value given to us by the Holy Spirit.

- The night before his death, Jesus prayed for unity and love amongst us. Today we raise our hands and pray with Jesus for Christian unity. We pray for the bishops, ministers and members of all churches. We pray that the Holy Spirit will lead us all on this path of unity.

Questions

1. How do we regard Christians of other churches, and are we prepared to ask forgiveness for prejudice towards them?
2. What can each of us do to decrease division amongst Christians?
3. How do we treasure the scriptures as the living word of God, calling us to greater unity and mission?
4. When and where do you have fellowship with Christians of other traditions?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, who prayed that we might all be one, we pray to you for the unity of Christians according to your will, according to your means. May your Spirit enable us to experience the suffering caused by division, to see our sin and to hope beyond all hope. Amen.

DAY 4 *A priestly people called to proclaim the Gospel*

Gen 17:1-8 Your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.

Ps 145:8-12 The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Rom 10:14-14 And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?

Commentary

These reflections were inspired by the producers of the Sunday morning Christian programme Vertikale. The challenge of maintaining this Christian voice on Latvian national television has taught them that it is only when we learn to recognise other Christians as brothers and sisters that we can dare take God's Word into the public space.

- In today's world more than ever, words flood into our homes: no longer just from our conversations, but from television, radio and now from social media. These words have the power to build up and to knock down. Much of this ocean of words seems meaningless: diversion rather than nourishment.
- One could drown in such an ocean where there is no meaning to grasp. But we have heard a saving Word; it has been thrown to us as a lifeline. It calls us into communion, and draws us into unity with others who have heard it too. Once we were not a people, but now we are God's people.

- More than this, we are a priestly people. United with others who have received his Word, our words are no longer mere drops lost in the ocean. Now we have a powerful Word to speak. United we can speak it powerfully: *Yeshua* – God saves.

Questions

1. What personal ambitions, competitive spirits, falsehoods about other Christians, and resentments obscure proclamation of the Gospel?
2. How do we understand our common call to be God's people?
3. How do we express our baptismal identity as a "royal priesthood"? Have we ever even thought in these terms?
4. How does God's word in scripture inform and shape our daily lives and the way we relate to others?
5. Who hears a life-giving word from us?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you said that everyone will know that we are your disciples if there is love among us. Strengthened by your grace, may we work tirelessly for the visible unity of your Church, so that the Good News that we are called to proclaim will be seen in all our words and deeds. Amen.

DAY 5 *The fellowship of the Apostles*

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| Isa 56:6-8 | For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. |
| Ps 24 | Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? |
| Acts 2:37-42 | They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. |
| John 13:34-35 | I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. |

Commentary

The fellowship of Christian leaders shapes the visible expression of ecumenical life in Latvia. They gather regularly at Gaizins, Latvia's highest hill, and other locations, for a 40-hour period of prayer and simple fellowship around shared meals. For the duration of these meetings they are supported in non-stop prayer and worship by the faithful. These encounters renew the leaders as fellow-workers in Christ. The experience of the founder of the Latvia House of Prayer for All Peoples inspired this reflection.

- Jesus' commandment to love one another is not theoretical. Our communion of love with one another becomes concrete when we gather together intentionally as Christ's disciples, to share fellowship and prayer in the power of the Spirit.
- The more that Christians, especially their leaders, encounter Christ together in humility and patience, the more prejudice diminishes, the more we discover Christ in one another, and the more we become authentic witnesses to the kingdom of God.

- At times ecumenism can seem very complicated. Yet joyful fellowship, a shared meal and common prayer and praise are ways of apostolic simplicity. In these we obey the commandment to love one another, and proclaim our *Amen* to Christ's prayer for unity.

Questions

1. How can we recognize other Christians as brothers and sisters if they believe/teach/practise beliefs and attitudes that we consider unhelpful, wrong, even destructive to the spreading of the good news?
2. What is our experience of encountering one another as brothers and sisters in Christ through Christian fellowship, shared meals and common prayer?
3. What are our expectations of bishops and other church leaders on the path towards the visible unity of the Church? How can we support and encourage them?
4. In what ways and over what issues do our local and national church leaders come together? Avoid each other?

Prayer

God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may you give to all Christians, and especially to those entrusted with leadership in your Church, the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that with the eyes of our hearts we may see the hope to which you have called us: one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above and through all and in all. Amen.

DAY 6 *Listen to this dream*

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| Gen 37:5-8 | Listen to this dream that I dreamed. |
| Ps 126 | We were like those who dream. |
| Rom 12:9-13 | Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. |
| John 21:25 | The world itself could not contain the books that would be written. |

Commentary

Christian disunity hurts. Churches suffer from their inability to be united as one family at the Lord's Table; they suffer from rivalry and from histories of combativeness. One individual response to disunity emerged in 2005 in the form of an ecumenical journal: Kas Mus Vieno? ("What unites us?"). The experience of producing the journal inspired this reflection.

- Joseph has a dream, which is a message from God. However, when Joseph shares his dream with his brothers they react with anger and violence because the dream implies that they must bow down before him. Ultimately famine drives the brothers to Egypt and they do bow before Joseph, but rather than the abasement and dishonour they fear, it is a moment of reconciliation and grace.
- Jesus, like Joseph, unfolds to us a vision, a message about the life of his Father's kingdom. It is a vision of unity. But like Joseph's brothers, we are often upset, angered and fearful of the vision and what it seems to imply. It demands that we submit and bow to the will of God. We fear it because we fear what we might lose. But the vision is not about loss. Rather, it is about regaining brothers and sisters we had lost, the reuniting of a family.

- We have written many ecumenical texts, but the vision of Christian unity is not captured in agreed statements alone, important though these are. The unity God desires for us, the vision he puts before us, far exceeds anything we can express in words or contain in books. The vision must take flesh in our lives and in the prayer and mission that we share with our brothers and sisters. Most of all it is realised in the love we show for one another.

Questions

1. What does it mean to place our own dreams for Christian unity at the feet of Christ?
2. In what ways does the Lord's vision of unity call the churches to renewal and change today?
3. As we consider our commitment to Christian unity, for what should we ask, or offer, forgiveness?
4. Have you ever experienced, as an individual or as part of a Christian community, such a moment of reconciliation and grace?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, grant us humility to hear your voice, to receive your call, and to share your dream for the unity of the Church. Help us to be awake to the pain of disunity. Where division has left us with hearts of stone, may the fire of your Holy Spirit inflame our hearts and inspire us with the vision of being one in Christ, as he is one with you, so that the world may believe that you have sent him. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

DAY 7 Hospitality for prayer

- Is 62:6-7 Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all day and all night they shall never be silent.
- Ps 100 Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness.
- 1 Pet 4:7b-10 Be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers.
- John 4:4-14 The water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

Commentary

The experience of praying together on each of the eight days of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has helped Christians in the small town of Madonna to come together in friendship. A particular fruit of this has been the opening of an ecumenical prayer chapel in the centre of town, complete with elements from Lutheran, Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Here the Christians of Madonna join in continuous round-the-clock prayer. This experience forms the background of the following reflections.

- As long as God's people are divided, and Christians are estranged from one another, we are like Jesus in Samaria, strangers in a foreign land, without safety, without refreshment and without a place of rest.
- The people of Israel longed for a place of safety where they could worship the Lord. Isaiah tells us of the Lord's mighty act: he posted sentinels on the walls of Jerusalem so that his people could worship him in safety day and night.

- In the Week of Prayer our churches and chapels become places of safety, rest and refreshment for people to join in prayer. The challenge from this week is to create more places and protected times of prayer, because as we pray together, we become one people.

Questions

1. How can we promote mutual hospitality among parishes and congregations in our locality?
2. Is there a place and time in our neighbourhood where Christians from different traditions can regularly gather in prayer, and if not, can we help to create such a place?
3. At what times of year or in what circumstances do we mostly come together as Christians? For what reason and with what purpose?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you asked your apostles to stay awake with you and to pray with you. May we offer the world dedicated protected times and spaces in which to find refreshment and peace, so that praying together with other Christians we may come to know you more deeply. Amen.

DAY 8 *Hearts burning for unity*

- Is 52:7-9 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news.
- Ps 30 You have turned my mourning into dancing.
- Col 1:27-29 How great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you.
- Luke 24:13-36 Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

Commentary

Different churches in Latvia have been able to work together in evangelisation through the use of the Alpha Course, developed in the Anglican Church of Holy Trinity, Brompton, London. Latvians who have come to faith through this programme remain open to learning and being enriched by the gifts of other Christian communities. This experience inspired the following reflections.

- The disappointed disciples who leave Jerusalem for Emmaus have lost their hope that Jesus was the Messiah and walk away from their community. It is a journey of separation and isolation.
- By contrast, they return to Jerusalem full of hope with a gospel message on their lips. It is this resurrection message that drives them back into the heart of the community and into a communion of fellowship.

- So often Christians try to evangelise with a competitive spirit, hoping to fill their own churches. Ambition overrides the desire for others to hear the life-giving message of the Gospel. True evangelism is a journey from Emmaus to Jerusalem, a journey from isolation into unity.

Questions

1. What are the disappointments and barriers that isolate us from others?
2. What are the gifts (initiatives, methods, and programmes) that we can receive from other Christian denominations and communities?
3. How have you been blessed, or what have you discovered in working with Christians of different denominations?
4. Knowing the presence and mercy of God, how do we engage in social and charitable projects with other Christians?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you have made our hearts burn within us, and have sent us back upon the road towards our brothers and sisters, with the Gospel message on our lips. Help us to see that hope and obedience to your commands always lead to the greater unity of your people. Amen.