

Week of Prayer For Christian Unity

2nd-9th June 2019



The Marian shrine of Annai Velangkanni. Medan, Indonesia

Biblical Reflections and Prayers for the Eight Days

“Justice, and only justice you shall pursue”

(Deuteronomy 16.18-20)

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME FOR THE YEAR 2019

Justice and only justice you shall pursue

(Deuteronomy 16:18-20)

Every year Christians across the world gather in prayer for growth in unity. We do this in a world where corruption, greed and injustice bring about inequality and division. Ours is a united prayer in a fractured world: this is powerful. However, as individual Christians and communities, we are often complicit with injustice, and yet we are called together to form a united witness for justice and to be a means of Christ's healing grace for the brokenness of the world.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2019 has been prepared by Christians from Indonesia. With a population of 265 million, 86% of whom are reckoned to be Muslim, Indonesia is well known as having the largest Muslim population of any country. However, about 10% of Indonesians are Christian from various traditions. In terms of both population and the vast extension of the country Indonesia is the biggest nation in South East Asia. It has more than 17,000 islands, 1,340 different ethnic groups and over 740 local languages and yet is united in its plurality by one national language Bahasa Indonesia. The nation is founded on five principles called Pancasila,¹ with the motto *Bhineka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity)*. Across the diversity of ethnicity, language and religion, Indonesians have lived by the principle of *gotong royong* which is to live in solidarity and by collaboration. This means sharing in all aspects of life, work, grief and festivities, and regarding all Indonesians as brothers and sisters.

This always fragile harmony is today threatened in new ways. Much of the economic growth that Indonesia has experienced in recent decades has been built on a system that has competition at its heart. This is in stark contrast to the collaboration of *gotong royong*. Corruption is experienced in many forms. It infects politics and business, often with devastating consequences for the environment. In particular, corruption undermines justice and the implementation of law. Too often those who are supposed to promote justice and protect the weak do the opposite. As a consequence, the gap between the rich and

¹ The five principles of Pancasila are (1) *Belief in the one and only God*, (2) *Just and civilized humanity*, (3) *The unity of Indonesia*, (4) *Democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations amongst representatives*, (5) *Social justice for all People of Indonesia*.

the poor has widened; and so a country rich in resources has the scandal of many people living in poverty. As a traditional Indonesian saying goes, "A mouse dies of hunger in the barn full of rice." Meanwhile particular ethnic and religious groups are often associated with wealth in ways that have fed tensions. Radicalization that pits one community against another has grown and is exacerbated by the misuse of social media that demonizes particular communities.

Christian communities in such an environment become newly aware of their unity as they join in a common concern and a common response to an unjust reality. At the same time, confronted by these injustices, we are obliged, as Christians, to examine the ways in which we are complicit. Only by heeding Jesus's prayer "that they all may be one" can we witness to living unity in diversity. It is through our unity in Christ that we will be able to combat injustice and serve the needs of its victims.

Moved by these concerns, the Christians of Indonesia found that the words of Deuteronomy, "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue ..." (see Deut. 16:18-20) spoke powerfully to their situation and needs. Before the people of God enter the land God has promised them they renew their commitment to the Covenant God established with them. The pericope comes in a chapter whose central theme is the festivities to be celebrated by the Covenant people. After each festival the people are instructed, "Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns" (Deut. 16:14, see also 16:11). Indonesian Christians look to recover this same spirit of inclusive festivities across communities, which they previously enjoyed. At the end of this long chapter it may seem strange to have two verses about appointing judges, but in this Indonesian context the links between festivities for all and justice become alive. As people of the Covenant established in Jesus, we know that the delights of the heavenly banquet will be given to those who hunger and thirst and are persecuted for justice "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:6, 10).

Christ's Church is called to be a foretaste of this kingdom. However, in our disunity we fall short. We fail to be the sign of God's love for his people. Just as injustice has widened the divisions that have riven Indonesian society, so injustice has also fed the divisions of the Church. We repent of the injustice that causes division, but as Christians we also believe in the power of Christ to forgive us and heal. And so, we find ourselves united under the cross of Christ, calling both for his grace to end injustice and for his mercy for the sins which have caused our division.

The reflections for the eight days and the worship service will be focused on the chosen theme. To deepen our reflection on unity and justice, the topic of each day has been carefully chosen to present struggles that result from injustice.

BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS FOR THE EIGHT DAYS

Day 1

Let justice roll down like waters

(Amos 5:24)

Amos 5:22-25

Psalms 82: 1-4

Luke 11:37-44

Reflection

Christians can sometimes be very committed to prayer and worship, but less concerned for the poor and the marginalized. Sometimes we pray in church, but at the same time oppress our fellow human beings or exploit the environment. Christians in Indonesia recognize that in their land there are people who passionately try to practise their faith, but who oppress those of other beliefs, even using violence in doing so. But in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus reminds us that the outward sign of true worship of God is acting justly. Jesus is fierce in his condemnation of those who neglect this obligation.

In the prophecy of Amos, God rejects the worship offered by those who neglect justice, until they 'let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (5:24). The prophet insists on the absolute link between sincere worship and doing deeds of justice. When Christians work together to listen to the cry of the poor and the oppressed, they grow in communion with one another and with the Triune God.

Questions

Which other prophets spoke out strongly to God's people concerning issues of justice? (check out Isaiah 3 & 58; Micah 6; Luke 3)

In regard to what issues of social justice is your denomination most committed and most active? Your local congregation? Yourself?

How do God's justice and God's mercy work together?

Prayer

God of the widow, the orphan and the stranger,

You have shown us the path of justice.

Help us to follow your way by doing justice as our worship of you.

As Christians together, may we worship you not only with our hearts and minds, but also by our deeds.

May the Holy Spirit help and guide us to work for justice wherever we are, so that many people may be strengthened through our works.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Day 2

Let your word be 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'

(*Matthew 5:37*)

Leviticus 19: 11-18

Ephesians 4:22-25

Matthew 5:33-37

Reflection

Violence towards fellow humans is not found only in physical assault and robbery, but also in gossip and malicious rumours. Social media have made it easy for untruths to be circulated instantly to a wide audience. Christians in Indonesia are aware of how this has sometimes led to lies and prejudice being propagated by religious groups, including Christians, against other religious groups. Fear and the threat of reprisals can make people reluctant to stand up for the truth and can cause them to remain silent in the face of unjust and untrue statements aimed at causing fear.

Jesus boldly said, 'Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one.' Deceitfulness destroys good relationships between persons and between groups, including churches. Dishonesty disrupts the unity of the Church. The Letter to the Ephesians reminds us that we are members of one another. This is a call for Christians to be honest and accountable to each other, so that they may grow in fellowship. When we do so, it is not the spirit of the evil one, but the Holy Spirit of God who will be with us.

Questions

What do you know about the decision-making processes of your denomination? Your local congregation? How do you participate in these processes? How are leaders both supported and held accountable in making and carrying out decisions affecting the life of your church?

How do our faith and the life and teachings of Jesus help us to be more honest with one another? In your discussion, think of the place of things like respect, vulnerability, responsibility and forgiveness.

What did Jesus have to say about ‘truth’?

Prayer

God of righteousness,
grant us wisdom to distinguish right from wrong,
and the strength to do what is right.

Let our hearts be guided by honesty
and our lips speak the truth.

Give us courage to be truthful
even when others go against us.

Keep us from spreading animosity and deceit;
make us, rather, agents of unity and
peace, spreading good news for all
people.

We pray in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Day 3

The Lord is gracious and merciful to all

(Psalm 145:8)

Ruth 1: 15-17

Psalm 145:8-13

Matthew 1:1-17

Reflection

'The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made', said the psalmist, proclaiming that the love of God is beyond boundaries of ethnicity, culture, race, and even religion. The account of the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's gospel reflects this expansive vision. While ancient cultures often saw women as inferior, or as the property of their fathers or husbands, Matthew names four women among the ancestors of Jesus, two of whom, Ruth and Rahab, were Gentiles. Three other ancestors in the list were known for their sinfulness, including the adulterous King David. Naming these in the genealogy of Jesus and making them part of God's human history, proclaims that God includes everyone, male and female, sinner and righteous, in his plan of salvation, regardless of their backgrounds.

Indonesia is a nation of over 17,000 islands and 1,340 different ethnic groups, and churches are often separated along ethnic lines. Such exclusivity can lead some to see themselves as the sole possessors of the truth, thus wounding the unity of the Church. Amidst escalating ethnic and religious fanaticism and a growing spirit of intolerance throughout the world today, Christians can serve the human family by joining together to bear witness to the all-embracing love of God, proclaiming with the psalmist that 'the Lord is gracious and merciful' to all.

Questions

Australian society is becoming more secular. Even so, our dominant cultural and religious background is in western Christianity. What would it be like for us to live in a country like Indonesia where only 10% of the population are Christian? What different assumptions might apply?

About what other religions do you know the most? The least? When was the last time you had a conversation with someone who practises a religion other than Christianity? What was that like?

It seems that at some stage in history Christians began to “see themselves as the sole possessors of the truth”. When? How? Why? Has this been helpful? Is this still a valid position to hold?

Prayer

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God,
we give praise to you for your great glory
made manifest in all of creation.

Give us an open heart to embrace all who experience
discrimination.

Help us to grow in love beyond prejudice and
injustice.

Grant us the grace to respect the uniqueness of
each person, so that in our diversity we may
experience unity.

This prayer we make in your holy name. Amen.

Day 4

Be content with what you have

(Hebrews 13:5)

Exodus 20: 12-17

Hebrews 13:1-5

Matthew 6:25-34

Reflection

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews warns against excessive love of money and material things. In the face of our tendency to think we never have enough, the text reminds us of God's providence and assures us that God will never forsake creation. Through the fruitfulness of earth, rivers and seas, God's goodness has provided ample food and fresh water to sustain all living beings, and yet many people lack these basic necessities. Human weakness and greed frequently lead to corruption, injustice, poverty and hunger. It can be tempting, instead of caring about others and sharing our goods with them, to gather and accumulate money, food and natural resources for ourselves, or our own nation or ethnic group.

Yet, Jesus teaches us that material things should not be our main concern. Rather, we should strive first for the reign of God and its values, trusting that our heavenly Father will provide for us. In recent years, some churches in Indonesia have been providing various kinds of financial, human and educational support to small churches in rural areas. In this simple and practical example of mutual love they are demonstrating the unity with their fellow-Christians which is God's gift to his Church. Living more simply, not preoccupied with earning money beyond our needs or with hoarding resources for the future, can enable us to make the earth, our common home, a more just place.

Questions

What are your thoughts on the words of Mahatma Gandhi: “The earth has enough for everyone’s need, but not for everyone’s greed”?

What would a more just distribution of the world’s resources look like? How would it operate? Who would gain and who would lose?

It seems from the Gospel records that Jesus had far more to say about money, care of the poor, and the distribution and accumulation of wealth than he did about almost any other subject. Should we in the church, therefore, be paying more attention to these matters (rather than many other things that tend to distract us) than we do?

Prayer

Compassionate God,
we thank you for your bountiful gifts.

Give us the grace to accept all
blessings in simplicity and with
humble gratitude.

Enable us to be content and ready to share with others
who are in need, so that all may experience unity in the
love that flows from you,
our Triune God,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

Day 5

To bring good news to the poor

(Luke 4:18)

Amos 8:4-8

Psalms 85:8-13

Luke 4:16-21

Reflection

The prophet Amos criticized traders who practiced deceit and exploited the poor in order to gain maximum profit for themselves. Amos also underlined how God observes their wrongdoing and will not forget it. God listens to the cries of victims of injustice and never forsakes those who are exploited and treated unjustly.

We live in a globalized world where marginalization, exploitation and injustice are rampant. The gap between the rich and the poor is getting wider. Economic achievement becomes a deciding factor in relationships between peoples, nations and communities. Economic issues often trigger tensions and conflicts between them. It is hard to enjoy peace when justice is absent.

By virtue of our common Baptism, all Christians share in the prophetic mission of Jesus to proclaim good news to the poor and the weak, in both words and deeds. When we recognise this mission, the Spirit of the Lord will be upon us too, empowering us to work for justice. Our dignity as Christians calls us to speak and act in such a way that the words from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, which Jesus proclaimed in Nazareth, are fulfilled each day in the hearing of those around us.

Questions

When is ‘good news for the poor’ bad news for others? Is this God’s justice in operation?

Can rich people go to heaven? (see Mark 10: 23-25 and parallels)

How do the systems from which we benefit oppress others?
What can we do about this?

Read Luke 12: 47-48. Australia is comparatively a very rich country. What responsibilities are we currently neglecting? (Think climate change, waste, refugee crisis, overseas aid). How can we influence our leaders (political, economic, religious) to be more attentive to our collective responsibilities as privileged global citizens? What changes can we make in our own lives?

Prayer

God our Father,
forgive our lust for power
and free us from the temptation to
oppress others.
By your Holy Spirit of communion,
help us to live in solidarity with our
neighbour, and so share together with
your Son Jesus
in fulfilling your promise of freedom from poverty and oppression.
We pray in his name. Amen.

Day 6

The Lord of hosts is his name

(*Jeremiah 10:16*)

Jeremiah 10:12-16

Psalms 19:1-4a

Mark 16:14-15

Reflection

The created world is a manifestation of God's wondrous power. The greatness of God is made visible in and through all creation: 'The Lord of hosts is his name.'

Today, however, we are facing a serious global ecological crisis, which threatens the survival of the natural world. Many people have been driven by greed to exploit creation beyond its capacity. In the name of development, forests are cleared and pollution destroys land, air, rivers and seas, rendering agriculture impossible, making fresh water unobtainable and causing animals to die. In this context it is useful to remember that after his resurrection, Jesus commissioned the disciples to proclaim the good news 'to the *whole* creation'. No part of creation is outside God's plan to make all things new. And so conversion is needed from a tendency to exploit to an attitude that values and reconciles us with creation.

Movements among people of different faiths in Indonesia and many other places are inspiring Christians to promote eco-friendly churches, and to take a stand against environmental abuses. This unites Christians in bearing witness to their Creator, 'for he is the one who formed all things'. When we join with other Christians in defense of our common earthly home, we are not just engaging in activism, but are fulfilling the Lord's command to proclaim the good news of God's healing and restoring love to *all* of creation.

Questions

Do you experience God in creation? How, and with what effect? To what extent are Christians called upon to be ‘greenies’?

“The natural environment would get along very nicely without humans, but humans couldn’t survive without the natural environment”. Discuss

What is your denomination doing to promote and practise ‘eco-friendly churches’? What measures do you or could you have in place in your local church to take a stand against environmental abuses?

Prayer

Loving God,

By your word all things came to be.

We thank you for the universe

which manifests your glory, beauty and kindness.

Grant us the wisdom to walk gently upon the earth

and together to be prophets of your good news to all creation.

Amen.

Day 7

Woman, great is your faith!

(*Matthew 15:28*)

1 Samuel 1:13-17

Matthew 15:21-28

Luke 8:1-3

Reflection

Eli misjudges Hannah's deep and fervent prayer and condemns her, dismissing her supplications as drunken ramblings. Yet the words of her reply, calling on him not to dismiss her as 'a worthless woman' softened his heart and he sent her away with a blessing. Likewise, when the Canaanite woman came to beg Jesus to heal her daughter, he initially dismissed her, saying that he had come only for his own people. Yet she persisted in her begging and challenging and eventually, recognising her great faith, Jesus granted her request. In both cases, a woman who was initially marginalised and judged unworthy of attention turned out to be speaking prophetic words that softened hearts and brought healing and wholeness.

The marginalization and dismissing of women's voices continues in our own times. Indeed even within our churches we are often complicit with cultures that devalue women. As Christians become aware of their own failings in this area, they come to recognize more clearly the horror of violence against women and children, snatched forcibly from their homes and trafficked to other lands. These and many other migrant workers are often treated as less than human, and are denied the most basic human rights. In recent years churches in Indonesia have taken common action against human trafficking and the sexual abuse of children. Their efforts, and those of people of other faiths, are all the more urgent since the number of victims in some parts of their country is increasing daily.

As Christians unite in prayer and study of the Scriptures, truly

listening for God's voice, they can discover that God also speaks today through the cries of the most abused in society. It is when they hear God's call together that they are inspired to join in common action against the scourge of human trafficking and of other evils.

Questions

Why do we hear far less about women in the Bible than we do about men? What has changed? What has not changed?

Many women in the Bible, of disadvantaged background and using possibly dubious means, changed the course of history. How many of them can you name?

What “common action against the scourge of human trafficking” (including child labour and sexual slavery) can you, your group or congregation join and become involved in?

Prayer

Gracious God,

You are the source of human dignity.

By your grace and power

the words of Hannah changed the heart of Eli

the Priest;

by your grace and power

the words of the Canaanite woman moved Jesus to

heal her daughter.

As we strive to manifest the unity of the Church,
grant us the courage to reject all forms of violence
against women and to celebrate the gifts of the Spirit
that women bring to the service of
the Church.

This we pray through Jesus Christ
our Lord, who lives and reigns with
you and the Holy Spirit, one God for
ever and ever. Amen.

Day 8

The Lord is my light and my salvation

(*Psalm 27:1*)

Isaiah 60:1-3, 19-22

Psalm 27:1-4

John 8:12-20

Reflection

Throughout the eight days of this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the daily reflections have considered many difficult situations facing the world today, including greed, violence, exclusion, exploitation, poverty, pollution, hunger and human trafficking. Churches in Indonesia are conscious of these issues as challenges facing all Christians. They recognise and confess that some of these sins have tainted the lives of their churches too, wounding their unity and diminishing their witness to the world. At the same time, they recognise as well the many promising instances of churches coming together to witness to their unity in Christ. Christians in other parts of the world can name many other examples from their own situations.

Day by day, year by year, and especially during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Christians join together for common prayer, professing their common baptismal faith, listening for God's voice in the scriptures and praying together for unity in Christ's Body. In doing so, they recognise that the Holy Trinity is the source of all unity and that Jesus is the light of the world, who promises the light of life to those who follow him. The many injustices in the world frequently sadden or anger them. But they do not lose hope; they move to action. Because the Lord is their light and their salvation, and the stronghold of their lives, they do not fear.

Questions

On what issues of social justice can our various denominations productively come together (and join with other faiths), in advocacy and action, to reflect the light of Christ and be ‘a light to the nation’ today?

A great pall of darkness, shame, shock and sadness has come over the church during and since the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. How can we repent, redress, reform and rebuild trust after this?

I am writing these questions the week before Christmas. Read John 1:5. How many different translations of this verse can you find? The key word is the Greek verb at the end. Talk about the implications of its various meanings. Then light a candle.

Prayer

God, our Sustainer,
we praise you for your loving kindness,
for upholding us in times of trial, and showing us your light in
times of darkness.

Transform our lives so that we may be a blessing for others.
Help us to live unity in diversity as a witness to your communion,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.