

BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS FOR THE EIGHT DAYS

DAY 1

Reconciliation: Throwing the cargo overboard

Acts 27:18-19,21

“We were being pounded by the storm so violently that on the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard and on the third day with their own hands they threw the ship’s tackle overboard... Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, ‘Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss’.”

Psalm 85

Luke 18:9-14

Reflection

As Christians from different Churches and Traditions, we have unfortunately, over the centuries, accumulated abundant baggage consisting of mutual distrust, bitterness and suspicion. We thank the Lord for the birth and the growth of the ecumenical movement over the past century. Our encounter with Christians from other traditions and our common prayer for Christian unity encourage us to seek mutual forgiveness, reconciliation and acceptance. We must not allow the baggage of our past to hinder us from drawing closer to one another. It is the Lord’s will that we let go, in order to let God!

Questions and Discussion

- What “baggage” might we be carrying that is holding back progress in our life in faith, participation in the church, or relationships with people of other faiths? Think personal, local and denominational.
- When, if ever, is it helpful to say: “I told you so”?
- To what voices do you listen for advice?

Prayer

Forgiving God,
set us free from the painful memories of the past,
that wound our shared Christian life.
Lead us to reconciliation
so that, through the Holy Spirit we may overcome
hatred with love,
anger with gentleness,
and suspicion with trust.
We ask this in the name of your beloved Son, our brother Jesus. Amen.

DAY 2

Enlightenment: Seeking and showing forth Christ's light

Acts 27:20

“When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.”

Psalms 119:105-110

Mark 4:35-41

Reflection

Christ is our light and our guide. Without the light and guidance of Christ, we become disorientated. When Christians lose sight of Christ, they grow fearful and divided from one another. Moreover many people of good will outside the Church are unable to see the light of Christ because in our Christian division we reflect Christ's light less clearly or, at times, block it out completely. As we seek the light of Christ, we are drawn closer to one another, and so mirror this light more clearly, becoming truly a sign of Christ, the light of the world.

Questions and Discussion

- How important is hope in your life? How important is hope for Christians? For humanity?
- Sun/moon/stars/seasons ... What things give shape, rhythm and orientation to your life? What possible storms disrupt this? Think of some 'real life' examples.
- In what ways might your faith guide, sustain and restore in these stormy times? Think of some 'real life' examples.
- The boat is a traditional symbol for the church. What storms are the church battling right now? Have we lost sight of Christ in these storms?

Prayer

God, your word is a light to our steps
and without you we are lost and disorientated.
Enlighten us so that, through your word, we may walk your path.
May our churches crave your guiding, consoling and transforming presence.
Give us the honesty we need to recognize
when we make it difficult for others to see your light,
and the grace we need to share your light with others.
We ask this in the name of your Son,
who calls us, his followers, to be light to the world. Amen.

DAY 3

Hope: Paul's message

Acts 27:22,34

"I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship... none of you will lose a hair from your heads..."

Psalm 27

Matthew 11:28-30

Reflection

As Christians belonging to churches and traditions that are not fully reconciled to one another, we are often discouraged by the lack of progress towards visible unity. Indeed, some have given up all hope and see this unity as an unattainable ideal. Others do not even see unity as a necessary part of their Christian faith. As we pray for this gift of visible unity, let us do so with steadfast faith, enduring patience and expectant hope, trusting in God's loving providence. Unity is the Lord's prayer for the Church and he is accompanying us on this journey. We will not be lost.

Questions and Discussion

- What divided the people on board the ship with Paul? What were the unifying factors?
- What factors continue to divide us in the church? What things do we hold in common? How can we ease the divisions and cultivate the common ground?
- In what other ecumenical events/actions/gatherings do you participate besides the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity e.g. World Day of Prayer; Palm Sunday Peace Rally; Easter Dawn Service? What do you learn or contribute? How important are these kind of things?

Prayer

God of mercy,
lost and disheartened, we turn to you.
Instill in us your gift of hope.
May our churches hope and strive for the unity
for which your Son prayed on the eve of his passion.
We ask this through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
for ever and ever. Amen.

DAY 4

Trust: Do not be afraid, believe

Acts 27:23-26

“For the last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.’ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we will have to run aground on some island.”

Psalms 56

Luke 12:22-34

Reflection

In the midst of the tempest Paul’s encouragement and hope contradicted the fear and despair of his fellow travellers. Our common call to be disciples of Jesus Christ entails being a sign of contradiction. In a world riven with anxieties, we are called to stand as witnesses to hope by placing our trust in God’s loving providence. Christian experience shows us that God writes straight on crooked lines, and we know, against all odds, we will not drown or be lost, because God’s steadfast love endures forever.

Questions and Discussion

- Paul’s words and conviction encourage those around him. Words are powerful and can change things. Discuss some examples of this (Think both historical and contemporary).
- Do you have a saying, proverb or mantra that inspires you or helps you in difficult times? Share among the group.
- A contradiction is a word of difference or a word against. Discuss the ideas of speaking words that encourage others, of having the courage to offer a different perspective, and of speaking out against untruth and injustice.
- How are Christians signs of contradiction in the world?

Prayer

Almighty God,
our personal suffering leads us to cry out in pain
and we shrink in fear when we experience sickness,
anxiety or the death of loved ones.
Teach us to trust you, knowing that you bring good into all things.
May the churches we belong to be signs of your providential care.
Make us true disciples of your Son
who taught us to listen to your word
and to serve one another.
In confidence we ask this in the name of your Son,
and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

DAY 5

Strength: Breaking bread for the journey

Acts 27:33-36

“Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, ‘Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads.’ After he had said this, he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves.”

Psalms 77

Mark 6:30-44

Reflection

Paul’s invitation to eat is an exhortation to those in the boat to strengthen themselves for what lies ahead. This taking of bread marks a change of attitude, as those in the boat move from despair to courage. In a similar way the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper provides us with food for the journey and re-orientates us to life in God. We are made strong. The breaking of the bread – at the core of Christian community life and worship – builds us up as we commit ourselves to Christian service. We long for the day when all Christians will be able to share at the same table of the Lord’s Supper and draw strength from one bread and one cup.

Questions and Discussion

- Do you think the words of Acts 27 verse 35 are deliberately Eucharistic? Why do you think the author chose to write them this way?
- What aspects of the Eucharist/Mass/Holy Communion give you strength to be a disciple of Jesus? If you belong to a tradition that does not celebrate this sacrament, in what ritual or practise of your faith community do you share that gives you strength?
- What prevents all Christians from being able to share at the same table of the Lord’s Supper now?

Prayer

Loving God,
your Son Jesus Christ broke bread
and shared the cup with his friends on the eve of his passion.
May we grow together in closer communion.
Following the example of Paul and the early Christians,
give us strength to build bridges of compassion, solidarity and harmony.
In the power of the Holy Spirit,
we ask this in the name of your Son,
who gives his life that we might live. Amen.

DAY 6

Hospitality: Show unusual kindness

Acts 28:1-2, 7

“After we had reached safety, we then learned that the island was called Malta. The natives showed us unusual kindness. Since it had begun to rain and was cold, they kindled a fire and welcomed all of us round it... Now in the neighbourhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days.”

Psalm 46

Luke 14:12-24

Reflection

After the traumas and conflicts of the storm at sea, the practical care offered by the islanders is experienced as an unusual kindness by those washed up on the shores. Such kindness demonstrates our common humanity. The Gospel teaches us that when we care for those in distress we are showing love to Christ himself (cf. Matthew 25:40). Furthermore, when we show loving kindness to the weak and dispossessed we are attuning our hearts to the heart of God in which the poor have a special place. Welcoming outsiders, whether they be people of other cultures or beliefs, immigrants or refugees, is both to love Christ himself, and to love as God loves. As Christians, we are called to step out in faith and reach out with God’s all-embracing love, even to those we find difficult to love.

Questions and Discussion

- The Greek word translated ‘natives’ (or in some versions, ‘foreigners’) is the word from which we get our ‘barbarians’. Why is it that so often we regard people of different cultures as suspicious or even inferior?
- Consider the phrase “unusual kindness”. What is usual kindness? How does Jesus encourage us to go beyond this? See Luke 6: 27-36
- In what ways have you experienced the “unusual kindness” or hospitality of another culture? How in your culture do you show unusual kindness? How do we do so as Christians?
- This year the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity overlaps with the Week of Prayer for Reconciliation in Australia. What are the main issues involved in the process of justice and reconciliation for Indigenous Australians? How can we ease the tensions between first, second and third peoples of our nation?

Prayer

God of the orphan, the widow and the stranger,
instill in our hearts a deep sense of hospitality.
Open our eyes and hearts
when you ask us to feed you, to clothe you and to visit you.
May our churches participate
in the ending of hunger, thirst and isolation,
and in overcoming barriers that prevent the welcome of all people.
We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus,
who is present in the least of our sisters and brothers. Amen.

DAY 7

Conversion: Changing our hearts and minds

Acts 28:3-6

“Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire, when a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, ‘This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.’ He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were expecting him to swell up or drop dead, but after they had waited a long time and saw that nothing unusual had happened to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.”

Psalm 119:137-144

Matthew 18:1-6

Reflection

The locals realized that their judgment of Paul as a murderer was wrong, so they changed their minds. The extraordinary event with the viper enables the islanders to see things in a new way, a way that might prepare them to hear the message of Christ through Paul. In our search for Christian unity and reconciliation we are often challenged to rethink how we perceive other traditions and cultures. This demands an ongoing conversion to Christ in which the churches learn to overcome their perception of the other as a threat. As a result, our pejorative views of others will be cast away, and we will be drawn closer to unity.

Questions and Discussion

- First impressions are important, but they can be misleading. When have you had the experience of changing your attitude towards another person after getting to know them better?
- Have you ever been misjudged by others? How did that make you feel?
- Is it helpful sometimes to try and see ourselves as others see us?
- Why do we so often see difference as a threat rather than an opportunity?

Prayer

Almighty God,
we turn to you with repentant hearts.
In our sincere quest for your truth,
purify us from our unjust opinions of others
and lead the churches to grow in communion.
Help us let go of our fears,
and so better understand each other and the stranger in our midst.
We ask this in the name of the Just One,
your beloved Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

DAY 8

Generosity: Receiving and giving

Acts 28:8-10

“The father of Publius lay sick in bed with fever and dysentery. Paul visited him and cured him by praying and putting his hands on him. After this happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They bestowed many honours on us, and when we were about to sail, they put on board all the provisions we needed”.

Psalms 103:1-5

Matthew 10:7-8

Reflection

This story is full of giving and receiving: Paul received unusual kindness from the islanders; Paul gives healing to the father of Publius and others; having lost everything in the storm, the 276 receive abundant provisions as they set sail. As Christians we are called to unusual kindness. But in order to give we must first learn to receive – from Christ and from others. More often than we realize, we are recipients of acts of kindness from people who are different from us. These acts also point towards the generosity and healing of our Lord. We who have been healed by the Lord are responsible for passing on that which we have received.

Questions and Discussion

- When has the saying: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” held true in your life?
- So-called “gifts” take many forms: material, spiritual, emotional, physical. Name some of those gifts in yourself, in others, in your congregation or faith community.
- What inspires or prompts you to acts of kindness and generosity?
- Entering into relationships, though at times risky, opens doors to the giving and receiving of gifts. What gifts do Christians of different traditions, cultures and backgrounds have to share with one another? With the world?

Prayer

God, giver of life,
we thank you for the gift of your
compassionate love which
soothes and strengthens us.
We pray that our churches
may be always open to receive your gifts from one another.
Grant us a spirit of generosity to all
as we journey together in the path of Christian unity.
We ask this in the name of your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.