

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

13th-20th May 2018



Statue commemorating the Curaçao Slave Revolt of 1795.

Biblical Reflections and Prayers for the Eight Days

*Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power
(Exodus 15.6)*

TO THOSE ORGANIZING THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

The search for unity: throughout the year

The traditional period in the northern hemisphere for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is 18-25 January. Those dates were proposed in 1908 by Paul Wattson to cover the days between the feasts of St Peter and St Paul, and therefore have a symbolic significance. In the southern hemisphere where January is a vacation time churches often find other days to celebrate the week of prayer, for example around Pentecost (suggested by the Faith and Order movement in 1926), which is also a symbolic date for the unity of the Church.

Mindful of the need for flexibility, we invite you to use this material throughout the whole year to express the degree of communion which the churches have already reached, and to pray together for that full unity which is Christ's will.

Adapting the text

This material is offered with the understanding that, whenever possible, it will be adapted for use in local situations. Account should be taken of local liturgical and devotional practice, and of the whole social and cultural context. Such adaptation should ideally take place ecumenically. In some places ecumenical structures are already set up for adapting the material; in other places, we hope that the need to adapt it will be a stimulus to creating such structures.

Using the Week of Prayer material

- For churches and Christian communities which observe the week of prayer together through a single common service, an order for an ecumenical worship service is provided.
- Churches and Christian communities may also incorporate material from the week of prayer into their own services. Prayers from the ecumenical worship service, the "eight days", and the selection of additional prayers can be used as appropriate in their own setting.
- Communities which observe the week of prayer in their worship for each day during the week may draw material for these services from the "eight days".
- Those wishing to undertake bible studies on the week of prayer theme can use as a basis the biblical texts and reflections given in the eight days. Each day the discussions can lead to a closing period of intercessory prayer.
- Those who wish to pray privately may find the material helpful for focusing their prayer intentions. They can be mindful that they are in communion with others praying all around the world for the greater visible unity of Christ's Church.

BIBLICAL TEXT FOR 2018

Exodus 15:1-21

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him. The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name.

Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he cast into the sea; his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone. Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power— your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy. In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries; you sent out your fury, it consumed them like stubble. At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up, the floods stood up in a heap; the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea. The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.’ You blew with your wind, the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters.

Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendour, doing wonders? You stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed them.

In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode. The peoples heard, they trembled; pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia. Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; trembling seized the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away. Terror and dread fell upon them; by the might of your arm, they became still as a stone until your people, O Lord, passed by, until the people whom you acquired passed by. You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O Lord, that you made your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established. The Lord will reign for ever and ever”.

When the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his chariot drivers went into the sea, the Lord brought back the waters of the sea upon them; but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground.

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea”.

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME FOR THE YEAR 2018

Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power

(Ex 15:6)

The Caribbean Region

Bearing the name of one of the groups of its indigenous peoples – the Kalinago people, formerly called the Caribs – the contemporary Caribbean region is a complex reality. The region's vast geographical spread includes both island and mainland territories containing a rich and diverse tapestry of ethnic, linguistic and religious traditions. It is also a complex political reality with a variety of governmental and constitutional arrangements, ranging from colonial dependencies (British, Dutch, French, and American) to republican nation states.

The contemporary Caribbean is deeply marked by the dehumanizing project of colonial exploitation. In the aggressive pursuit of mercantile gains, the colonisers codified brutal systems which traded human beings, and their forced labour. Initially, these practices enslaved and decimated and in some cases exterminated the region's indigenous peoples. This was followed by the enslavement of Africans and the "indentureship" of people from India and China.

At each stage, the systems of the colonisers attempted to strip subjugated peoples of their inalienable rights: their identity, their human dignity, their freedom and their self-determination. The enslavement of Africans was not simply a case of transporting labourers from one location to another. In an affront to God-given human dignity, it commodified the human person, making one human being the property of another. With the understanding of the enslaved as property went other practices that further sought to dehumanize the African. Included among these was the denial of the right to cultural and religious practices and to marriage and family life.

Very regrettably, during five hundred years of colonialism and enslavement, Christian missionary activity in the region, with the exception of a few outstanding examples, was closely tied to this dehumanizing system and in many ways rationalized it and reinforced it. Whereas those who brought the Bible to this region used the scriptures to justify their subjugation of a people in bondage, in the hands of the enslaved, it became an inspiration, an assurance that God was on their side, and that God would lead them into freedom.

The Theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2018

Today Caribbean Christians of many different traditions see the hand of God active in the ending of enslavement. It is a uniting experience of the saving action of God which brings freedom. For this reason the choice of the song of Moses and Miriam (Ex 15:1-21), as the motif of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2018 was considered a most appropriate one. It is a song of triumph over oppression. This theme has been taken up in a hymn, *The Right Hand of God*, written in a workshop of the Caribbean Conference of Churches in August 1981, which has become an “anthem” of the ecumenical movement in the region, translated into a number of different languages.

Like the Israelites, the people of the Caribbean have a song of victory and freedom to sing and it is a song which unites them. However, contemporary challenges again threaten to enslave and again threaten the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God. While human dignity is inalienable it is often obscured by both personal sin and social structures of sin. In our fallen world societal relationships too often lack the justice and compassion that honour human dignity. Poverty, violence, injustice, addiction to drugs and pornography, and the pain, grief and anguish which follow, are experiences that distort human dignity.

Many of the contemporary challenges are themselves the legacy of a colonial past and slave trade. The wounded collective psyche is manifested today in social problems related to low self-esteem, gang and domestic violence, and damaged familial relationships. Although a legacy of the past, these issues are also exacerbated by the contemporary reality that many would characterize as neo-colonialism. Under existing circumstances it seems almost impossible for many of the nations of this region to pull themselves out of poverty and debt. Moreover, in many places there is a residual legislative framework that continues to be discriminatory.

The right hand of God that brought the people out of slavery, gave continued hope and courage to the Israelites, as it continues to bring hope to the Christians of the Caribbean. They are not victims of circumstance. In witnessing to this common hope the churches are working together to minister to all peoples of the region, but particularly the most vulnerable and neglected. In the words of the hymn, “the right hand of God is planting in our land, planting seeds of freedom, hope and love”.

Biblical - Pastoral reflection on the text (Ex 15:1-21)

The Book of Exodus takes us through three periods: the Israelites’ life in Egypt (1:1-15:21); Israel’s journey through the wilderness (15:22-18:27); and the Sinai experience (19-40). The passage chosen, the ‘Song at the Sea’ led by Moses and Miriam, details the events leading up to the redemption of the people of God from enslavement. It closes the first period.

“This is my God, and I will praise him” (15:2)

Verses 1-3 of chapter 15 emphasize the praise of God: “The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him” (15:2). In the song, led by Moses and Miriam, the Israelites sing the praises of the God who has freed them. They realize that the plan and purpose of God to set the people free cannot be thwarted or frustrated. No forces not even Pharaoh’s chariots, army and trained military power could frustrate the will of God for his people to be free (15:4-5). In this joyful cry of praise, Christians from many different traditions recognize that God is the Saviour of us all, we delight that he has kept his promises, and continues to bring his salvation to us through the Holy Spirit. In the salvation that he brings we recognize that he is our God and we are all his people.

“Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power” (15:6)

The liberation and salvation of God’s people comes through the power of God. The right hand of God can be understood both as God’s sure victory over his adversaries, and as his unfailing protection of his own people. In spite of the determination of Pharaoh, God heard the cry of his people and will not let the people perish because God is the God of life. By his control of wind and sea God shows his will to preserve life and to destroy violence (Ex 15:10). The purpose of this redemption was to constitute the Israelites as a people of praise recognizing God’s steadfast love.

The liberation brought hope and a promise for the people. Hope because a new day had dawned when the people could freely worship their God and realize their potential. It was also a promise: their God would accompany them throughout their journey and no force could destroy God’s purpose for them.

Does God use violence to counteract violence?

Some Church Fathers interpreted the narrative as a metaphor for the spiritual life. Augustine, for example, identified the enemy which is cast into the sea not as the Egyptians, but as sin.

“All our past sins, you see, which have been pressing on us, as it were from behind, he has drowned and obliterated in baptism. These dark things of ours were being ridden by unclean spirits as their mounts, and like horsemen they were riding them wherever they liked. That’s why the apostle calls them ‘rulers of this darkness’. We have been rid of all this through baptism, as through the Red Sea, so called because sanctified by the blood of the crucified Lord...” (Sermon 223E).

Augustine saw the story as encouraging the Christian to hope and to persevere, rather than despair, at the pursuit of the enemy. For Augustine baptism was the key constitutive event in establishing the true identity of each person as a member of

the Body of Christ. He draws a parallel between Israel's liberating passage through the Red Sea and that of the Christian people in baptism. Both liberating journeys bring a worshiping assembly into being. As such Israel could freely praise the saving hand of God in the victory song of Miriam and Moses. Their redemption constituted the enslaved Israelites as members of the one people of God, united with one song of praise to sing.

Unity

Exodus 15 allows us to see how the road to unity must often pass through a communal experience of suffering. The Israelites' liberation from enslavement is the foundational event in the constitution of this people. For Christians this process climaxes with the incarnation and Paschal mystery. Although liberation/salvation is an initiative taken by God, God engages human agencies in the realization of his purpose and plan for the redemption of his people. Christians, through baptism, share in God's ministry of reconciliation, but our own divisions hamper our witness and mission to a world in need of God's healing.

REFLECTIONS AND BIBLICAL PRAYERS FOR THE EIGHT DAYS

Day 1 **You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt**

Leviticus 19:33-34	You shall love the alien as yourself
Psalms 146	The Lord watches over the strangers
Hebrews 13:1-3	Some have entertained angels without knowing it
Matthew 25:31-46	I was a stranger and you welcomed me

After becoming the first independent black republic, Haiti extended hospitality to other enslaved peoples in search of freedom. Recent times have brought severe economic hardship to Haitians, many of whom have left home, making perilous journeys in hope of a better life. In many instances they have been met with inhospitality and legal barriers. The Caribbean Council of Churches has been involved in advocacy to challenge those nations that are restricting or stripping Haitians of citizenship rights.

Reflection

The Israelites' memory of being strangers in the land of Egypt lay behind the Law's instruction that God's people were to welcome the stranger in their midst. The memory of their own exile was expected to prompt empathy and solidarity with contemporary exiles and strangers. Like Israel, our common Christian experience of God's saving action goes together with remembering both alienation and estrangement – in the sense of estrangement from God and from his kingdom. This kind of Christian remembering has ethical implications. God has restored our dignity in Christ, and made us citizens of his kingdom, not because of anything we did to deserve it but by his own free gift in love. We are called to do likewise, freely and motivated by love. Christian love is to love like the Father. That is, to recognize dignity and to give dignity, and thereby to help bring healing to the broken human family.

Questions

1. Read the Biblical text Exodus 15: 1-21. This is a victory celebration, sung and danced by the loosely organized tribes of the Hebrews, the underdogs, after they had escaped from bondage in Egypt, against the odds. How might the Egyptian soldiers, the humiliated losers, have recounted the episode to Pharaoh?
2. Read and discuss the 'Introduction to the theme for the year 2018' on pages 5-8 of this year's resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

3. In the supplementary Biblical texts and in the Prayer for today what other word besides ‘strange(r)’ could be used? With what effect?

Prayer

Eternal God,
You belong to no culture and land but are Lord of all. You call us to welcome the stranger in our midst.
Help us by your Spirit,
to live as brothers and sisters, welcoming all in your name,
and living in the justice of your kingdom. This we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.

*The right hand of God is planting in our land,
planting seeds of freedom, hope and love;
in these many-peopled lands,
let his children all join hands,
and be one with the right hand of God.*

Day 2 No longer as a slave but a beloved brother

Genesis 1:26-28	God created humankind in God’s own image
Psalms 10:1-10	Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?
Philemon	No longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother
Luke 10:25-37	The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery in which victims are forced or tricked into sex work, child labour and the harvesting of organs for the profit of the exploiters. It is a global, multimillion-dollar industry. It is also a growing problem across the Caribbean. Reformed Churches in the Caribbean have joined with the Council for World Mission and the Caribbean and North American Council for Mission to educate Christian communities to end the scourge of human trafficking.

Reflection

One of the first things we learn about God in the Hebrew and Christian Bible is that God created humankind in his own image. However, this profound and beautiful truth has often been obscured or denied throughout human history. For instance, in the Roman Empire, the dignity of those enslaved was denied. The Gospel message is entirely different to this. Jesus challenged the social norms that devalued the human dignity of Samaritans, describing the Samaritan as the ‘neighbour’ of the man who had been attacked on the road to Jericho – a neighbour to be loved, according to the Law. And Paul, made bold in Christ, describes the once-enslaved Onesimus as ‘a beloved brother’, transgressing the norms of his society and affirming Onesimus’s humanity.

Christian love must always be a courageous love that dares to cross borders, recognising in others a dignity equal to our own. Like St Paul, Christians must be 'bold enough in Christ' to raise a united voice in clearly recognising trafficked persons as their neighbours and their beloved brothers and sisters, and so work together to end modern-day slavery.

Questions

1. What do you know about present day slavery, exploitation of workers and human trafficking? [If you don't know anything about it, Amnesty International would be a good resource.]
2. Is your denomination involved in any action to end modern day slavery and human trafficking? If you don't know, how can you find out?
3. As a result of the Bangladesh 'Rana Plaza' garment factory tragedy in 2013 many clothing companies have adopted stricter policies to ensure they obtain their products from suppliers who abide by recognised international standards of worker safety and conditions. Can you name any of these companies? How can you encourage and support such moves?

Prayer

Gracious God,
draw near to those who are victims of human trafficking,
assuring them that you see their plight and hear their cry.
May your Church be united in compassion and courage
to work for that day when no one will be exploited
and all will be free to live lives of dignity and peace.
This we pray in the name of the Triune God
who can do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine. Amen.

*The right hand of God
is lifting in our land,
lifting the fallen one by one;
each one is known by name,
and rescued now from shame,
by the lifting of the right hand of God.*

Day 3

Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit

Exodus 3:4-10

God frees those who are in human bondage

Psalms 24:1-6

Lord, we are the people who seek your face

1 Corinthians 6:9-20

Therefore glorify God in your body

Matthew 18:1-7

Woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!

Many Christian churches in the Caribbean share a concern about the issue of pornography, especially via the internet. Pornography has destructive consequences for human dignity, particularly for children and young people. Like slavery, it commodifies human beings, ensnares those addicted to it and damages wholesome loving relationships.

Reflection

The book of Exodus demonstrates God's concern for people in human bondage. God's revelation to Moses at the burning bush was a powerful declaration of his will to free his people. God observed their misery, heard their cry and so came to deliver them. God still hears the cry of those who are subject to enslavement today, and wills to deliver them. While sexuality is a gift of God for human relationships and the expression of intimacy, the misuse of this gift through pornography enslaves and devalues both those caught up in producing it and those who consume it. God is not impervious to their plight and Christians are called to be similarly concerned.

St Paul writes that we are called to give glory to God in our own bodies, which means that every part of our lives, including our relationships, can and should be an offering pleasing to God. Christians must work together for the kind of society that upholds human dignity and does not put a stumbling block before any of God's little ones, but, rather, enables them to live in the freedom which is God's will for them.

Questions

1. What is pornography? How does it *commodify human beings, ensnare those addicted to it and damage wholesome loving relationships*?
2. What other aspects of modern Australian society might be said to do the same or similar?
3. In what ways has the human dignity of Indigenous Australians been eroded or destroyed and their culture devalued by the prevailing majority culture?

Prayer

By your heavenly grace, O God,
restore us in mind and body.
Create in us a clean heart and a pure mind
that we may give glory to your Name.
May the churches attain unity of purpose
for the sanctification of your people,
through Jesus Christ
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
for ever and ever.
Amen.

*The right hand of God
is healing in our land,
healing broken bodies, minds and souls;
so wondrous is its touch,
with love that means so much,
when we're healed
by the right hand of God.*

Day 4 Hope and Healing

Isaiah 9:2-7a	His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace
Psalms 34:1-14	Seek peace, and pursue it
Revelation 7:13-17	God will wipe away every tear from their eyes
John 14:25-27	Peace I leave with you

Within the Caribbean, violence is a problem to which the churches are called to respond. There is an alarmingly high rate of murder, much of which stems from domestic abuse, gang warfare and other forms of criminality. There is also a rising rate of self-harm and suicide in some parts of the region.

Reflection

The kingdom which God promised, the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed and made manifest in his ministry, is a kingdom of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. What does this Good News mean for those trapped in the darkness of violence? In the prophet's vision, light shone on those who lived in a land of deep darkness. But how can Christians bring the light of Jesus to those living in the darkness of domestic and gang violence? What sense of hope can Christians offer? It is a sad reality that division among Christians is a counter-sign, which hampers the communication of hope.

However, the quest for peace and reconciliation between the different churches and confessions is the opposite of that. When Christians strive for unity in a world of conflict, they offer the world a sign of reconciliation. Christians who refuse to enter a logic of privilege and status, who refuse to demean others and their communities, give witness to the peace of God's kingdom, where the Lamb guides the saints to springs of the water of life. This is a peace the world needs, and one which brings healing and comfort to those afflicted by violence.

Questions

1. Over what issues of peace, justice and human rights have churches of different traditions come together in recent times to present a united voice to Australian governments? With what effect?
2. Spend some time in consideration of the questions posed in the first paragraph of today's 'Reflection'.
3. What practical steps towards Christian unity have you been involved in, or are you aware of, in your local area?

Prayer

God of all comfort and hope,
your resurrection defeated the violence of the cross.
As your people, may we be a visible sign
that the violence of the world will be overcome.
This we pray in the name of our risen Lord.
Amen.

*The right hand of God
is pointing in our land,
pointing the way we must go;
so clouded is the way,
so easily we stray,
but we're guided by the right hand of God.*

Day 5

Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land!

Deuteronomy 1:19-35
Psalm 145:9-20
James 1:9-11
Luke 18:35-43

The Lord God goes before you and carried you
The Lord upholds all who are falling
The rich will disappear like a flower in the field
Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!

The Caribbean economies have traditionally been based on the production of raw materials for the European market and so have never been self-sustaining. As a consequence, borrowing on the international market became important for development. The requirements of such borrowing impose a reduction of spending on transport, education, health and other public services, which impacts most severely on the poor. The Caribbean Conference of Churches has launched an initiative to address the current debt crisis in the region and through their international networks to come to the aid of the poor.

Reflection

We can imagine the noise of the crowd as Jesus enters Jericho. Many voices shout down the cry of the blind beggar. He is a distraction and an embarrassment. But through all this tumult Jesus hears the blind man's voice, just as God always hears the cries of the poor in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Lord who upholds the falling not only hears, he responds. Thereby, the beggar's life is radically transformed.

The disunity of Christians can become part of the world's tumult and chaos. Like the arguing voices outside Jericho, our divisions can drown out the cry of the poor. However, when we are united we become more fully Christ's presence in the world, better able to hear, listen and respond. Rather than increasing the volume of discord, we are able to truly listen and so discern the voices that most need to be heard.

Questions

1. What raw materials does the Caribbean produce for European and similar markets – like Australia?
2. Do you ever give much thought to where the ingredients/components in the products you buy come from? What purchasing ethics do you practise?
3. Who are 'the falling' (in the first paragraph of the 'Reflection' above) in Australia today, who need to be upheld and whose voices need to be heard? How might churches respond and be Christ's presence in their situation?

Prayer

Loving God,
you lift up the poor and distressed
and restore their dignity.
Hear now our cries for the poor of our world.
Restore their hope and lift them up,
that all your people may be one,
and live in security and peace.
This we pray in Jesus name.
Amen.

*The right hand of God
is lifting in our land,
lifting the fallen one by one;
each one is known by name,
and rescued now from shame,
by the lifting of the right hand of God.*

Day 6 Let us look to the interests of others

Isaiah 25:1-9	Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation
Psalms 82	Maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute
Philippians 2:1-4	Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others
Luke 12:13-21	Be on your guard against all kinds of greed

Changing international banking regulations continue to have a negative impact on the trade and commerce of the Caribbean and threaten the economic survival of many families. It has become increasingly difficult for Caribbean people working abroad to send money back to their families. The Churches in the Caribbean introduced the Credit Union movement in order for the poor to have access to finance for economic activity.

Reflection

The witness of the Scriptures is consistent that God always makes a preferential option for the poor: the right hand of God acts for the powerless against the powerful. Similarly, Jesus consistently warns against the dangers of greed. Despite these warnings, however, the sin of greed often infects our Christian communities and introduces a logic of competition: one community competing against the next. We need to remember that insofar as we fail to differentiate ourselves from the world, but conform to its divisive competing spirit, we fail to offer ‘a refuge for the needy in distress, a shelter from the storm’.

For our different churches and confessions, to be rich in the sight of God is not a case of having many members belonging – or donating – to one’s own community. Rather, it is to recognise that as Christians we have countless brothers and sisters right across the world, united across the economic divisions of ‘North’ and ‘South’. Conscious of this fraternity in Christ, Christians can join hands in promoting economic justice for all.

Questions

1. What role does competition play in our lives? Is there a place for competition in the church? Why or why not?
2. In what well-known Bible stories, events and pronouncements do we see God's "preferential option for the poor" in action?
3. Australia is a rich country in the 'South'. Yet our overseas aid is now the lowest it has ever been at just 0.22% of GDP. We rank 17th out of the 29 wealthy OECD member nations for foreign aid. How can churches and individual Christians encourage our government to 'lift its game' in this regard?
4. In what ways can we support ecumenical efforts and the good work each of our denominations is doing to facilitate economic opportunities and sustainability in developing countries in our region?

Prayer

Almighty God,
give courage and strength to your church
to continually proclaim justice and righteousness
in situations of domination and oppression.
As we celebrate our unity in Christ,
may your Holy Spirit help us
to look to the needs of others.
Amen.

*The right hand of God
is striking in our land,
striking out at envy, hate and greed;
our selfishness and lust,
our pride and deeds unjust,
are destroyed by the right hand of God.*

Day 7

Building family in household and church

Exodus 2:1-10

The birth of Moses

Psalm 127

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain

Hebrews 11:23-24

Moses was hidden by his parents ... because they saw that the child was beautiful

Matthew 2:13-15

Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt

In the Caribbean the family continues to be adversely affected by the legacy of enslavement and by new factors such as the migration of parents, financial problems and domestic violence. Facing this reality, the churches of the Caribbean are working to give support to both nuclear and extended families.

Reflection

Families are of central importance for the protection and nurture of children. The Bible accounts of the infancies of both Moses and Jesus, who were in mortal danger from the moment they were born because of the murderous orders of angry rulers, illustrate how vulnerable children can be to external forces. These stories also show how action can be taken to protect such little ones. Matthew presents us with a model of fatherhood that is in loving fidelity to the Lord's command, especially in turbulent times.

The Scriptures view children as a blessing and as hope for the future. For the Psalmist, they are 'like arrows in the hand of a warrior'. As Christians, we share a common calling to live as supportive family networks, relying on the strength of the Lord for the task of building strong communities in which children are protected and can flourish.

Questions

1. How would you define a family? What is the role and importance of families in society? In the church?
2. What do you know about Isaac and Rebekah's family? Jacob and Leah's? Elimelech and Naomi's? Jesse's? Matha, Mary and Lazarus's?
3. What observations and understandings emerge from your discussion of these Biblical families?
4. Consider the advice given to families in Ephesians 5:21 to 6:9. What, if any, is still useful today? What has changed?

Prayer

Gracious God,
you sent your son to be born in an ordinary family
with ancestors who were both faithful and sinful.
We ask your blessing upon all families
within households and communities.
We pray especially for the unity of the Christian family
so that the world may believe.
In Jesus' name we pray,
Amen.

*The right hand of God
is writing in our land,
writing with power and with love;
our conflicts and our fears,
our triumphs and our tears,
are recorded by the right hand of God.*

Day 8 He will gather the dispersed... from the four corners of the earth

Isaiah 11:12-13	Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah, and Judah shall not be hostile towards Ephraim
Psalms 106:1-14, 43-48	Gather us to give thanks to your holy name
Ephesians 2:13-19	He has broken down the dividing wall
John 17:1-12	I have been glorified in them

The Caribbean churches work together to heal the wounds in the Body of Christ in the region, which are a legacy left by colonisation. Reconciliation often demands repentance, reparation and the healing of memories. One example is the acts of apology and reparation between Baptists in Britain and the Caribbean. Like Israel, the Church in its unity is called to be both a sign and an active agent of reconciliation.

Reflection

Throughout the biblical narrative of salvation history, an unmistakable motif is the unrelenting determination of the Lord to form a people whom he could call his own. The formation of such a people – united in a sacred covenant with God – is integral to the Lord’s plan of salvation and to the glorification and hallowing of God’s Name.

The prophets repeatedly remind Israel that the covenant demanded that relationships among its various social groups should be characterised by justice, compassion and mercy. As Jesus prepared to seal the new covenant in his own blood, his earnest prayer to the Father was that those given to him by the Father would be one, just as he and the Father were one. When Christians discover their unity in Jesus they participate in Christ’s glorification in the presence of the Father, with the same glory that he had in the Father’s presence before the world existed. And so, God’s covenanted people must always strive to be a reconciled community – one which itself is an effective sign to all the peoples of the earth of how to live in justice and in peace.

Questions

1. How was God present and active in Australia before British settlement?
2. In Australia, second peoples are undoubtedly the beneficiaries of injustices inflicted on First Peoples. Is redress a possibility? Is reconciliation and constructive relationship a possibility? What might the move towards this involve? What might be the church's role?
3. What are some practical steps you/your congregation can take towards a better understanding of Indigenous spirituality?
4. Write another, Australian, verse for the hymn "The right hand of God".

Prayer

Lord,
we humbly ask that, by your grace,
the churches throughout the world
may become instruments of your peace.
Through their joint action as ambassadors
and agents of your healing, reconciling love
among divided peoples,
may your Name be hallowed and glorified.
Amen.

*The right hand of God
is planting in our land,
planting seeds of freedom, hope and love;
in these many-peopled lands,
let his children all join hands,
and be one with the right hand of God.*