

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME OF THE YEAR 2023

Do good; seek justice.

(Isaiah 1:17)

Introduction

Isaiah lived and prophesied in Judah during the eighth century BCE and was a contemporary of Amos, Micah and Hosea. This was towards the end of a period of great economic success and political stability for both Israel and Judah, due to the weakness of the ‘superpowers’ of the time, Egypt and Assyria. However, it was also a period when injustice, inequity and inequalities were rampant in both kingdoms.

This period also saw religion thriving as a ritual and formal expression of belief in God, concentrated on Temple offerings and sacrifices. This formal and ritual religion was presided over by the priests, who were also the beneficiaries of the largesse of the rich and powerful. Due to the physical proximity and interconnectedness of the royal palace and the Temple, power and influence were centred almost entirely on the king and the priests, neither of whom, for much of this history, stood up for those who were enduring oppression and inequity. In the worldview of this time (one which recurs throughout history), the rich and those who made many offerings were understood to be good and blessed by God, while those who were poor and could not offer sacrifices were understood to be wicked and cursed by God. The poor were often denigrated for their economic inability to fully participate in Temple worship.

Isaiah spoke into this context, attempting to awaken the consciousness of the people of Judah to the reality of their situation. Instead of honouring the contemporary religiosity as a blessing, Isaiah saw it as a festering wound and a sacrilege before the Almighty. Injustice and inequality led to fragmentation and disunity. His prophecies denounce the political, social and religious structures and the hypocrisy of offering sacrifices while oppressing the poor. He speaks out vigorously against corrupt leaders and in favour of the disadvantaged, rooting righteousness and justice in God alone.

The working group appointed by the Minnesota Council of Churches chose this verse from the first chapter of the prophet Isaiah as the central text for the Week of Prayer: *“learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (1:17).*

Isaiah taught that God requires righteousness and justice from all of us, all the time and in all spheres of life. Our world today in many ways mirrors the challenges of division that Isaiah confronted in his preaching. Justice, righteousness and unity originate from God’s profound love for each of us, and are at the heart of who God is and how God expects us to be with one another. God’s commitment to create a new humanity *“from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev 7:9)* calls us to the peace and unity God has always wanted for creation.

The prophet’s language with regard to the religiosity of the time is ferocious – *“Bringing offerings is futile, incense is an abomination to me ... When you stretch out your hands I will hide my eyes from you” (vv. 13, 15).* Once he has spoken these blistering condemnations, diagnosing what is wrong, Isaiah offers

the remedy for these iniquities. He instructs God's people to, *“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil”* (v. 16).

Today, separation and oppression continue to be manifest when any single group or class is given privileges above others. The sin of racism is evident in any beliefs or practices that distinguish or elevate one “race”¹ over another. When accompanied or sustained by imbalances in power, racial prejudice moves beyond individual relationships to the very structures of society – the systemic perpetuation of racism. Its existence has unfairly benefitted some, including churches, and burdened and excluded others, simply due to the colour of their skin and the cultural associations based upon perceptions of “race”.

Like the religious people so fiercely denounced by the biblical prophets, some Christian believers have been or continue to be complicit in supporting or perpetuating prejudice and oppression and fostering division. History shows that, rather than recognising the dignity of every human being made in the image and likeness of God, Christians have too often involved themselves in structures of sin such as slavery, colonisation, segregation and apartheid which have stripped others of their dignity on the spurious grounds of race. So too within the churches, Christians have failed to recognise the dignity of all the baptised and have belittled the dignity of their brothers and sisters in Christ on the grounds of supposed racial difference.

Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr memorably said, *“It is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that 11 o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hour in Christian America”*. This statement demonstrates the intersections between the disunity of Christians and the disunity of humanity. All division has its root in sin, that is, in attitudes and actions that run counter to the unity that God desires for the whole of his creation. Tragically racism is part of the sin that has divided Christians from one another, has caused Christians to worship at separate times, and in separate buildings, and in certain cases has led Christian communities to divide.

Unfortunately, not much has changed since the time of Martin Luther King Jr's statement. The 11:00 am time slot – the most common time for Sunday worship – often does not manifest Christian unity, but rather, division, along racial and social as well as denominational lines. As Isaiah proclaimed, this hypocrisy among people of faith is an offence before God: *“even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood”* (v. 15).

Learn to do good

In the Scripture passage chosen for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023, the prophet Isaiah teaches us how we are to cure these ills.

Learning to do right requires the decision to engage in self-reflection. The Week of Prayer is the perfect time for Christians to recognize that the divisions between our churches and confessions cannot be separated from the divisions within the wider human family. Praying together for Christian unity allows us to reflect on what unites us and to commit ourselves to confront oppression and division amongst humanity.

The prophet Micah points out that God has told us what is good and what God requires of us: *“to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”* (Mic 6:8). To act justly means that we have respect for all persons. Justice requires truly equitable treatment in order to address historic disadvantage based on “race”, gender, religion and socio-economic status. To walk humbly with God requires repentance, reparations, and finally reconciliation. God expects us to

¹ There is only one race, the human race. However, we must acknowledge that the myth of race has caused the reality of racism. Race is not biological; it is a social construct which separates humanity according to physical traits. It is important to acknowledge that while the term may not be used in various parts of the world, it has been used as a tool to effectively divide and oppress groups of humans.

unite in a shared responsibility for equity for all God's children. The unity of Christians should be a sign and foretaste of the reconciled unity of the entire creation. However, Christian division weakens the force of that sign, serving to reinforce division rather than bring healing to the world's brokenness which is the Church's mission.

Seek justice

Isaiah counsels Judah to seek justice (*v. 17*), which is an acknowledgment of the existence of injustice and oppression in their society. He implores the people of Judah to overturn this *status quo*. Seeking justice requires us to face up to those who inflict evil on others. This is not an easy task and will sometimes lead to conflict, but Jesus assures us that standing up for justice in the face of oppression leads to the kingdom of heaven. "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (*Mt 5:10*). Churches in many parts of the world must acknowledge how they have conformed to societal norms and been silent or actively complicit regarding racial injustice. Racial prejudice has been one of the causes of Christian division that has torn the Body of Christ. Toxic ideologies, such as White Supremacy and the doctrine of discovery,² have caused much harm, particularly in North America and in lands throughout the world colonized by White European powers over the centuries. As Christians we must be willing to disrupt systems of oppression and to advocate for justice.

The year during which the Minnesota writing group was preparing the texts for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was filled with the evil and devastation of oppression in its many forms all over the world. This suffering was greatly amplified in many regions, especially in the Global South, by the Covid-19 pandemic, where even basic subsistence was almost impossible for many, and practical assistance was largely absent. The author of Ecclesiastes seemed to be speaking to the current experience: "*I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed - with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them*" (*Eccles 4:1*).

Oppression is harmful to the entire human race. There can be no unity without justice. As we pray for Christian unity, we must acknowledge current and generational oppression and be resolute in our commitment to repent of these sins. We can make our own Isaiah's injunction to "*wash yourselves; make yourselves clean*" because "*your hands are full of blood*" (*vv. 15, 16*).

Rescue the oppressed

The Bible tells us that we cannot separate our relationship with Christ from our attitude towards all God's people, particularly those considered "*the least of these*" (*Mt 25:40*). Our commitment to each other requires us to engage in *mishpat*, the Hebrew word for restorative justice, advocating for those whose voices have not been heard, dismantling structures that create and sustain injustice, and building others that promote and ensure everyone receives fair treatment and the rights that are due to them. This work must extend beyond our friends, family and congregations to the whole of humanity. Christians are called to go out and listen to the cries of all who are suffering, in order to better understand and respond to their stories of suffering and their trauma. Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr. often stated that "*a riot is the language of the unheard.*" When protest and civil unrest arise, it is often because the protesters' voices are not being heard. If churches join their voices to those of the oppressed, their cry for justice and liberation will be amplified. We serve and love God and our neighbour by serving and loving one another in unity.

² The Doctrine of Discovery resulted from a Papal Bull issued by Pope Alexander VI (May 4th, 1493), and was pervasive throughout the world benefitting the churches in every way in regards to the descendants of Indigenous and Enslaved people. It justified seizing the lands of Indigenous peoples on the grounds that the colonizing powers 'discovered' these lands.

Defend the orphan, plead for the widow

Widows and orphans occupy a special place in the Hebrew Bible, alongside strangers, as representatives of the most vulnerable members of society. In the context of the economic success in Judah at the time of Isaiah, the situation of orphans and widows was a desperate one as they were deprived of protection and of the right to own land, and therefore the capacity to provide for themselves. The prophet called on the community, as it rejoiced in its prosperity, not to neglect to defend and nurture the poorest and most vulnerable among them. This prophetic call echoes in our time, as we consider: who are the most vulnerable people in our society?

Whose voices are not being heard in our communities? Who is not represented at the table? Why? Which churches and communities are missing from our dialogues, our common action and our prayer for Christian unity? As we pray together during this Week of Prayer, what are we willing to do about these absent voices?

Conclusion

Isaiah challenged God's people in his day to learn to do good *together*, to seek justice *together*, to rescue the oppressed *together*, to defend the orphan and plead for the widow *together*. The prophet's challenge applies equally to us today. How can we live our unity as Christians so as to confront the evils and injustices of our time? How can we engage in dialogue, increase awareness, understanding and insight about one another's lived experiences?

These prayers and encounters of the heart have the power to transform us – individually and collectively. Let us be open to God's presence in all our encounters with each other as we seek to be transformed, to dismantle the systems of oppression, and to heal the sins of racism. Together, let us engage in the struggle for justice in our society. We all belong to Christ.

THE PREPARATION OF THE MATERIAL FOR THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2023

The theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023 was chosen, and the materials prepared, by a group of Christians in the United States of America (USA) convened by the Minnesota Council of Churches. In December 2020, the group first met online, many knowing each other and all knowing the work of the Minnesota Council of Churches, some of them leaders in that organization as well as being activists and/or pastors in their own congregations and communities. The international group jointly sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches to finalize materials for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023 met with delegates from the Minnesota Council of Churches in the Château de Bossey, Switzerland, 19-23 September 2021.

For years, Minnesota has had some of the worst racial disparities in the nation. Minnesota saw the largest mass execution in the history of the USA in 1862, when 38 members of the Dakota Indigenous people were hanged in Mankato, the day after Christmas Day, following the US-Dakota War. As they prepared to die, the 38 sang the hymn *Wakantanka taku nitawa* (Many and Great) a version of which is included in the worship service. More recently, Minnesota has been at the epicentre of racial reckoning. When Covid-19 shut down the world in March 2020, the murder of an African American man, George Floyd, at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin drew people from all over the world out onto the streets in unity and righteous anger, to protest the injustice they witnessed on their television screens. Chauvin, who was dismissed immediately after the assault,³ would become the first police officer in modern history convicted for murdering a Black person in Minnesota.

The history of mistreatment of communities of colour in the United States has created longstanding inequities and relational rifts between communities. Consequently, the history of the churches in the United States includes racial issues as a major factor of ecclesial division. In other parts of the world, other non-doctrinal issues play a similar role. That is why the theological work on unity done by the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order has traditionally sought to hold together the search for the churches' unity and the search for overcoming walls of separation within the human family such as racism. That is why prayer, especially prayer for Christian unity, takes an even more important meaning when it takes place in the heart of the struggles against what separates us as humans created with equal dignity in the image and likeness of God.⁴ The Minnesota Council of Churches, already engaged in addressing these historic racial patterns, convened a working group that articulated the scripture readings, themes, music, and worship service for this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

The working group consisted of intergenerational Minnesota clergy and lay leaders who have been working on the front lines of the unrest. They have been responsible for both spiritual and community care in the region and have borne witness to the frustrations and cries of God's people. Members of this working group represented many different cultural and spiritual communities and were inclusive of Indigenous and African American communities who have been at the centre of the recent reckoning. While writing these materials these communities continued to experience

³ Chauvin was dismissed by the first African American Minneapolis Police Chief, Medaria Arradondo.

⁴ See for instance: *Unity in Today's World – The Faith and Order Study on the Unity of the Church and the Unity of Humankind*, Geneva, WCC, 1978; *Church and World – The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*, Geneva, WCC, 1990.

extrajudicial killings,⁵ the death of children due to rising violence, and continued hardships as a result of the pandemic.

The online writing meetings became a sacred and safe space of energy and support and prayer as the group moved through the attack on the United States Capitol, the trial of former officer Derek Chauvin and the anniversary of the murder of George Floyd.

The members of the writing group were men, women, mothers, fathers, storytellers and healers. They represented diverse worship experiences and spiritual expressions, both from the Indigenous peoples of the United States and communities who have immigrated – both forced and voluntary – with varying levels of access to their individual linguistic and cultural histories, who now call this region home. Members represented urban and suburban regions and many Christian communities. This diversity allowed for deep reflection and solidarity across the many perspectives.

The members of the Minnesota writing group are hopeful that their personal experiences of racism and devaluation as human beings will serve as witness to the inhumanity of God’s children toward one another. It is also from deep longing within that as Christians they embody God’s gift of unity to address and eradicate the divisions that keep us from understanding and experiencing the reality that we all belong to Christ.

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⁵ This term refers to killings carried out by state authorities without any legal or judicial process. An example is the shooting of Daunte Wright in April 2021.

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CONTEXTUALISING THE RESOURCES IN AUSTRALIA

“When we stop talking and listen, we hear that the church in Australia is built on stolen land, Indigenous land, and shares in a history of racism, massacre, abuse, stolen children, imprisonment and death in custody, and ongoing disadvantage. We hear that this legacy is really ours because we have explained, justified or remained silent in the face of this reality. When we stop talking and listen, we make space to realise anew that we have acted in ways that deny the worth of some of God’s people, equally made in God’s image.” (Rev. Radhika Sukumar-White’s sermon from Day of Mourning service, 19th January 2020, Leichhardt Uniting Church).

The history we are dealing with involved the massacre of the First Nations people in all Australian states right into the twentieth century (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_massacres_of_Indigenous_Australians; <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php>).

Between 1910 and as late as the 1970’s, governments, churches and welfare bodies forcibly removed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. These children became known as the Stolen Generations. The rationale for the removal of the children was that their lives would be improved if they became part of White society. It was a policy of assimilation, sanctioned by Government policies. It left a legacy of trauma and loss that continues to this day.

In 1975, acknowledging that land had been stolen from Aboriginal people, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam met Australian Aboriginal rights activist and member of the Gurindji people Vincent Lingiari at Wave Hill in the Northern Territory. Ceremonially tipping sand from his hands into the hands of Lingiari, he said, *‘Vincent, I solemnly hand to you these deeds as proof in Australian law that these lands belong to the Gurindji people and I put into your hands this piece of earth as a sign that we restore them to you and your children forever.*

In 1993, Prime Minister Paul Keating’s Redfern Speech proved a way to re-set attitudes towards first Australians (<https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00008765.pdf>). Here is part of what he said:

Isn’t it reasonable to say that if we can build a prosperous and remarkably harmonious multicultural society in Australia, surely we can find just solutions to the problems which beset the first Australians – the people to whom the most injustice has been done. The starting point might be to recognise that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal people. It begins, I think, with that act of recognition. Recognition that it was we did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us. With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds.

We failed to ask – how would I feel if this were done to me? As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us.

In 1995 a National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

from their families commenced, headed by the President of the Human Rights and Equality Commission, Sir Ronald Wilson. By the end of 1996 nearly 800 submissions had been heard and in May 1997 the *Bringing Them Home* report was tabled in Parliament concluding that: *For individuals, their removal as children and the abuse they experienced at the hands of the authorities or their delegates have permanently scarred their lives. The harm continues in later generations, affecting their children and grandchildren.*

In 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered an official apology and expressed regret for past government policies that resulted in the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families.

I move that today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history. We reflect on their past mistreatment. We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations - this blemished chapter in our nation's history. The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.

We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians. We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country. For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.

We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation. For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written. We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians.

A future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again.

A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity.

A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed.

A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility.

A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia

Many churches and church organisations have also offered official apologies for past failures, with a commitment to address the injustices of the dispossession of Indigenous people.

In May 2017, over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates gathered near Uluru and put their signatures on an historic document, the Statement from the Heart, addressed to the Australian people.

STATEMENT FROM THE HEART

We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart.

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial', and according to science more than 60,000 years ago. This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

*How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?
With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.
Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.
These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness. We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.
We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.
Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: the coming together after a struggle. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination. We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history. In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.*

The Statement from the Heart invites Australia to create a better future for all, calling for 'Voice. Truth. Treaty'. In 2023, Australians will vote in a referendum about establishing a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution, that will enable First Nations people to be engaged in decisions that directly affect them.