

Sundays with CWM

Rise to Life: Together in Transformation

2024





SUNDAYS

WITH **CWM** 2024



Council for World Mission
www.cwmission.org

The Council for World Mission is a worldwide partnership of Christian churches. The 32 members are committed to sharing their resources of money, people, skills and insights globally to carry out God's mission locally. CWM was created in 1977 and incorporates the London Missionary Society (1795), the Commonwealth Missionary Society (1836) and the (English) Presbyterian Board of Missions (1847).

OUR VISION

“ Life-flourishing Communities, living out God’s promise of a New Heaven and a New Earth. ”

This vision articulates CWM’s conviction that the life-giving alternative that characterised the mission of Jesus is the basis of our hope. In naming life-flourishing communities as our vision, CWM sees the unfolding of a restored and renewed creation, an experience of a different world in our lifetime, where human dignity is protected, poverty eradicated, climate catastrophe abated, ideologies of supremacy demolished and peace reigns. The vision statement captures the essence of subversive imagination of a different world, where the Earth and all that is in it serve and sustain all of God’s creation; and where the people of God envision this new life for now.

OUR MISSION

“ Called in Christ to radical and prophetic discipleship, working in partnership with churches and the ecumenical community to resist life-denying systems, affirm peace, do justice and enable life-flourishing communities. ”

In our theology statement we declare that “We seek, as an organisation and as a partnership of churches, a life rooted in obedience to God’s mission focused on:

Rising with the risen Jesus whose resurrection is insurrection and proclamation that Babylon is as fallen as the tomb is empty; and

Responding in radical discipleship where we live out the New Heaven and New Earth in the midst of a violent, abused and grieving world as signs of transforming love.”

CWM’s emphasis is on naming this “violent, abused and grieving world” that ought to be replaced with life-flourishing communities, based on justice and peace. It is a clear sense of call to partnership with churches and the ecumenical community in which radical and prophetic discipleship is expressed in transformative and loving action to resist, affirm, support, and enable life-flourishing alternatives.

OUR VALUES

The underlying core values that have guided CWM since 1977 and informed its relationship with others in doing God’s mission are:

Justice in relationships

Mutuality, equality and interdependence

Generosity of spirit

Unity in diversity

This is a kairos moment for CWM. The changing landscape of global Christianity is facing new challenges and opportunities. These challenges require mission agencies and churches to examine their values.

EUROPE

Congregational Federation (CF)
Presbyterian Church of Wales (PCW)
Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN)
Union of Welsh Independents (UWI)
United Reformed Church (URC)

SOUTH ASIA

Church of Bangladesh (COB)
Church of North India (CNI)
Church of South India (CSI)
Presbyterian Church of India (PCI)

EAST ASIA

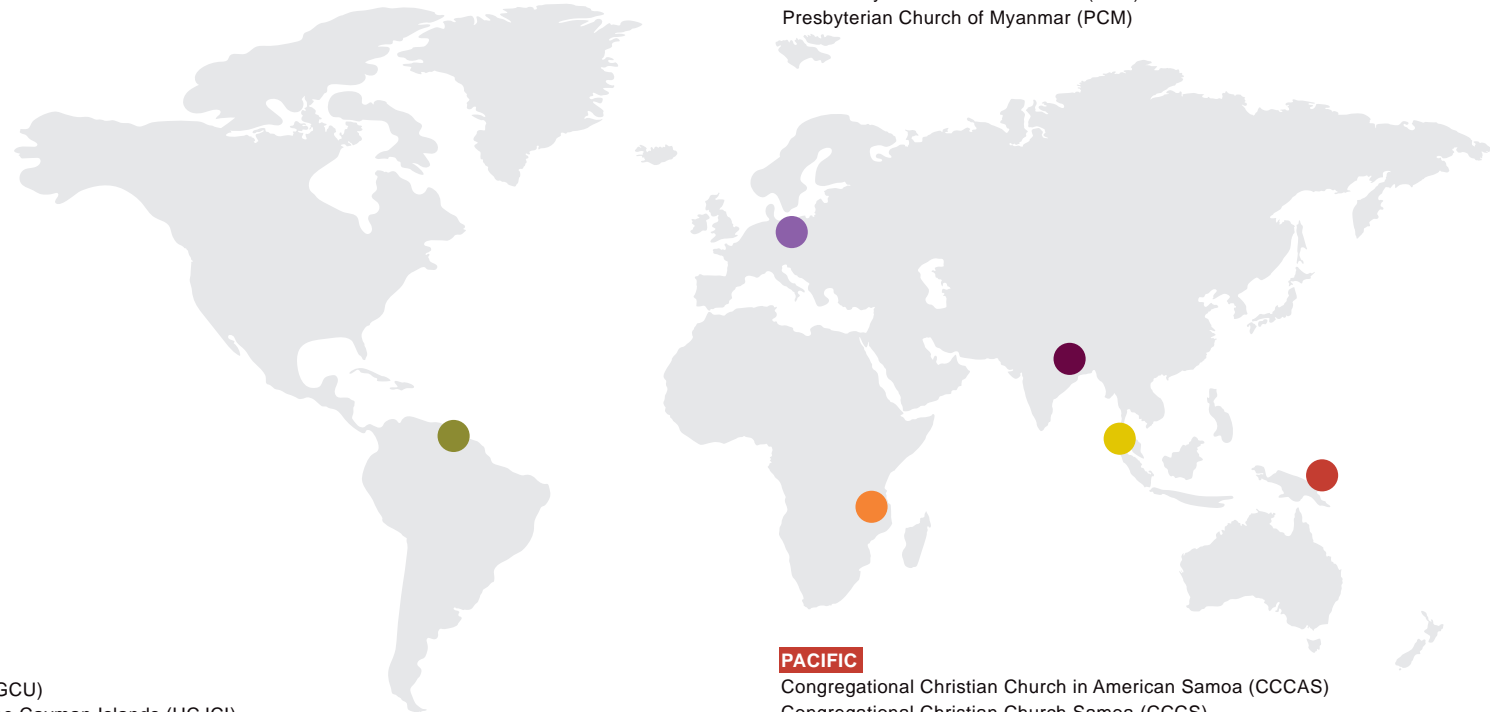
Gereja Presbiterian Malaysia (GPM)
The Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China (HKCCCC)
The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT)
The Presbyterian Church in Singapore (PCS)
The Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK)
Presbyterian Church of Myanmar (PCM)

32
Churches

41
Countries

50,000
Congregations

21.5 million
Christians



CARIBBEAN

Guyana Congregational Union (GCU)
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands (UCJCI)

AFRICA

Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM)
Churches of Christ in Malawi (CCM)
United Church of Zambia (UCZ)
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA)
Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA)

PACIFIC

Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa (CCCAS)
Congregational Christian Church Samoa (CCCS)
Congregational Union of New Zealand (CUNZ)
Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu (EKT)
Etaretia Porotetani Maohi (EPM)
Kiribati Uniting Church (KUC)
Nauru Congregational Church (NCC)
Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand (PCANZ)
United Church in Papua New Guinea (UCPNG)
United Church in Solomon Islands (UCSI)

FOREWORD



Rise to Life: Together in Transformation

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ Jesus,

Greetings of love and peace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ from the Council for World Mission!

I am pleased to present to you the 'Sundays with CWM 2024,' a weekly devotional booklet intended to assist you as a resource to use during your personal, family or congregational gatherings to worship God.

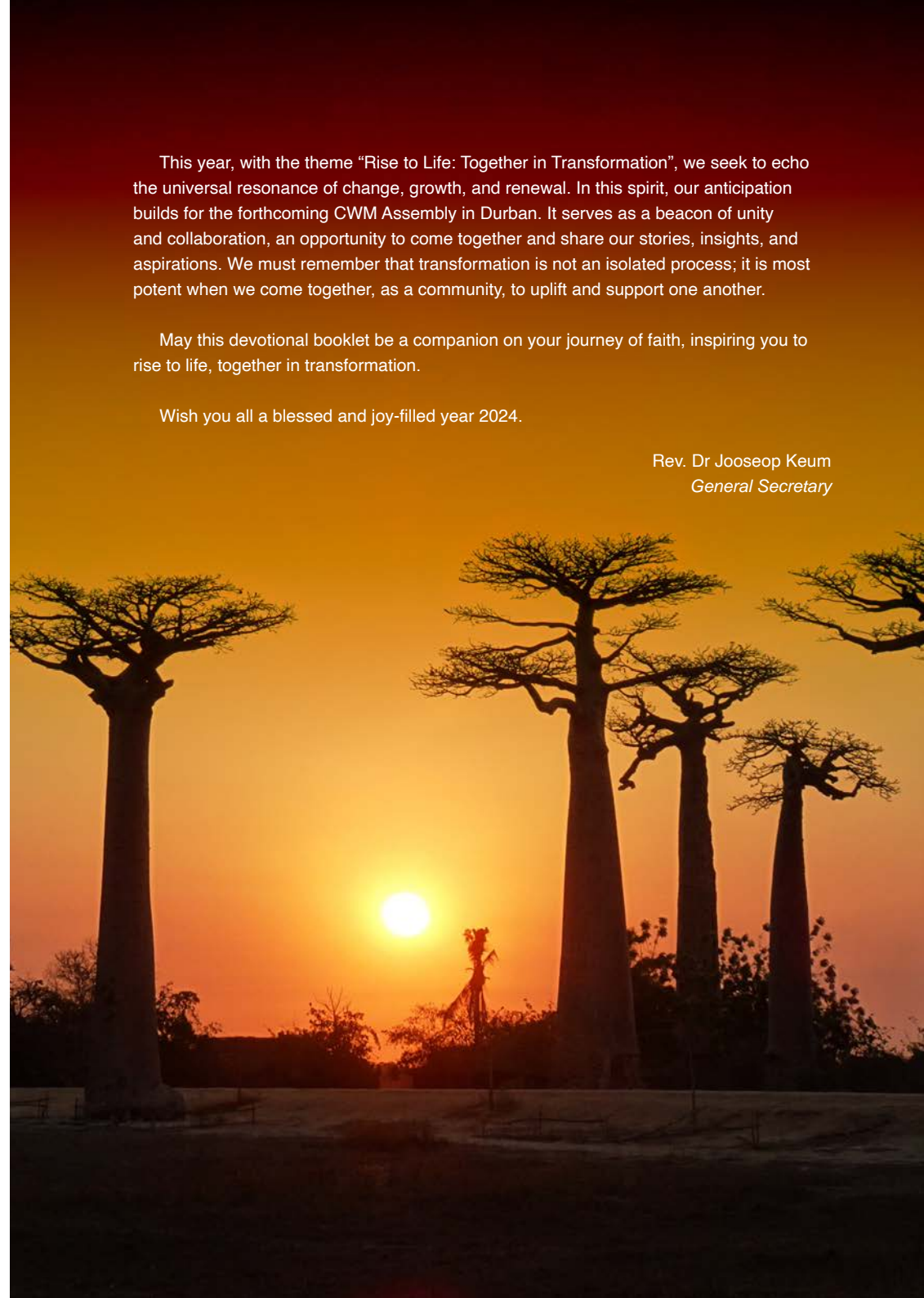
'Sundays with CWM 2024' aims to be a weekly touchstone, guiding us through reflections, prayers, and narratives that resonate with our theme. Each passage has been thoughtfully curated, aiming to inspire, challenge, and reinvigorate our connection with the Divine and with each other.

This year, with the theme "Rise to Life: Together in Transformation", we seek to echo the universal resonance of change, growth, and renewal. In this spirit, our anticipation builds for the forthcoming CWM Assembly in Durban. It serves as a beacon of unity and collaboration, an opportunity to come together and share our stories, insights, and aspirations. We must remember that transformation is not an isolated process; it is most potent when we come together, as a community, to uplift and support one another.

May this devotional booklet be a companion on your journey of faith, inspiring you to rise to life, together in transformation.

Wish you all a blessed and joy-filled year 2024.

Rev. Dr Jooseop Keum
General Secretary



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A Prophetic Church

Scripture: *The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites." ~ Exodus 3: 7-8*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today, in many parts of the world, the people are oppressed by power and authority. The oppressed communities expect liberation from their oppression. Who will liberate those who are under oppression? Will God do it alone? Or will humans do it alone? Liberation can happen wherever in the world God and humans work together. Amen. God cannot do without the human's support. The God we worship is not Superman or Spider-man. In the midst of the oppression, God takes the side of the oppressed and God expects repentance from the oppressor, because God is God for all of humanity.

In the scripture read today from Exodus 3:1-14, we can see how God and humans work together in the process of liberation. We all know very well the birth narrative of Moses. But here I would like to ask you all to read again Chapter 2:11-24. There you can see the teenage Moses. Even though Moses grows up in the palace of Pharaoh when a Hebrew was beaten by an Egyptian, Moses took the side of Hebrews (Ex2:12). As a young Moses he turned violent and killed the Egyptian. Here Moses was pushed to become violent. In another event when Hebrews fought each other, when Moses asked, "Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?" Moses was questioned: "Who made you a ruler and judge over us?" And Moses was betrayed by saying, "Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Violence is not a solution for liberation and violence does not bring freedom. Moses's violent way pushed back the involvement of God in the liberation. Therefore, Moses had to escape from Egypt. He was fine out of the Egypt, and I do think that he had no idea to go back to Egypt.

The prince Moses is out of Egypt now. Can you imagine that Moses grew up in the Palace of Pharaoh but now he was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro? I think maybe it was the training period for Moses to be a shepherd of the Israelites' community. So when Moses was keeping the flock, God met him and talked to him at Horeb and it was called "the mountain of God." God and human meet together to do something.

Here, what is important in this meeting? Calling of Moses? Conversation between God and Moses? I would say that the burning bush is not important. So what is important?

The important part, is God spoke to Moses from out of the burning bush. Why would God speak to Moses out of the burning bush? Here, God showed Moses God's existence. Here we must understand that even when Moses ran from Egypt, God did not come out. Moses had to come out of Egypt but God could not. Moses had to save his life but God had to be with the suffering people. So through the burning bush God shows us that God is the God of suffering. God shows Moses that God already took sides on behalf of the oppressed, not in a violent way but in the way of Ahimsha (nonviolent).

Many times, when we have problems and loss, we question God. Where is God? Why does God allow all this suffering? But God is not far away from us. God is with us. When you cry, God also cries with you. When you suffer, God also suffers with you.

As Christians, are we ready to suffer with the people? As a church, are we ready to be with suffering people? Are we ready to take sides on behalf of the oppressed? Are we going to support the violent in the world? God calls all the Christians and churches from the burning bush.

Verse 7 is a very important one. There are three important verbs in this verse. God said to Moses: "I have seen." God is seeing the suffering people. God is seeing the marginalized. God, we believe, is a seeing one. Our God is not a blind God. God said to Moses: "I have heard." God is hearing the voice of the voiceless. God is hearing the voice of the powerless. Our God is a hearing God. God said to Moses: "I have known." God is knowing all who are oppressing the vulnerable. God has seen, God has heard, God has known, therefore God co-exists with the vulnerable and marginalized.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, do we see the marginalized? Do we hear the voiceless? Do we know the powerless and vulnerable? If we say yes, why we do not identify ourselves with them? If we say yes, why we do not raise our voice for the voiceless? If we say yes, why we do not liberate the oppressed? God does not want Christians who are blind, deaf and do not know. Christians cannot command God to make peace and harmony in the world. God expects our support for liberation and social transformation.

God calls you and me to walk toward liberation and transformation. There are many burning bushes among us and God is speaking to us from those bushes. Let's listen to God. Think and act. God bless you. Amen.

FOR REFLECTION

1. What is your understanding of God, according to your own context and experience?
2. How do you understand the statement that God is waiting for your participation in the work of liberation of the oppressed?

PRAYER

Our God of liberation, God of oppressed, I am seeking your wisdom and knowledge to understand your presence in the midst of suffering. Lord, guide me to find your way and push me to be part of your work of liberation. Amen.



Discovering Our Purpose

Scripture: *Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path. ~ Psalm 119:105*

Despised But Not in Despair

There is a real story in the rural setting of Zambia about a man who was born without legs. This man is still alive and has ended up to be a bread winner within his family and the surrounding communities despite being physically challenged. Traditionally, persons born with any kind of disability have generally been classified as objects of charity and agents of medical attention in our society. These people have faced a number of stereotypes, stigma, and discrimination, and have always been excluded from the mainstream of society, including that of public or religious life and entertainment. On a sad note, religion has been classified as a major challenge in the discrimination of persons with disabilities in our society. This follows the lack of reasonable accommodation, stigma and other stereotypes that exist in our worship environments which creates a barrier between the able-bodied and the people living with disabilities (PLWD).

However, against all odds, this man has accepted his social status and has lived a peaceful life with a lot of innovative ideas which he has always demonstrated. He has built a personal foundation for a successful and satisfying life centered around God and continues to preach this great love to the community in which he lives.

The Psalmist encourages us that “no matter what we are, we must let the enduring word of God’s standard to lead us to a life full of heaven-led purpose and fulfilment in line with His divine plan so we may we find understanding and clarity amidst chaos around – and often within us.” The lesson from the real story presented above is that disability is not inability, and whatever we are or wherever we might be, we can rise to life and can make a difference in ourselves and within the lives of others. Yes, we might be despised by others but God has a final say for our existence.

FOR REFLECTION

The challenge for us is to answer the three big questions that may lead us in discovering our purpose in this life: Who am I? Why am I here? And what will happen when I finally leave this world?

PRAYER

God of all seasons, you have made all things with purpose in this life; inspire us with your wisdom as we navigate through this life of humiliation, shame and despair, and may we always find comfort in your word with that assurance of your accompaniment on our journey to find the real meaning of our existence, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.



Walking in Unity

Scripture: *How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!*

~ Psalm 133: 1

Unity is an integral part in our mission of God, not only in Christian circles, but unity is also demanded from a personal level of oneself, one's family, one's immediate community, extended spaces like places of work, places of worship and many more. The absence of unity in settings leads to a lamentable downfall.

The Psalmist reminds us that indeed it is GOOD and PLEASANT to dwell in unity; the opposite of that leads to various social instabilities that God's creation is facing today.

He further puts it beautifully in an artistic way of how oil might look when poured on the head of Aaron then flows down the beard, onto his garments. Not only that, but he also takes us to nature; how beautifully the dew descends on the mountain.

Brothers and sisters, you will agree that wherever people team up in one accord, even displeasing ideas flourish; today the world has experienced situations that are a result of disunity. When an individual mind is not well cared for or organized, we see mental health complications in people developing; families that fail to agree end up in violent activities and unhealthy relationships. Communities that have failed to agree to work together have resorted

to gangs of violence causing community instability. When nations choose not to agree we see not only rumors of war but effects of wars such as homelessness, deaths, chronic conditions, increases in harmful emissions, and loss of biodiversity among other maladies.

1. A united family will disagree yet remain strong and united.
2. We are differently called by one God; if we blend our different voices, we will produce a hymn worthy to change the world.
3. A popular proverb both in Africa and the Caribbean goes: "One finger can not pick lice." We need each other.

The desire of God is that his creation lives in unity, then he will command a blessing on us all, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, gender and all other barriers we have created.

PRAYER

May we lay down our swords, set aside our grievances, and forgive each other as you forgave us. Individuals united in mind, communities united in love, creation united in Jesus name. Amen.



Bringing Light to the World

Scripture: *Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness.* ~ Matthew 5:14 - 16

I remember singing this song in church one Sunday evening at a particular time when I was exploring a call to ministry and praying and thinking about the next steps on the pathway through life that I needed to take.

At that moment in time, I was simply captivated by love for God and adored singing the line “Here I am to worship” in that song and responding physically to the line “here I am to bow down”. I recognised it is not really about what you do for God but who you are in relationship with God, what your relationship with God is like, that matters.

“DO-ING” THINGS, THE ACTIONS, OFTEN COME LATER.

I realised then that falling in love with God is the first thing that, for me, was needed before anything else.

Because when you have fallen in love with God, in my experience, what you then find is that your heart begins to be broken by the things that break God’s heart as well. You begin to gain an understanding about how God feels and thinks about things that are happening in the world - that is where the “do-ing” begins to come into play – you look around at what is going on in the world around you and you discover that somebody needs to bring light and truth, to bring hope into that world.

As you think about what that means you also find that the person who needs to bring light into the world has to be you. You can bring the light of Jesus into the community, the workplace, the country where you are – and you are a light for all those that you encounter as you go about whatever task it is that you have to do for God where you are today.

Jesus didn’t just say “*I am the Light of the World*” (John 8:12) – he also said “*you are the light of the world*” (Matthew 5:14).

Even if you are housebound, or are ill in hospital, you are able to bring light to the world where you are. It may happen in a way you least expect, and you may bring light to someone that you were not expecting to reach out to. We never know who we will be given the opportunity to shine light on.

So, do not think that what you are doing is pointless or of no benefit to anybody else – you may be a small candle, but small candles still bring light to dark places!

Think about where you are right now, today, and ask God to show you how you can bring light into the environment you are situated in.

FOR REFLECTION

Think about someone that you haven’t spoken to for a while, and ring them, text them or send them a message on social media.

PRAYER

God of light and truth, shine your light on my life today. Show me your glorious light in the darkest place that I may find myself in. Show me where the light you have put inside me needs to shine most. Amen.



Building Inclusive Communities

Scripture: Then Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easier to bear and the burden I give you is light.” ~ Matthew 11: 28- 30

What an awesome invitation to all those that are seeking some kind of rest in their journey of life! This invitation is open to all, but mostly to those who are seeking rest because they have reached a point of exhaustion due to heaviness of loads they have been carrying.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus was always inclusive of others. He invited people from all walks of life. He never segregated anyone but interacted with everyone. His ministry was across the board, including the rich, the poor, the sick, the young and the old.

In the gospels, we often see Jesus stopping to eat with others despite their religious or social status. He used the opportunity to deepen relationships, welcome strangers and serve the poor. Today Jesus is still inviting us to come and find rest in Him. Take our burdens whether it may be pain, sorrow, stress, frustrations, anxiety, heavy loads that we carry in our daily lives, our fears, sicknesses, relationship issues, joblessness, barrenness, every sin to Jesus.

Are you still searching for rest? Jesus is calling you to “come.” He is willing to take our burdens in exchange for His yoke. But wait a second, who would want to exchange a burden for

a yoke? Are they not one and the same thing? A yoke is indeed is like a burden, but this kind is easier. “Jesus said that my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

When you read verse 28, it is so enticing, and you might think that it ends there. But the next verse comes with conditions attached; “take my yoke and learn from me.” Before we receive this rest that we so much desire, we are being asked to do our part in this promise.

WHY SHOULD WE COME TO JESUS?

1. Because we are burdened and weary.
2. Because we need rest.
3. Because he is a humble and gentle teacher.
4. Because we need to learn from him.
5. Because he is faithful.

Our challenges may not be similar because we serve in diverse contexts. However, we all experience burdensome situations. May we learn from our Lord who is gentle at heart and be able to embrace all people as God's own possession. We are to encourage each other and hold up one another's hand in times of difficulties as we aim at building inclusive communities.

FOR REFLECTION

How is my life and your life impacting others to come to Christ so they could find rest for their souls?

PRAYER

Heavenly father, as we serve one another in creating life flourishing communities where each one of us feels a sense of belonging, may you grant us peace in places of war, joy in hearts that are broken, love in communities where there is hate. For Christ's sake, our Lord. Amen!



The Mountaintop Experience

Scripture: *And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ~ Matthew 17:2*

High atop a mountain, Peter, James, and John were privy to a sight few mortals have witnessed. Jesus, the humble teacher and healer they'd come to know, was transformed. The very essence of divinity radiated from Him, a blinding brilliance accompanied by the presence of Moses and Elijah, two towering figures of Israel's history. The transfiguration was a moment where heaven touched earth, where the temporal met the eternal, and where the disciples saw, even if just for a fleeting moment, the full glory of Christ.

But why the transfiguration? What is its significance for us today?

Firstly, the transfiguration affirmed Jesus' identity. The voice from the cloud, echoing the words spoken at Jesus' baptism, declared, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased." This confirmation served not only as a testament to the disciples then but to all of us now, solidifying Jesus as the divine Son of God.

Yet, the mountaintop experience was not meant to be an end in itself. As enthralling as it was, Peter's wish to remain and build dwellings was not granted. They had to descend, to return to the realities of life below, equipped with the knowledge of who Jesus truly was. And there's a profound lesson in this. While mountaintop experiences, moments of deep spiritual insight, and profound religious experiences are valuable, they're also often transitory. They serve as both a source of strength and a directive. We're meant to carry the illumination from these experiences into the valleys of our everyday lives.

In the shadow of the mountain lay Jerusalem. Ahead for Jesus was the journey to the cross, a path of sacrifice, suffering, and ultimate redemption. The transfiguration, in its brilliance, also cast a shadow, foreshadowing the pivotal events of salvation that lay ahead.

For us, the transfiguration serves as a beacon of hope and clarity. In life, we all have our mountaintop and valley moments. During times of confusion, despair, or doubt, the transfiguration reminds us of the ever-present divinity of Jesus, His purpose, and His ultimate sacrifice for humanity. It calls us to hold onto the glimpses of glory we've experienced and to carry that light into the darkest corners of our world.

As we reflect on the transfiguration, may we be inspired to seek Christ in His fullness, to cherish our own moments of divine clarity, and to let those moments propel us forward in love, service, and witness.

FOR REFLECTION

How can we take the transformative moments of our faith journey and allow them to guide and strengthen us in our daily walk with Christ?

PRAYER

Lord of light and glory, as we ponder the mystery of the transfiguration, open our eyes to see your majesty in our midst. Strengthen us with the memory of our own mountaintop experiences, and empower us to shine your light in the valleys of our world. Amen.



Women: The Soul of a Nation

Scripture: *The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, “When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.*

~ Exodus 1: 15-17

The Bible has powerful and thought-provoking stories about women. Women from time immemorial have stood up against injustice against themselves, their families, and their nations. In Zambia, I am told about a story of a woman called Julia Chikamoneka who stood up against the powers-that-be, protesting stripped to the waist in a nonviolent protest for the freedom of Zambia during colonial times. Mama Chikamoneka became one of the pioneers of political engagement and activism for freedom from colonial rule. Her courage, bravery, and pride won her fame and respect among women countrywide. She encouraged fellow Africans to determine the political destiny of their country.

Mama Julia Chikamoneka reminded me of the story of Mrs Coretta Scott King, who once said, “women, if the soul of the nation is to be saved, I believe that you must become its soul.” Mrs Coretta was the late wife of the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was a powerful civil rights activist and died for the cause of freedom for the black people of America. These words echoed in my mind all the way as we (I and my two girls) flew from Atlanta, Georgia, USA, to Montego Bay, Jamaica. Women’s stories are always powerful and liberating because of the

many struggles that they go through in their lives. Mrs Coretta and Mama Julia Chikamoneka could have done more if the status quo had favoured them. Shifting power means shifting resources into the hands of those doing the work for equality on the ground.

The story in Exodus 1:6-21 tells us of the struggles of two strong women who resisted the powers that wanted to enslave their minds. They were commanded to kill the male children as they were strategically placed in positions to assist Hebrew women in giving birth. God used these women to save male children from death thus saving the nation of Israel.

These women in Exodus 1, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, were midwives who were ordered to destroy the nation of Israel. We shouldn’t expect that these two women were the only midwives for all the children of Israel. They were probably the leaders of some association of midwives. They were in leadership and they needed to be an example to other women who faced the powers of Pharaoh on how to release their bodies and minds from enslavement. These women used nonviolent means to resist the threat of annihilating the male children by refusing to obey King Pharaoh. If the soul of the nation of Israel was to be saved, the women were to become its soul. Shiphrah and Puah became the soul of Israel.

There are many times that women put their lives at stake for the sake of their families. They work so hard in the fields to make sure that their children have food on the table. The women are the souls of the nation and when they are given equal opportunities at school, at work, in politics, they thrive for the betterment of their families and the nation at large in areas of justice, gender equality, and climate change. The nations can only be saved if the women are the soul of the nation. I pray that my two girls will grow up to appreciate the stories of women who fought nonviolent battles for their nations because they feared God. Amen.

FOR REFLECTION

The church is challenged to build new power structures inclusive of women at decision-making levels.

PRAYER

Lord, help us to bring social change in our nation through nonviolent ways by speaking to the powers that be against injustice of every form. Lord, grant us the wisdom to speak words of power to the empires and refuse to be used to bring death but help us to bring life to our nation. Amen.



Bridges of Solidarity: Uniting for a Just World

Scripture: *How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!*
~ Psalm 133:1

In the age-old wisdom of the Psalms, the beauty of unity is extolled. Today, as we reflect upon our theme, "Bridges of Solidarity: Uniting for a Just World," we are reminded of the power and potential of coming together, of building bridges of understanding and compassion, and of forging paths toward justice and equity.

Bridges are remarkable structures. They traverse vast expanses, connect disparate lands, and enable movement and progress. Just as physical bridges connect territories, bridges of solidarity unite hearts, minds, and spirits in the pursuit of a greater good. They stand as testaments to humanity's innate ability to rise above divisions, biases, and prejudices, connecting us in our shared quest for justice.

But what does it mean to build bridges of solidarity? At its core, it means acknowledging the intrinsic value of every individual, regardless of their background, beliefs, or circumstances. It means recognizing the interconnectedness of our human family and understanding that the suffering of one affects the well-being of all.

In a world marked by disparities, where the chasms of inequality seem ever-widening, our call to bridge-building becomes all the more crucial. Whether these disparities manifest in socioeconomic divides, racial tensions, gender inequalities, or any other form of injustice, the onus is upon us as followers of Christ to be the bridge-builders, the peacemakers, the justice-seekers.

Jesus himself exemplified this bridge-building spirit. He dined with tax collectors, engaged with Samaritans, and welcomed those whom society had cast aside. In his teachings and actions, he continually challenged societal norms that perpetuated discrimination and injustice. To unite for a just world requires both intention and action. It necessitates listening to the marginalized, standing in solidarity with the oppressed, and tirelessly working towards creating a society where justice isn't just an ideal but a lived reality.

As we contemplate our roles in this divine mandate, let us remember that every act of kindness, every gesture of understanding, every step towards reconciliation is a brick in the bridge of solidarity. These bridges don't just connect lands; they connect hearts, foster understanding, and pave the way for a world marked by love, justice, and equity.

FOR REFLECTION

In what ways are we called to build bridges of solidarity in our communities? How can we actively contribute to a more just and equitable world?

PRAYER

God of Justice and Mercy, infuse our hearts with the spirit of unity and solidarity. Equip us with the courage to stand against injustice, the wisdom to listen and learn, and the compassion to build bridges that usher in your Kingdom of love and justice on earth. May we be instruments of your peace in a fractured world. Amen.



Encounters that Shape and Form Us

Scripture: *“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” ~ Acts 9: 5-6*

In our journey of life and faith, we are often taken into spaces of facing the temptation of running away from unfamiliar and uncomfortable experiences. Each time we yield to this temptation, we risk failing to expose ourselves to the very fabric we need to grow, blossom and discover our untapped self and purpose for life and living. Have you ever imagined what could have happened to Saul if he never met Jesus and the dynamics which constituted the encounter? (Being blind for three days.)

Undoubtedly, Saul's zeal and passion in his assignment to persecute the church required him to face something totally strange and beyond his imagination. The light which was shone around him and caused him to lose sight was in itself a significant process to humble him and allow him to recognize his own limitations when it comes to God's way of doing things. Is this not what we require time and again—moments and experiences which remind us that we are not and should not always be in control? Can you remember times when your ability and capacity to perform certain tasks was challenged by the manifestation of so-called wrong judgement, oversight, inadequacy in resources and energy, and not having the right support at the right time? How did you feel? Did you resort to beating yourself hard? The Apostle Paul would say to us as he did to the Church in Corinth that *“my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness For when I am weak then I am strong.”*

Saul's response to the instruction of Jesus (*now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do*) in our text is something so profound, to draw inspiration and guidance during our moments of despair, anxiety and fear when we face what may look like unsafe waters. Instead of pressing the panic button, Saul obeyed, trusted and followed the directives of Jesus without any arguments. In desperate moments God wants us to trust him and the process he is leading us into without any form of doubt. Indeed *“Not all storms are meant to break us, some are meant to pave the way” (Anonymous).*

As you did to Saul, may the scales which blind us from seeing and encountering you afresh in unusual times be removed not only from our eyes but our hearts and minds. May your refreshing presence fill and cause us to be the embodiment of your presence. These mercies and others we ask through Jesus the Christ our Lord. Amen.

PRAYER

Loving and caring God, creator of the universe and all that is in it, we come to you in confession of our sins of self-centeredness, over reliance on self, other human beings, systems, circles that promise security, and lead to blindness to our limitations and the failure to acknowledge and celebrate your process, especially when it does not look like what we are used to or what we want. Grant us the courage to face the strange experiences and encounters with the fortitude which brings us close to you. Increase in us the faith of riding through the trying moments without losing the sense of your presence and power.



Sowing with No Cost-Efficiency

Scripture: *But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ~ Matthew 13:23*

In the parable of sowing seeds, we are often inclined to focus on the various types of land and question which category we fall into. Are we the roadside, the rocky ground, or the thorny soil? We ponder the potential harvest and the success rate, contemplating whether we can bear fruit thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold. Yet, the true significance of this parable lies not only in the condition of the land but also in the character of the sower.

If we shift our attention to the Sower, we can observe his approach, his way of life, and his beliefs. One remarkable aspect that emerges is the Sower's lack of concern for cost-efficiency. It is as if the concept of maximizing productivity does not exist for him.

Why, then, does the Sower scatter seeds in places where they are unlikely to flourish? Why does he sow in areas that yield no immediate benefit? Jesus employs this parable to convey a profound truth - God does not consider cost and efficiency when sowing His Word. He is a farmer who sows without discrimination, without distinctions. His desire is to seize every possibility, to give and help, just in case any might miss the opportunity, even if there is a mere 1% chance of failure.

Whether it is the roadside, the rocky ground, or the thorny soil, God continues to sow seeds of the Gospel. He is undeterred by the birds that snatch away the seeds, the scorching sun that withers the growth, or the thorns that choke the life out of the plants. His love remains unwavering, and His commitment to sow remains unchanged.

In this indiscriminate sowing, we witness the attitude of God towards the world. We also glimpse the attitude of missionaries, pastors, and evangelists throughout history. They all embrace the same approach - sowing without calculation, without concern for the effort invested.

As we reflect on this parable, we are challenged to embody this indiscriminate sowing attitude in our own lives. We are called to share the Gospel with a profound sense of love and compassion, without discrimination or prejudice.

We are called to trust in God's timing and His ability to work in the hearts of those we encounter.

As we delve deeper into the theological implications of this parable, we are reminded of God's relentless love for all humanity. He seeks to reach every person, regardless of their background or circumstances. His indiscriminate sowing reflects His desire for the salvation of all.

FOR REFLECTION

How can we embody the indiscriminate sowing attitude in our daily lives, sharing the Gospel with love and compassion for all people, irrespective of their circumstances or background?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, grant us the wisdom and humility to embrace the indiscriminate sowing attitude exemplified in this parable. Help us to sow the seeds of the Gospel with boldness, compassion, and a deep understanding of Your sovereignty and transformative power. Soften our hearts and make us receptive to Your Word, that we may bear abundant fruit for Your glory. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Reconciliation and Forgiveness

Scripture: *Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. ~ Ephesians 4:31-32*

Why block your relationships with God and those around you?

I have worked and lived as a social worker, mental health worker, community worker and church minister in the UK, Nigeria, Kenya, Grenada and for a short time in Fiji. All the places have slight variations, but what blocks people from achieving all God has planned for them is often unforgiven hurts from the past.

Sometime they cannot remember why they don't speak to a certain person, but still the hostility continues. It causes more hurt to them that the person who upset them in the first place. Is that you?

Ephesians 4:31-32 says 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

But forgiveness is difficult and we may need others to help us and we certainly need God to help us. The first stage has to be prayer for the person we need to forgive and for help for ourselves.

A child I worked with in school was so angry with classmates, I visited his mother. She was so angry about boys throwing mud at her house window, which had happened a year before, had been reported, and had not continued. She was stuck and showed hostility to people outside the home and the son was acting out Mum's modelling. When I was able to work with Mum and found out about so many unresolved issues from her past and helped her forgive and accept, both mother and child were able to form good relationships for the future. In Matthew 6:14-15, after teaching the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says: 14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

When we don't forgive our relationship with God is blocked.

In Fiji, as I remember, when we first came to a community and were welcomed, we asked for forgiveness for the things we may say or do which may offend. As hard as we try not to wrong either in what we say, do or don't do, cultures and peoples are all different and we will make mistakes. But we have a loving and forgiving God who died so that we can be forgiven. God expects us to follow his example and forgive too.

In many of our churches each week, we have a prayer to say sorry, and it is best to do it sooner than later. The longer you leave, it the harder it is.

Unfortunately, in spite of regularly saying the Lord's Prayer and teaching forgiveness, some people in churches hold on to un-forgiveness and it blocks them and blocks the church from growth numerically and spiritually.

FOR REFLECTION

1. *Think what have you said, done or not done that is blocking you from a positive relationship with others and with God.*
2. *What can you do this week to resolve the situation?*
3. *Pray. God has a plan for all of us so we impact our world and turn negativity to hope.*

PRAYER

Our God, we thank you that you are a forgiving God who has shown us and taught us about the wonder of forgiveness. Sometimes we struggle big time to forgive others and get stuck in unresolved on-going conflict. Help us to forgive and accept forgiveness and move on with your plan for our lives. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.



Beyond the Palms: Embracing the Journey of Humility and Sacrifice

Scripture: *They took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!’ ~ John 12:13*

The scene was one of triumph. Jerusalem’s streets were lined with cheering crowds, palms waving vigorously, cloaks laid out like a carpet fit for royalty. Jesus, riding a humble donkey, entered the city not as a conquering hero but as the Prince of Peace. Palm Sunday, as we’ve come to call it, is a beautiful paradox—a blend of jubilation and impending sacrifice, the threshold of Holy Week.

At first glance, the events of Palm Sunday seem full of victory and acclaim. Yet, underlying this joyous procession was the profound humility of Christ and a foreshadowing of the week to come.

Jesus’ choice of a donkey, a common and unassuming creature, as His mode of entry into Jerusalem was a deliberate one. While leaders and kings of the day would often parade into cities on grand chariots or mighty warhorses, Jesus chose a symbol of peace and humility. He turned the world’s standards of majesty and grandeur upside down, emphasizing that true greatness is found in service and sacrifice.

The palm branches, a sign of victory and celebration in the Jewish tradition, were laid out for a King. But the Kingdom that Jesus came to establish was not one of military might or political power. His Kingdom was of the heart, built on love, sacrifice, and grace. The cheering crowds on Palm Sunday, some of whom would later cry out for His crucifixion, were perhaps not fully aware of the nature of the Kingdom Jesus represented.

As we commemorate Palm Sunday and step into Holy Week, we’re invited to reflect deeper on its significance. Beyond the palms and jubilant shouts of “Hosanna!”, we’re beckoned to journey with Christ through the selfless love He demonstrated, leading up to the cross. Palm Sunday calls us to embrace humility in a world that often celebrates pride. It invites us to seek genuine victory, not in domination or control but in love and service. And as we move through the events of Holy Week, may we be reminded of the depth of Christ’s love—a love that chose the cross for each one of us.

As the palms are waved today, may our hearts not just rejoice in the moment but be prepared to walk with Christ, in His humility and sacrifice, understanding the true cost of our redemption.

FOR REFLECTION

In what ways can we embody Christ’s humility and sacrificial love in our lives, especially during this Holy Week?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, as we commemorate your triumphant entry into Jerusalem, fill our hearts with understanding and gratitude. Help us to embrace the humility you demonstrated, to seek the true essence of victory in love, and to journey with you through the sacrifice of the cross. Amen.



Resurrection Hope

Scripture: *For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this. ~ Esther 4:14*

Through my work at The Pacific Theological College, I have been told by several women here in Fiji that their favourite Bible story is that of Queen Esther. They tell me that they like her bravery, saving her people from almost certain annihilation.

Yet when I've had the opportunity to delve a little deeper, it seems as though they know her story at the point when she becomes queen, not her life before that; it's not part of the story they know well.

Before Esther was made queen, she was an orphan child, adopted by her uncle, and living in the foreign nation of Persia, a colonial and patriarchal power, where her forebears had been taken from Jerusalem as captives.

When the King Ahasuerus deposed his Queen Vashti for refusing to parade herself in front of hundreds of drunken men, he held open auditions to bring fresh "beautiful young virgins" into his harem. Physical appearance is the only criteria specified for acceptance. These young girls (children) were to be trained to be ready to be called upon for sex by the king at and for his pleasure.

Whether it was because of his employment status, his finances, or some other reason we can't know, Uncle Mordecai put young Esther forward to join this harem; Esther being locked away as a sex-slave for the King was Uncle Mordecai's idea of guardianship. Today this is known as human trafficking or modern-day slavery. Esther was isolated from her own people, customs, and heritage.

The story of Esther could be seen as an uncensored version of the Cinderella story, or perhaps the 'Pretty Woman' film. Yet, we know nothing of the end of the story of Cinderella and her prince other than the 'happily ever after' although we do know that Julia Roberts goes on to reform Richard Gere's character.

Nor do we know if King Ahasuerus and Queen Esther lived happily ever after or if the King was reformed from being the cruel husband whom we meet in Esther 1:10-19. We do know that Queen Esther used her position to save her community from annihilation, even though to do so she risked her own life.

Can this story bring hope to communities in Fiji and beyond? A flourishing community needs risk takers, who will speak out when people are othered and threatened, like the Jews in Persia.

Women in many Pacific Islands still face the legacy of colonial and cultural patriarchy which has resulted in their facing some of the highest rates of intimate partner violence in the world. In this context, the story of Esther is a story of hope that they can take actions for themselves to break the cycle of violence. In this context, it's not a Cinderella rags to riches fairytale, it is a testament to the resilience of women throughout the world who hold the future of their communities in their hands. It is a story of how self-sacrificial love wins.

FOR REFLECTION

Can you stand against injustice in your community? What barriers prevent you from taking risks for the welfare of others?

PRAYER

God of justice, who knows the pain of violence, bring your resurrection hope into communities where legacies of colonialism and patriarchy lead to inequality and violence. Raise brave women and men to challenge unjust practices so that all might flourish.



Appreciation is Earned

Scripture: *So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ~ Matthew 25:28-30*

Everyone, regardless of age, gender, class, caste, or colour, feels nice, cheerful, and enthusiastic when they are appreciated. Appreciation is something we can't just anticipate from others; it is something we have to earn for ourselves. In the parable of the talents recorded in Mt. 25:14-30, the master gave 10, 5 and 1 talent each to his three servants. His objective and purpose in delivering the talents to his servants is to multiply them and to keep an eye on their moral character. The first two servants received 10 and 5 talents, each remaining faithful to their master; they toiled hard and multiplied the talents but the third servant who received one talent did not do as others did. Upon the master's arrival, therefore, he commended the first two servants by saying, "Well done" (vs. 21, 23). The master's appreciation goes beyond a simple "well done," further identifying them as "faithful servants" and extending an invitation for them "to enter into the joy of eschatological blessings." The one-talent servant out of his criticism against the master as well as the fact that he had not carried out the task assigned to him (v. 24) was not appreciated.

According to this parable, appreciation is earned through our character and hard work in fulfilling the purpose of the responsibility entrusted to us. In a practical sense, people anticipated to be appreciated, and their expectation is, of course, entirely reasonable. Whether or not

our expectations are met entirely depends on us because appreciation is earned through our diligence, selflessness, honesty, faithfulness, etc. If we don't put efforts from our heart into what we are doing, people won't just love and appreciate us (Read Col. 3: 23-24). As an illustration, missionaries sacrificed themselves to share the love of God with others, for their selflessness, diligence and dedication therefore, they were appreciated in various forms. In this regard, Thomas Jones (the first Welsh Presbyterian missionary from Wales to the present state of Meghalaya, India, who arrived in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills on 22 June 1841) was entitled by the Khasis as the "Father of Khasi Alphabet" because he was the one who gave the Khasi people their script which was considered as the greatest gift. Since 2019 the state of Meghalaya has declared 22 June every year as "St. Thomas Jones Day" and it is observed as a public holiday, to honour and appreciate the sacrifice and contribution made by Rev. Thomas Jones to the entire Khasi community. Thomas Jones inspired the Khasis with his commitment, and even though he is no longer with us, he still lives on in our hearts.

The two servants from the parable of the talents, as well as Thomas Jones from the History of Mission, serve as role models for us to strive hard, to be honest, and to be faithful as we are awaiting God to grant us not just words of appreciation but more than that eternal blessing and peace from God as the Psalmist says, "You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you" (128:2).

PRAYER

Dear God, grant us an honest heart so that we may serve you and the people faithfully despite the corrupt environment we live in. Please help us so that we can be a blessing to others and bring glory and honor to you.



Embracing the Power Beyond the Empty Tomb

Scripture: *If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ~ Colossians 3:1-2*

The story of Christ's resurrection is the linchpin of our Christian faith. It's the moment where hope conquered despair, life triumphed over death, and God's omnipotent love was irrevocably demonstrated. Yet, the resurrection is not just a historical event or a theological point; it's a lived reality, a power accessible to each one of us today.

So, what does it mean to live in the power of the resurrection?

Firstly, living in the resurrection means recognizing our identity in Christ. Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, speaks of believers being "raised with Christ." Our old self, with its sins and failings, has been crucified and buried. In its place, a new self has risen, one that is connected intimately with the living Christ. Daily, we are invited to shed the shackles of our past and embrace the new creation we have become.

Living in the resurrection also means shifting our perspective. The world often values the transient, the material, and the immediate. But Paul reminds us to "set our minds on things that are above." Our aspirations, motivations, and desires should be rooted not in earthly gains but in the eternal promises of God.

Furthermore, the power of the resurrection empowers us to live courageously. The same force that rolled away the stone, that brought Jesus back from the grip of death, resides in us. With that power, we can face adversity with resilience, tackle challenges with hope, and confront darkness with the radiant light of Christ's love.

Finally, living in the power of the resurrection means being agents of resurrection in the world. Just as Christ brought newness of life, we are called to bring life to dead places – to heal, to restore, to uplift. Whether it's through acts of kindness, advocating for justice, or sharing the gospel, we are ambassadors of Christ's resurrecting power.

The empty tomb is not just a testament of a miracle that happened two millennia ago; it's a call to a new way of living today. A life that is free from the grip of sin, fear, and despair. A life that is vibrant with hope, purpose, and divine power.

May we not merely celebrate the resurrection. May we live it.

FOR REFLECTION

How can we more fully integrate the transformative power of the resurrection into our daily lives and actions?

PRAYER

Risen Lord, remind us daily of the power and promise of your resurrection. Grant us the grace to embrace our new identity in you, to set our sights on heavenly things, and to be bearers of your life-giving power in the world. Amen.



An Outcast Turned Witness

Scripture: *Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!* ~ John 9:25

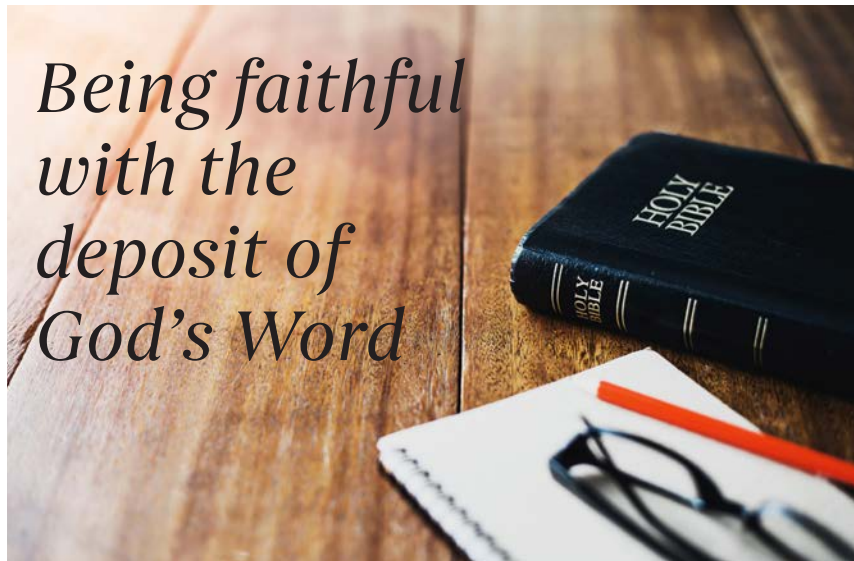
A 'witness' (martus/martys in Greek) is one who remembers something and testifies concerning what they remember. However, the word has a twofold meaning: (1) One who has seen and/or experienced something, or (2) One who testifies to what he or she saw. This is mainly in a legal setting. A martus is one who passionately attests to a fact or event; it is one who gives evidence (testifies in a court to the truth of a fact or event); one who has seen or has personal knowledge of something or someone. A witness is one who furnishes evidence or proof, confirming the truth by verbal testimony. In legal terms a witness gives testimony in a court trial. Martus is also used to describe those who witnessed to the point of death. This gave rise to our English word "martyr", one who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty of witnessing to and refusing to renounce some truth – so being Jesus' witness can be costly!

John 9:1–41 narrates how Jesus met a man who had been blind from birth. Tradition at that time had it that being born like that was as a result of sin or a curse on the part of the parents. After applying mud to his eyes, Jesus commanded the man to go elsewhere and wash off the mud. To this point, the formerly-blind man had still not physically seen the One who healed him, neither did this man seek Jesus out, or knew anything about Him prior to this incident. Local religious leaders could not accept that Jesus had performed a miracle, so they had been interrogating the man and his parents, insisting that Jesus must be a sinner.

The man's response here was an excellent summary of how saving faith works. Sight or light are often used as a metaphor for faith. This man was neither an educated nor a rich person. He knew nothing about Jesus' prior ministry, or the details of Jesus ministry. But what he did know, he knew for sure: he had been blind, but now he could see! The profound, incomprehensible change brought by his encounter with Christ was beyond debate. For Christians, this is the cornerstone of our testimony: it is no longer about what the Bible tells us about Christ, it is rather the influence of Christ in our own lives. This is what opens our conversation with others about the reality of the gospel (Mark 5:19), and which leads into all of our other evidence and arguments (1 Peter 3:15–16). We do not just know him, but we experience Him daily. He can no longer be silenced in our speech and deeds. In which ways do you, your family and congregation allow Christ's life to be experienced by your community?

PRAYER

"Our Father in Heaven we confess our own spiritual blindness that stops us from seeing other people's value in life, just because they live in the periphery. Open our eyes, Lord so that we may see them as you see them, In Christ's name we pray. Amen!"



The Good Stewards of Money

Scripture: *Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share ~ 1 Timothy 6:17-18*

I have heard preachers say that the Bible, in many instances, has more to say about money than about heaven and hell combined. When it came to Jesus' parables, 16 out of his 38 dealt with the topic of money. The only subject Jesus taught more about than money was the Kingdom of God.

How can we be good stewards of money?

In Matthew 25:14-30, Christ describes believers as people who are meant to oversee his possessions and his affairs. Christ will one day return and the faithful will be rewarded and those that are unfaithful will pay for it. This stewardship applies to us in many ways in our daily lives, like our families, careers and ministries.

In Timothy 6:17-21, Paul focuses on two riches on the believer's stewardship. He commands the financially rich in Ephesus to be rich in good deeds and to store up treasure in heaven. He calls upon Timothy to guard what had been "entrusted" to his care, referring to God's word. The word entrusted was like "money or valuables deposited with somebody for safe keeping." God's word is one of his great riches.

We are called to recognize how valuable it is and to faithfully steward it. This instruction was not just for Timothy; the fact that Paul ends the letter with "Grace be with you all" means that it was for the Ephesians as well (v. 21). They needed to faithfully guard the valuable deposit of God's word, and we must also.

Are we being faithful with the deposit of God's word? Are we being faithful with God's money? In 1 Timothy 6:17-21, we learn principles about good stewards of God's riches.

Let's now share a story that my grandfather told me before he died: "In order to give my money to God, I have to believe that I can survive with less money than I earn. I have to trust God's providence. I am not good at trusting God. I'm good at SAYING I trust God, but when push comes to shove, I'm going to be working behind the scenes as much as humanly possible to make sure things go the way I want them to go. It's funny that I feel this way, because when I look back at my life, it's clear that I could not have made my life happen the way it has happened on my own. God's hand was there. Yet, I still worry, and I still fumble with trying to create my own reality, and every time the month changes, some money leaves my account and my bills still get paid and I'm still able to buy clothes, food and other home requirements and give tithe to church. God provides. I am okay. And each year I increase my gift a nominal amount, and each year I'm still okay. I'm still more than okay."

PRAYER

Almighty God, whose loving hand has given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor you with our substance, and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. -Prayer for the Right Use of God's Gifts, Book of Common Prayer, page 827.



The Power of Education and Knowledge in the Kingdom

Scripture: *An intelligent heart acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.*
~ Proverbs 18:15

From the earliest days of the church, the quest for knowledge and the thirst for understanding have been revered. The Bereans were lauded for their commitment to study (Acts 17:11). Apollos was celebrated as one who was eloquent and “mighty in the Scriptures” (Acts 18:24). Our faith tradition is rich with thinkers, scholars, and seekers, demonstrating that the love for God and the love for knowledge are intertwined.

Education, in its essence, is a sacred act. It mirrors the very nature of God, who is the eternal teacher, revealing Himself to us through the Scriptures, nature, and the human experience. When Jesus began His public ministry, He took on the role of a rabbi, a teacher. His teachings weren’t just about spiritual truths but about how to live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly.

Yet, education transcends even the religious realm. It’s about empowering individuals and communities. In Proverbs, we are reminded of the value of knowledge and the pursuit of wisdom. Acquiring knowledge isn’t just an intellectual endeavor; it’s a spiritual journey that brings us closer to understanding God’s design and will for our lives and the world.

The illumination that education provides breaks chains of ignorance, prejudice, and narrow-mindedness. It equips people with tools to combat injustice, poverty, and inequality. The power of knowledge gives voice to the voiceless, enabling them to contribute to society and, in turn, enrich it. Education is not just about individual betterment; it’s about collective upliftment.

In our communities today, where misinformation can spread like wildfire and where ignorance often leads to division and strife, the church’s role in championing education becomes even more critical. We are called to be proponents of truth, seekers of wisdom, and advocates for education at all levels. The church can and should be a space where minds are nurtured, where questions are encouraged, and where the pursuit of knowledge is seen as a holy endeavor.

Let us remember that Jesus, our Savior, was also Jesus, the teacher. As His followers, we are commissioned not just to teach the Gospel but to embody the very essence of education – to bring light, understanding, and empowerment to every corner of our world.

FOR REFLECTION

How can our faith community become more involved in educational endeavors, ensuring that both spiritual and worldly knowledge uplift and empower all members?

PRAYER

God of wisdom and knowledge, inspire us to seek truth and understanding in all things. May we value the gift of education, using it as a tool to empower ourselves and others, and to build Your kingdom on earth. Amen.



Navigating Digital Waters: The Church in the Age of Technology

Scripture: *See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. ~ Isaiah 43:19*

Isaiah spoke of a God ever at work, molding, shaping, and doing new things. The ancient words of the prophet echo a truth both timeless and timely, particularly as we stand at the confluence of faith and technology. Today, as the digital age reshapes every facet of human experience, how does the church understand and navigate this revolution?

At its core, technology is a tool – a means, not an end. The printing press, once a groundbreaking invention, democratized the Word, allowing Scripture to be shared far and wide. Centuries later, the internet and digital tools offer a similar promise: of connection, of dissemination, of evangelism.

But with this promise come challenges. As digital spaces become congregational places, we grapple with questions. Can a virtual church replace the warmth of a physical community? How do we maintain authenticity in an age dominated by curated personas? In the vast cacophony of the internet, how does the Gospel message retain its clarity and power?

Yet, the underlying current of these queries isn't new. The Church has always faced challenges when venturing into uncharted territories. The apostles grappled with translating

Christ's teachings across cultures and languages. The early church navigated the confluence of diverse traditions. In every age, the essential mission has remained unchanged: to proclaim the love and grace of Christ.

Technology, in its essence, extends the church's ability to fulfill this mission. Live streams allow the housebound to join in worship. Social media enables us to share reflections, prayers, and services with a global audience. Digital platforms offer resources for study, meditation, and spiritual growth at the click of a button.

However, as stewards of these tools, we must use them discerningly. It's vital to ensure that technology aids our spiritual journey without becoming a distraction. As the digital realm blurs the lines between the public and the private, the sacred and the profane, we must anchor ourselves in Christ, using technology in ways that reflect His teachings of love, authenticity, and community.

The Church, in this digital age, is called to be both a beacon and a bridge. A beacon, shining Christ's light in the vast digital expanse, and a bridge, connecting the timeless truths of the Gospel with the ever-evolving language of technology.

FOR REFLECTION

How can our church community harness the potential of technology while ensuring that our faith remains authentic, personal, and deeply rooted in Christ?

PRAYER

Lord of all times and seasons, grant us wisdom to navigate the digital age with discernment. Help us to use technology as a tool to further Your kingdom, ensuring that in all things, Your message of love and grace remains at the forefront. Amen.



The Spirit's Unifying Power

Scripture: *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. ~ 2 Corinthians 13:14*

The Holy Spirit in the Centre of Mission

In the creative work *Missio Dei* (Mission of God) and the ongoing *Missio Christos* (Mission of Christ) in the life and work of the church (the people God), one of the roles of the *Holy Spirit* is to create unprecedented unity in diversity as the Spirit of God 'hovers over the surface' (Genesis 1:2b). As we are called upon to advance *Missio Christos*, we must see others through the eyes of grace as God sees us; in this way, we allow the Holy Spirit to do His work and to produce fellowship amongst believers. In this divine mandate, we are reminded that unity is a product of the grace of God, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14).

Our Call to Promote Unity

Today, all of us who are involved in the life and work of the church are encouraged 'to make every effort' to maintain unity, and 'to be completely humble, gentle, and patient with each other' and 'to keep united in the Spirit' 'just as we have been called to one glorious hope for the future' (Ephesians 4:2-3).



Our Challenge in Promoting Christian Unity

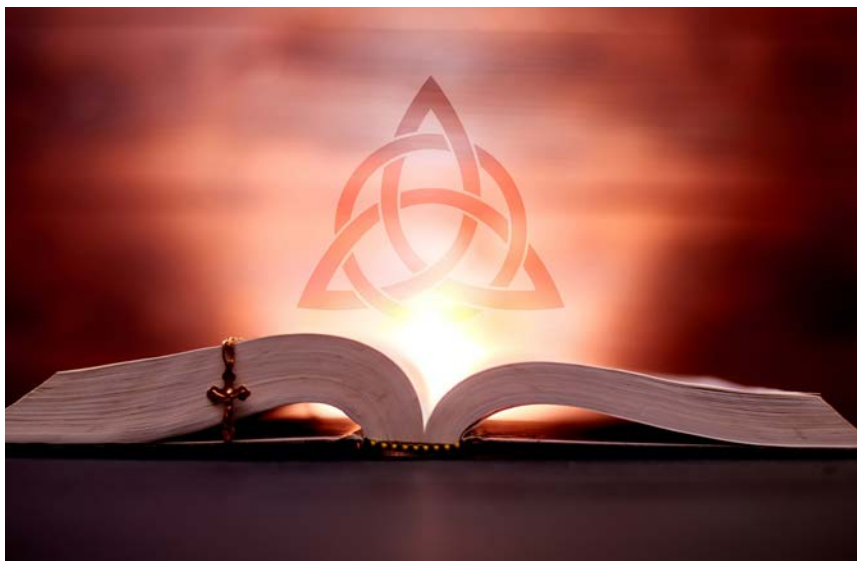
Friends, most of the time we are easily filled with pride and selfishness hence we fail to live in the Spirit and to promote Christian unity. Because of our pride and selfishness, we are not humble, we are not gentle, and we are not patient! We fail to allow the Holy Spirit to soften our hearts and to help us communicate and act in love, peace, and unity. The Spirit of God is calling us to repentance.

Our Calling to Advance the Unifying Power of the Spirit

As part of the body of Christ, the church, believers need to bear with one another in love. The logic of bearing with one another resonates with the call to endure, to hold up, and to sustain. As we seek to promote the unifying power of the holy Spirit, we must identify with Paul's encouragement to the Christians in Corinth whom he challenged to rejoice, to strive for full reconciliation, to encourage one another, and to be of one mind, and live in peace (2 Corinthians 13:11).

PRAYER

Come Holy Spirit, come; come bring us together as one. Come Holy Spirit, come; come unite all God's people. Come Holy Spirit, come; come work through the church, your body. Help us to share our talents and our varied gifts to support the cause for greater unity among all God's people. Come Holy Spirit, come; Come help us to witness to unity in the diverse expressions of faith, practice, and worship. O Holy Spirit, may we be your instruments for a common witness in our communities; in the Precious Name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, Amen.



Embracing the Mystery

Scripture: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. ~ Mark 28:18-20*

Trinitarian theology didn't take shape until approximately 400 years after Jesus' ascension. It emerged after extensive debates and profound contemplation.

I vividly remember my Sunday School teacher's attempt to explain the Trinity when I was very young. She described God as being like zero, composed of three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, yet remaining one God. I found it challenging to comprehend. How could 1+1+1 equal 3, and why was God compared to zero?

The mystery of the Trinity doesn't aim to define what God is but rather illuminates who God is in terms of divine interaction with humanity and creation. The Trinity reveals that God's engagement with the world has been ongoing since creation, from Jesus' ascension to the apostles' spread of the gospel, enabling individuals like me, living in the 21st century, to hear the gospel and profess it with faith.

The singular God unites us with Jesus and the Holy Spirit, shaping our identity as Christians. The mystery of the Trinity empowers us, as Christians, to engage in God's work through the Holy Spirit, much like Jesus did. We are called to be active participants in God's mission.

God's mission is to love the world created by the Triune God so much that He sent Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit, into the world, and by the power of the Holy Spirit to make life ever more abundant throughout the world. All who believe in the Trinitarian God are equally able to participate in this mission of God.

In the context of God's mission, God the Father represents the initiator and sender. Just as the Father sent the Son into the world (John 3:16), God's mission involves sending individuals and communities to share the Gospel, promote justice, and engage in humanitarian efforts. Being co-participants in God's mission means aligning our missions with the purpose and will of God, the Father.

Jesus is often seen as the embodiment of God's mission on Earth. Christians are called to emulate the example of Jesus in spreading the Good News and in carrying out acts of compassion, healing, and reconciliation. Participation in God's mission means being Christ-like in our actions and attitudes.

The Holy Spirit empowers and equips believers for the mission. It provides guidance, discernment, and spiritual gifts. Christians are called to be receptive to the leading of the Holy Spirit and to be open to its transformative work, enabling them to be effective witnesses and agents of change in the world.

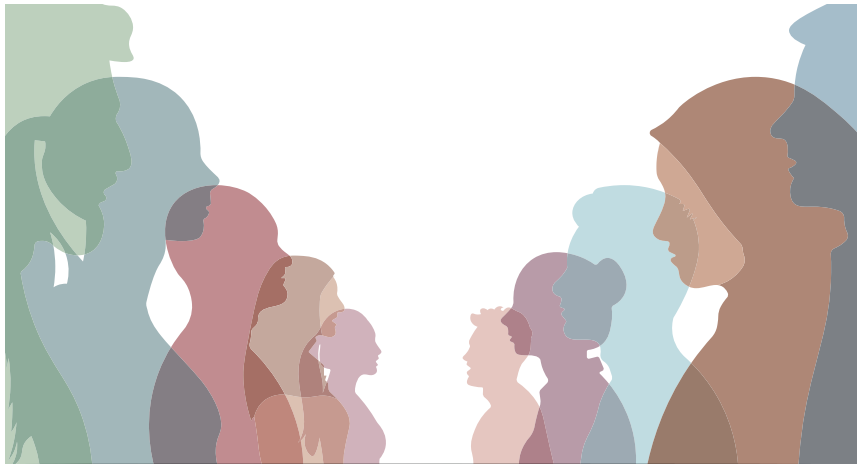
As a Christian, how do you relate to the world? How do you participate in God's mission?

PRAYER

Triune God, we are living in your mystery, which guides us to believe in Jesus, the life. We stand before you, acknowledging the profound depth of your love and the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in your divine mission.

In the mystery of the Trinity, we find our purpose and identity as Christians. As we go about our daily lives, may we carry the knowledge of your infinite love and the mission of the Triune God in our hearts. Use us as instruments of your grace, and may our lives testify to your boundless love and compassion.

We offer this prayer in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who are one and who are with us always, to the very end of the age. Amen.



Embracing Diversity in Community

Scripture: *The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” ~ John 4:9*

In the world that is so divided on the basis of race, color, religion, ethnicity, region and many more what would Jesus do if he lived in our present time?

The story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well on His way to Samaria presents very interesting and important lessons for society today. In the Gospel of John 4, Jesus, a Jewish man, shares in a friendly conversation with a Samaritan woman. Jesus’ intention was to minister to this woman even when he knew she was not going to embrace him at all. When he asked for water, he knew what her response was going to be, but he asked anyway. Now, to put the context in perspective, one ought to understand the relationship that existed between the Jews and the Samaritans in those days. It is important to understand that hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans was fierce and longstanding. It is argued that in some ways that it is dated all the way back to the Patriarchs. Jacob (Israel) had twelve sons whose descendants became the twelve tribes of Israel. Now Joseph, his favorite son, was despised by the other brothers (Genesis 37:3-4) and this hatred lasted a great deal. Without getting into the details of the historical differences between the Jews and the Samaritans, what we notice from the passage before us is that the bad relationship between these two peoples still existed even in the time of Jesus’ earthly life. Her response in verses 9 tells it all, when Jesus asked for water, she says: “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman, how can you ask me for a drink...?”

My sisters and brothers, many are the times we have refused to embrace each other

because of the barriers we have created for ourselves. Sometimes we have refused to embrace one another because of the skin color. Sometimes we have refused to embrace each other, because of the regions from which we hail. To the extreme, we have refused to embrace each other because of different religious beliefs that we share. My dear brothers and sisters, Jesus in our passage of reflection today, has demonstrated that it is possible to put aside the hatred that has existed for generations and be the help that is needed for one another and for the peace of the world. We are called to love and embrace the different other! We are called to love one another regardless of our religious affiliations, color, race or region where we come from. Jesus’ model of connecting with and embracing the Samaritan woman and ministering to her should be our model of ministering love to the communities where people are hurting and have known no love.

May God’s grace be sufficient for us in these very difficult and challenging times so that we may rise to life and flourish in our communities as we embrace diversity of opinions and personalities around ourselves for a better world.

PRAYER

Dear God, we pray that you may teach us to love like you love, to embrace each other as you embrace, to forgive like you forgive. May your peace that transcends all human understanding be and abide with each one of us as we learn and relearn to embrace diversity for the sake of your son. AMEN!



We are part of an intricate web of life

Healing Earth, Healing Humanity

Scripture: *Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground."* ~ Genesis 1:26

On World Environment Day 2024, as we reflect upon this passage from Genesis, we are reminded of our role as stewards of creation. The earth is groaning, and this is indicated by the unprecedented number of tsunamis, droughts, earthquakes, and floods. This, we would argue, is a result of human failure in our stewardship of creation. It is our vocation to show gratitude to God by caring for the environment in whatever small way we can. God entrusted us with the care of the Earth, calling us to work it and take care of it. Today, we acknowledge the importance of our environment's impact on our health and well-being. Let us remember that our actions, both big and small, have consequences for the Earth and for future generations. This verse in Genesis 1:26 calls us to exercise dominion not as domination, but as loving care and responsible guardianship. As we reflect on this verse, let us consider how we can fulfil our role as caretakers of the Earth, guided by God's image within us. Let us take a moment to reflect on the theology of our environment, offer a prayer, and meditate on a verse that reminds us of our responsibility as stewards of God's creation. This theme "Healing Earth, Healing Humanity" encapsulates the interconnectedness between the health of our planet and the well-being of humanity. It highlights the urgent need to restore and protect our environment for the benefit of present and future generations. Through this theme, we can inspire individuals and communities to act, fostering a sense of responsibility and unity in the global movement towards a sustainable future.

As people of faith, we understand that our environment is not merely a resource to exploit, but a sacred gift entrusted to us by God. It reflects God's creativity, wisdom, and love. Our

theology should embrace the interconnectedness of all living beings and recognize that our actions impact the delicate balance of nature. Let us reflect on how we can live in harmony with God's creation, promoting justice, sustainability, and ecological stewardship. May our reflections, prayers, and meditations on this World Environment Day 2024 inspire us to act for the well-being of our planet and all its inhabitants.

FOR REFLECTION

- Reflect on a time when you witnessed the negative effects of environmental degradation. How did it impact you and what did you learn from it?
- What role do you believe faith communities can play in promoting environmental stewardship?
- How can we balance our economic needs with the preservation of our natural resources?

PRAYER

Loving Creator, we come before you on this World Environment Day to acknowledge the beauty and wonder of the natural world that surrounds us. We recognize that we are part of a vast and intricate web of life, woven by your hands. Forgive us for the times when we have neglected our role as caretakers of the Earth. Grant us wisdom to understand the consequences of our actions and the courage to make choices that honor your creation. Help us to be mindful of our consumption patterns, to reduce waste, and to protect the ecosystems that sustain life. May we find inspiration in the resilience of nature and learn from its delicate balance. Guide us in advocating for justice and equality, recognizing that environmental degradation disproportionately affects the marginalized and vulnerable. Instill in us a deep sense of gratitude for the blessings of our planet and a commitment to preserve it for future generations. In your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.



Restored: A Journey to Healing and Wholeness

Scripture: *He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. ~ Psalm 147:3*

Once upon a time, in a small village of Sipatunyana in the plains of Kalomo, Zambia, there lived a young woman named Sarah. Sarah was 20 years old. Sarah carried within her a burden of pain and brokenness. The pain and brokenness emanated from Sarah losing her parents when she was just 5 years old. As Sarah grew up, the pain and brokenness did not go away. Sarah longed for wholeness, for the healing touch that would mend the shattered pieces of her heart.

One day, a missionary came to her village, sharing the gospel of Christ, telling stories of love, compassion, and the power of restoration that Christ brought for all who are broken, feel lost and alone.

Intrigued by the living word of God, Sarah approached the traveller and poured out her heart, seeking guidance and solace. The traveller looked at her with understanding eyes and said, "My dear, true healing begins when we invite Christ, who is 'Love', to take charge of our lives.... only He can silence the storm, the confusion and pain that you feel". The traveller, looking with compassion into Sarah's eyes, read from Psalm 147:3. Psalm 147:3 uses figurative speech of a heart that is "broken." in Hebrew "shabar" literally means "broken in pieces." And he says that the Messiah (Jesus) is able to "bind" the broken heart back together: wrap it up, bandage it up, and bring the heart back together.

The traveller continued to speak to Sarah, "Sometimes we feel as if we don't understand ourselves—what we want; what's wrong with us; or what we should do about our pain. But God is omniscient—He understands you fully. Take your mind off yourself and focus it on God who heals the hearts of people".

Convicted by the word of God, Sarah embarked on her journey towards healing and wholeness; she delved into the teachings of the Scriptures, discovering the transformative power of God's love. She learned that healing is not merely the absence of physical ailments, but a restoration of body, mind, and spirit.

Sarah realized that true healing goes beyond the physical. It encompasses emotional and spiritual healing, reconciliation with oneself and others, and restoration of relationships ruptured by pain and brokenness.

As Sarah's journey continued, she discovered the power of forgiveness to release the chains of bitterness and resentment, to let go of past hurts and find joy and hope for today and tomorrow. Sarah embraced the beauty of self-acceptance and learnt to extend compassion and self-worth to herself and others. She found solace in the power of community, where wounds could be shared and transformed into sources of strength to help others within her community. Having received healing, with her heart transforming as the Holy Spirit continued working in her, Sarah began to radiate healing and wholeness to those around her in her community with the same comfort she had received from Christ (2Corinthians 1:3-4). Her restored spirit touched the lives of many, offering them hope in their own journeys towards healing.

As Sarah's story draws to a close, it leaves us with a thought-provoking question: Where do we find healing and wholeness? As for Sarah, she found it with Christ!

May we be inspired by Sarah's journey and be encouraged to seek healing not just for ourselves but also for our communities and the world. May we learn to embody the values of compassion, justice, and peace, and extend the transformative power of healing and wholeness to those who are hurting around us.

PRAYER

Dear Lord,

We bring before you those who are emotionally wounded, those who carry the weight of sorrow, grief, or trauma. We pray for your divine comfort to embrace them, bringing them peace and healing. Heal their broken hearts and grant them the strength to step forward into a future filled with hope. Surround them with loving and supportive relationships, that they may find solace in the embrace of others. In Jesus' name, AMEN.



Navigating Life's Tides with Faith

Scripture: Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: **Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.** ~ Philippians 3:13-14

In the heart of Bangladesh, where the tapestry of life is woven with threads of resilience, faith, and hope, resides the spirit of a nation that personifies the very essence of pressing on toward a goal. The verses from Philippians 3:13-14 resonate deeply within the hearts of the people, providing a beacon of light amidst the challenges that come their way.

Life in Bangladesh, a country adorned by rivers that are both a blessing and a challenge, mirrors the journey depicted in the scriptures. It's a nation that faces the unknown, the ebbs and flows of life, much like the rivers that traverse its landscape. Just as a fisherman like Ali casts his net into the river, the people of Bangladesh cast their hopes and dreams into the vast river of life, always with an unwavering determination to press on.

Ali, a humble fisherman, is a living embodiment of this spirit. Every day, he sails into the river, braving the uncertainties that come with it. He casts his net, his hopes, and his dreams into the water. The unpredictability of the river is akin to the unpredictability of life. Ali, like many others in Bangladesh, perseveres, propelled by a dream to break the cycle of poverty and provide a better life for his children.

In this riverine nation, pressing on toward a goal means navigating through the various currents of life — the floods of adversity, the storms of poverty, and the whirlpools of societal challenges. It means casting nets of determination and faith into the river, despite not knowing what each day might bring.

Just as Paul urged the Philippians not to look back but to strain forward toward what lies ahead, the people of Bangladesh are urged by their circumstances, their dreams, and their faith to do the same. They press on, they strive, and they reach, believing in the promise of a prize that awaits them at the end of the race.

In this vast river of life, amidst the tides and currents, the people of Bangladesh continue to press on. Their faith, their dreams, and their unity carry them forward. And as they press on toward the goal, they inspire the world with their resilience, their determination, and their unwavering hope.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, grant us the unwavering strength and determination to press forward in our journey, overcoming obstacles and realizing our aspirations. Help us reflect the resilience of Ali, inspiring hope in our communities. Guide us and hold us close as we strive toward the purpose You've set before us. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



A Story From Myanmar

Scripture: *Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'* ~ Luke 15:4-6

We, the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar, have a story to tell, a story about not being able to do something—not about something we are doing. Is it that a story? Maybe not for others. But it is a real and miserable story. We know that we are assigned by God to care for His creatures. However, instead of caring, we are destroying them by cutting the trees and scattering the plastics everywhere.

Whenever we give the awareness campaign on 'Creation Care' we share how God appoints us, the human beings. We inform how the smoke of vehicles pollutes the air, how cutting the trees can affect climate change and how scattering plastics is dangerous to our health and the environment. The lecture is followed by group discussion. Miserably, at the end of discussion, we assigned the blame on the government.

We can't survive without cutting the trees because majority of families in Myanmar use firewood for cooking. Gas is too expensive for the rural dwelling people. If the government provide gas we don't have to cut the trees for cooking. Myanmar is called a golden land. It is also rich in natural resources. Chinese people, not Myanmar citizens, benefit from the natural gas in Rakhine State. The government is responsible for this.

It seems that there is nothing we can do concerning the care of God's good creatures without the help and support of the government. We feel that the government does not care for her citizens like a shepherd caring for his sheep. A shepherd who lost his sheep looked for the lost one until he found it—as soon as he knew one was lost out of a hundred.

Contrary to the shepherd in Luke's parable, the government never cares for the citizens—never cares where we are, who we are, or what we do. What can we do if the government does not provide something in place of firewood? The hope of the creature 'to be liberated from bondage' (Rom 8:21) from humanity's unjust act seems to be hopeless in Myanmar. The rivers and canals are filled with polythene. The dwelling place of the fish, pure and clean water of the rivers, became dirty and unsuitable for the fish. The only thing we can do is encourage our congregation to plant fruit-bearing trees behind the house and to recycle the plastics.

What we can do or we are doing is far from enough. What would do you if you were a citizen of Myanmar in this time of political instability? How would you care for the good creatures of God in Myanmar without the support of the government?

PRAYER

"Hear our prayer O Lord, incline your ear to us. We human beings, created in your own image, and your creatures, are oppressed and unjustly tortured. Liberate us from the tyrant government just as you freed your people Israel from the bondage of Egypt, so that we can liberate your creatures and we can give a loving care to them."



Promoting Health and Well-being

Scripture: *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. ~ John 10:10*

Spiritual and Emotional Health and Well-being.

Spiritual and emotional health and well-being do not come as an accident of history but as a result of faith and hard work. Peace is a *sine-qua-non* of spiritual and emotional health and well-being. Peace requires justice and righteousness (Amos 5:24); it also needs mercy and truth to meet together, and righteousness and peace to kiss each other (Psalm 85:10). Where there is no justice, there is no peace. Thieves range from those who commit the least crimes to those looting national resources, to multinational companies that exploit poor nations resulting in the collapse of economies, institutions and service delivery. The poor are left suffering and some dying due to collapsed health institutions, violence due to collapsed human security institutions, and unabated human rights abuses. The spiritual and emotional health of victim and survivor communities is decimated. We don't wrestle against flesh and blood, but against these forces that deny the full expression of abundant life.

There is hope for abundant life in Christ. The intersection of human experience and the abundant life is a paradox. *The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.*¹ In some cases, the suffering is due to the mind of the oppressed who believe their condition is God-given yet it is through exploitation (Amos 8:6 - 14). Christians ought to *think right, decide right and act right* to redeem themselves from suffering.

Questions for theological reflections.

Spiritual and emotional health comes when we are at peace with ourselves and with others. How can we be at peace with ourselves when we are exploited by others? How can we be at peace with one another in the face of racism and its legacies of tribalism? How can we be at peace and enjoy the fullness of life when some of our own are denied their rights and self-determination? How can we be Christians when we are complicit in the suffering of the masses? Our well-being is rooted in the well-being of others. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right when he said Christ was a man for others. In our missiological enterprise, our focus should include the well-being of others to guarantee our well-being.

Journey towards spiritual and emotional health

1. Understanding God's view of creation.
2. Exploring our role in racism and in the exclusion of the weak and vulnerable.
3. Demystify systems, institutions, structures and attitudes that subjugate and ostracise others, and explore our role in sustaining, supporting and strengthening them.
4. Embracing those who are ostracised.
5. Does your role enhance or deny the abundant life of others?

PRAYER

Our Lord God Almighty, you came to give us abundant life. The forces of this world continue to deny us the fullness of life. I/We pray for strength and resources needed for our struggle to wrestle against all these forces in search of the abundant life and our well-being.



Finding Rest in God

Scripture: *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. ~ Matthew 11:28-30*

Many are times that we find ourselves in restless and difficult situations. We are constantly overwhelmed by events happening in our lives and in surrounding places. This might sound and feel familiar to many people, especially after the 2020 – 2022 COVID-19 pandemic that swept across nations and families, leaving a lot of broken families and promises. We are constantly on guard, uncertain about what is coming next.

Many would wonder, will we ever find rest in this world? The book of Matthew in Chapter 28:28-30, gives us hope and strength to continue holding on. When all hope is lost, and nothing feels progressive, God says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” I am talking to a young man who is struggling to find employment, I am talking to a young lady who feels unsafe in this world, or to that wife who is in an abusive relationship, I am even talking to a parent, father, mother, or guardian who feels out of control or as a failure to their children. Allow me to say there is rest in Christ; do not be dismayed or discouraged by the negative things happening in your life. All the problems that are disturbing your peace are nothing compared to the love and rest that we can find in Christ.

Day in and day out, we hear disturbing news of wars and natural disasters. Reports of women being abused and murdered have become a norm in our daily news reports. We live in a world that is unkind to us. We are constantly reminded that this world is not our eternal home. Right at this moment, families are being displaced by wars, and hundreds die in the Mediterranean Sea in search of greener pastures, while many others are ill-treated in foreign lands. One would ask, for how long will we continue suffering like this?

1 Peter 5:10-11 assures us that, “Yes, you will suffer for a short time. But after that, God will make everything right. He will make you strong. He will support you and keep you from falling.” This is the assurance that we get from Christ. We may suffer now, but rest assured, rest is coming. God is not a man that can lie. Where is God when all this is happening to me? In all these predicaments, let us hear the voice of God saying, “Come, and I will give you rest.”

But again, a man who has lost everything in an earthquake, a woman who is abused daily and a mother who has lost her children in war might ask: where is God when all this is happening to me?

PRAYER

Almighty God, we come to you this moment, praying for those families and nations that are on the verge of losing hope in humanity. May you kindly intervene in their lives, restore hope and give them the rest they so dearly need. We pray that you give us the strength to hold steadfast to prayer and faith even when everything seems to be against us. Amen.



Unity: Life Flourishing Through the Work of the Council for World Mission

Scripture: *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ~ 1 Corinthians 12:12*

The Apostle Paul, in his poignant letter to the Corinthians, presents a vivid metaphor of the body, painting a picture of diverse parts working in harmony to ensure the well-being of the whole. The health and vitality of each part are crucial for the body to flourish. This scripture forms a resonant chord with the mission and ethos of the Council for World Mission (CWM). Across decades, the Council for World Mission has woven threads of unity, partnership, and shared vision across continents, cultures, and congregations. By fostering relationships among diverse member churches, the CWM seeks to manifest the interconnectedness and interdependence that Paul so eloquently described – that of unity in diversity.

But there's a profounder layer to this. The CWM's work is a reflection of the divine vision of 'life flourishing.' In the vast tapestry of the Christian faith, each thread, each tradition, each voice, contributes to a vibrant picture of a world where life is lived in its fullness, in its abundance. Where every individual, community, and even the ecological systems we are part of, thrives.

The life-flourishing concept aligns deeply with Christ's proclamation in John 10:10, where He says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Through its mission, CWM strives towards this abundance. The Council's work reminds us that the Christian faith isn't confined to

one culture or tradition but flourishes when expressed in diverse ways, each one attesting to a God who desires life in its abundance for all.

But the Council's endeavors go beyond mere celebration; they are a clarion call to action. As members of this vast body of Christ, how are we fostering life? How are we ensuring that every part, every member, every community is thriving? In our rapidly evolving world, with its challenges and opportunities, it is this call to abundant life for all that forms the heart of the CWM's mission.

So, as we celebrate the CWM Sunday, we don't just celebrate an institution. We celebrate a vision of the world where life flourishes in its God-intended fullness. A world of unity, diversity, and abundance. A world where the love of Christ, through our hands and hearts, brings life to every corner.

FOR REFLECTION

How can we, both individually and collectively, contribute to the mission of ensuring life flourishes in every community, every ecosystem, and every heart?

PRAYER

God of all nations, peoples, and creation, we thank You for the Council for World Mission and its dedication to a world where life flourishes. Strengthen its endeavors and inspire us to be bearers of Your vision of abundant life for all. Amen.



Embracing the Role of Peacemakers

Scripture: *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ~ Matthew 5:9*

In an unannounced visit, a parish priest encountered a family during a heated argument. The cacophony filled the room until the priest's arrival, prompting everyone to fall silent and welcome him in unison. Surprisingly, the priest did not urge them to cease their quarrel but instead encouraged them to continue. Bewildered, they asked how they could possibly argue in the presence of the priest. To this, the priest responded, "I am an ordinary man. If you fear my presence, why do you not fear the ever-present God who is dwelling within you? Shouldn't God's presence within you inspire peace, not conflict? You are called not to be fighters but peacemakers."

In a world often marked by division, conflict, and discord, the call to be peacemakers resonates deeply with the teachings of Jesus Christ. The verse from Matthew 5:9 reminds us that those who actively seek to build bridges for peace and reconciliation are not only blessed but also recognized as children of God. In Judaism, the pursuit of peace, or 'Shalom,' is a central value that extends beyond the absence of conflict and emphasizes that those who actively work to create peace are partners with the Divine in the ongoing act of creation and restoration. The Talmud, a central text in Jewish tradition, tells us that 'Great is peace, for God found no vessel that could contain blessing other than peace.'

The notion of being 'blessed' aligns with the idea of leading a morally upright and righteous life. Peace-making is viewed as a virtuous action that contributes to the repair of the world ('Tikkun Olam') and reflects the values of compassion, empathy, and social responsibility.

It is a Call

St. Augustine of Hippo has seen Matthew 5:9 as a call to inner transformation through the grace of God. Yes, it is not just a description of a blessed state but an invitation for followers of Jesus to actively engage in the work of peace.

It is a Commitment

St. John Chrysostom known for his eloquent sermons asked everyone to commit to the practical implications of peace-making in daily life. Peace-making is indeed a commitment that requires dedication, effort, and steadfast resolve. It is not just a one-time action, but an ongoing process that involves intentional choices and actions.

It is a Custom

St. Ambrose of Milan, a bishop and theologian, emphasizes the societal implications of peace-making. He teaches that peacemakers have a duty to advocate for justice, alleviate suffering, and promote the common good. It is a central aspect of Christian ethics and is emphasized throughout the New Testament and the teachings of the early church.

It is a Contrast

Tertullian, known for his apologetic works, focuses on the counter-cultural nature of peace-making. He highlights how peacemakers stand in contrast to the prevailing values of the world, demonstrating Christ's transformative power.

Let us dedicate ourselves to God, becoming a bridge to resolve conflicts, and through this commitment, we earn acknowledgment as God's children.

FOR REFLECTION

Are you truly embodying the identity of a child of God? Are you faithfully answering your divine call?

PRAYER

Lord, once again assure my call and commitment toward the peacemaker of the world. Make me contrast one in the world, and at the same time use me to create your presence in the world. Amen.



Creation's Cry: Answering the Call for Justice

Scripture: *We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ~ Romans 8:22*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today, I stand before you to address an urgent matter that weighs heavily on our hearts - the care of God's creation. In these turbulent times, we witness the earth groaning under the weight of environmental crises, and the call to action has never been more pressing.

From the pages of the Bible, we learn of a profound truth: in times of crisis, people cried out to the Lord, and He sent deliverers - prophets, judges, and leaders. These deliverers were raised up to bring justice, restore righteousness, and guide His people through tumultuous times.

Our present crisis, the ecological crisis, is no different. Creation is crying out, and the urgency of creation care is our divine calling. We are called to be the carers and deliverers for the whole of creation, as we have been since the beginning, according to Genesis.

In the book of Judges, we find remarkable examples of leaders like Gideon and Deborah, who worked in partnership with others. Deborah, partnering with Barak, led the Israelites to victory. Moses, upon the advice of his father-in-law Jethro, appointed others to share the burden

of leadership. Gideon found support from his father in facing his formidable task.

In each case, when a crisis arose, people cried out, leaders inquired of God, and they followed His direction. This led to reformation, deliverance, peace, and freedom. These leaders, guided by their faith in God, showed that it is possible to bring about transformation even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges.

Now, I want to challenge each one of us to look at the changing landscape of our world. Injustice and climatic crises are rampant, and the cries of creation are louder than ever. What is the Lord asking us to do? How can there be deliverance? How can the church respond?

In today's context, as we address the ecological crisis, it's crucial to recognize that we are not alone in this endeavor. Just as Deborah and Barak worked in partnership, we, too, must network with others. This networking extends beyond the walls of our church to include individuals, organizations, and communities dedicated to environmental care.

Networking for the climatic crises involves collaboration, sharing of knowledge, and pooling of resources. It's about connecting with scientists, activists, environmentalists, and like-minded believers. It's reaching out to community leaders, governmental bodies, and international organizations, all working towards the same goal: preserving God's creation.

In a world that is increasingly interconnected, networking allows us to amplify our efforts. It empowers us to learn from one another, leverage the expertise of experts, and advocate for change at local and global levels. Just as Moses appointed leaders to assist in governing the Israelites, we must appoint individuals to lead our collective efforts towards creation care.

This networking is not just practical; it is deeply rooted in our faith. When we unite, we reflect the oneness and unity that God desires for His people. We become a testimony to the world of Christ's love and His call to steward His creation. Our collective voices become a beacon of hope in the face of climate challenges.

As we network, let us remember that our guidance and direction must always come from the Lord. Seek His wisdom, pray for discernment, and follow His lead. Like Gideon, who relied on the guidance of the Lord, we must trust in God's providence and His promise to be with us in every endeavor.

In our networking for the climatic crises, may we act with urgency and determination. Let us not be discouraged by the magnitude of the challenge but instead find inspiration in the stories of deliverance and transformation from the Bible. Just as the people of old found deliverance through faith and obedience, we too can bring about positive change in the face of climate crisis.

PRAYER

May God bless our endeavors and guide us on this sacred path of creation care and justice. As we network for the sake of God's creation, may our efforts bring glory to His name and serve as a testament to His love for all of His creation. Amen.



Nurturing the Faith of Young People

Scripture: *Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. ~ 1 Timothy 4:12*

Throughout history and scripture, young people have played pivotal roles, from David to Mary to Timothy. Their youthful energy, idealism, and passion were channeled towards God's purposes. In today's ever-evolving world, the faith of our youth is more critical than ever. Their spiritual journeys, if nurtured correctly, can lead to a lifetime walking hand in hand with the Lord.

1. Recognize Their Unique Challenges

- **The Age of Information:** With the internet, young people today have access to vast amounts of information. While this can be a blessing, it can also lead to confusion and doubt. We must guide them to discern the truth in the age of misinformation.
- **Social Pressures:** Peer pressure, the quest for identity, and societal norms push young people in numerous directions. We need to help them ground their identity in Christ, reminding them that they are 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139:14).

2. Engage, Don't Alienate

- **Open Dialogues:** We must create safe spaces for them to ask questions, express doubts, and share experiences. They should never fear judgment.
- **Active Participation:** Involve them in church activities. Let them lead, serve, and bring fresh ideas.

3. Equip Them With Biblical Knowledge

- **Bible Studies:** Regularly engage them in studying the Word. It will be their guiding light in dark times.
- **Apologetics:** Equip them with the tools to defend their faith in an increasingly skeptical world.

4. Foster Genuine Relationships

- **Mentorship:** Older members of the congregation can provide wisdom, guidance, and a listening ear. Timothy had Paul; who will our young ones have?
- **Fellowship:** Encourage relationships among their peers within the faith community. Together, they can strengthen each other's faith.

5. Lead by Example

- **Walk the Talk:** Young people are keen observers. If they see authenticity in our walk with God, it will inspire their journey.
- **Admit Imperfections:** Let's show them that faith is a journey, with ups and downs. It's okay to falter; what's essential is to get back up.

6. Empower Their Passions

- **Spiritual Gifts:** Help them identify and nurture their spiritual gifts. Be it singing, teaching, serving, or evangelizing; their contribution is invaluable.
- **Social Justice:** Many young people are passionate about causes. Guide them on how their faith intersects with these passions and how they can make a difference.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father waits with open arms for his young son's return. Similarly, our role is not to control or confine, but to guide, support, and love. Let us take on this sacred duty, ensuring that the flame of faith in our young people not only remains lit but also shines brightly for the world to see.

Prayer

Dear Lord, guide us as we nurture the faith of our young ones. Let us be instruments of your love, wisdom, and understanding. Amen.



The Depth of Divine Generosity: A Call to Emulate

Scripture: *Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ~ 2 Corinthians 9:7*

From the dawn of time to this present moment, the narrative of the universe unfurls as a tale of divine generosity. Every sunrise that paints our skies, every breath that gives life, and every heartfelt connection speaks of a Creator whose essence is pure, unbridled generosity.

Before the foundation of the world, there existed a rhythm of abundance set in motion by the divine. The myriad stars, the diverse species on our Earth, and the depth of human emotion all testify to God's boundless giving nature. This narrative of giving reaches a climax in the scriptural recounting of God's greatest gift to humanity: Jesus Christ. In Him, we see generosity personified - a life laid down for many.

But what does this divine generosity mean for us? As beneficiaries of such unparalleled giving, we are invited not merely to receive but to emulate. Our own acts of giving, whether big or small, are a response to the divine invitation to participate in this cosmic dance of generosity. It's a call to move beyond mere transactions and into the realm of transformation.

Generosity is not confined to the material. Beyond the coins and notes lies a realm of giving that encompasses time, understanding, patience, and love. It's the act of making space in our lives for others, of seeing and affirming their worth, and of letting our actions be a testament to this recognition.

Yet, in this act of giving, there exists a profound paradox. In giving, we find that we receive. Not necessarily in material wealth, but in deeper, intangible riches - joy, purpose, and a sense of connection to something greater. It's as if our very acts of generosity open up channels for divine blessings to flow into and through our lives.

As we reflect on the divine model of generosity, let it not remain an abstract concept but be translated into tangible actions. Whether it's by sparing time to listen to a friend, helping a neighbor, or supporting a cause close to our hearts, may our lives become a continuous echo of divine generosity.

May we, with cheerful hearts, embrace the sacred call to generosity, recognizing that in doing so, we draw closer to the heart of our Creator, the ultimate Giver.

FOR REFLECTION

Reflect on moments where you've experienced profound generosity. How can you channel those experiences into acts of giving in your own life?

PRAYER

Gracious God, the source of all generosity, instill within us a heart that delights in giving. As we have freely received from Your abundance, may we freely give, reflecting Your love and grace in every act of generosity. Amen.



Pieces of Peace

Scripture: *“She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” ~ Genesis 16:13
Look at the birds of the air... ~ Matthew 6:26a*

There is an almond tree on the grounds of St Andrew’s Theological College in Trinidad and Tobago. A pair of macaws often visit the almond tree and sit perched on high branches, pecking at the almonds. When people pass by, they are often captivated by the exquisite blue, red, yellow and green macaws who will sometimes cheerfully squawk at bemused human spectators.

A family of owls lives in another tree on the compound. They are usually cleverly hidden in their nest and emerge tentatively at night. People who wish to see them have to remain completely still and wait for a long time before seeing a small brown owl-head poking out. Both the macaws and the owls are birds. but what differences they show in their appearance and in their behaviour!

We accept the differences within families of birds, animals, fruit, fish or flowers. We are called to accept differences among people. Differences are part of the radiance of the glory of diversity. The unity of the Creator is manifest in the variety in the universe.

Trinidad and Tobago is officially an interfaith state. The multifaith composition and crucial role of the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO) is enshrined in the laws of the nation. The national anthem sings enthusiastically that “Here every creed and race find an equal place.” National events and activities feature prayers from Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Spiritual (Shouter) Baptist traditions.

Within Trinidad and Tobago, St Andrew’s Theological College is the oldest institution for tertiary education. It was established in 1892 and has a determinedly ecumenical focus. The Mission Statement says that it exists “to inspire and fulfil the call to spiritual enlightenment, empowerment, engagement and edification through ecumenical, inclusive, theological education.”

We call the Lord by many names. The only person in the Bible to give God a name is Hagar in Genesis 16:13. She was a marginalized slave woman, excluded, disenfranchised, impoverished, and starving. We are called to tune our hearts to those who are different from us. It is to them and through them we may experience a new name for, and relationship with, the Lord.

Let us look at the birds. Let us look at ourselves. Let us embrace the ethos which embraces others. We are all pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of peace.

FOR REFLECTION

What do we learn from the diversity of creation about appreciating differences?

PRAYER

God who is Almighty yet who lives in the image of the powerless and likeness of the different, be with us.

We soar with the birds and suffer with Hagar. Be in us.

May have a new vision of ourselves and of you.



Stewards of the Sacred: Our Shared Responsibility to Creation

Scripture: *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ~ Genesis 2:15*

From the very inception of the universe, as detailed in the poetic narrative of Genesis, the rhythm and design of creation have been evident. The cosmos, the earth, the waters, and all living creatures came into existence by the very Word of God. Humanity's unique role, however, was distinguished not merely by our creation but by our vocation: to tend and care for the earth. In this divine mandate lies both our privilege and our responsibility.

The theological underpinning of our relationship with creation is foundational to understanding our ethical duty. If all of creation sings the praises of the Creator, as the psalmist beautifully declares, then to harm creation is, in essence, to silence that song of praise. Moreover, as beings created in the image of God (imago Dei), our interaction with the world becomes a reflection of our understanding of God. In nurturing the earth, we mirror God's nurturing nature. In protecting the vulnerable species, we reflect God's heart for the weak and marginalized.

Yet, our current reality often paints a somber picture. The environment is groaning under the weight of exploitation, neglect, and the adverse impacts of human choices. From deforestation to pollution, from species extinction to climate change - these are not just ecological issues, they are profound theological concerns. They raise questions about justice, about our understanding of God's gifts, and about our place and role in the larger tapestry of creation.

Ethically, our shared responsibility emerges from the recognition that we are not isolated entities. Our well-being is intrinsically linked to the well-being of all creation. Our actions or inactions, our choices, have ramifications that ripple outwards, impacting communities and ecosystems. And often, it is the most vulnerable among us – those with the least resources or agency – who bear the brunt of ecological degradation.

To care for God's creation together is to recognize the interconnectedness of life, to value the inherent worth of every creature, and to actively work towards the flourishing of all. It is to bridge the gap between theology and praxis, ensuring that our beliefs manifest in tangible, positive actions for the environment.

The early Celtic Christians had a term, "thin places," to describe locales where the divide between the divine and the earthly seemed especially narrow, where God's presence felt almost palpable. In a way, our entire planet is such a 'thin place'. Every rock, river, plant, and animal is a testament to God's creative genius and enduring love.

As we navigate the complexities of modern life, may we be grounded in the ancient truth of our calling as stewards. Let us unite in our efforts, transcending denominations, cultures, and backgrounds, to care for God's creation. For in doing so, we not only honor the Creator but also ensure a harmonious and sustainable future for all.

FOR REFLECTION

How might our daily actions and decisions change if we truly viewed ourselves as caretakers of God's creation, and how can we collaborate with others to amplify our impact?

PRAYER

Creator God, instill in us a deep reverence for all of Your creation. Guide us in our efforts to protect and nurture the world around us. Strengthen our resolve to make ethical choices, and help us to be diligent stewards of the gifts you've entrusted to us. Amen.



A Path to Economic Justice and Compassion

Scripture: *He that hath two clothes, let him give to him that hath none; and he that hath food, let him do the same. ~ Luke 3:11*

In our world today, marked by economic disparities and injustice, the virtue of almsgiving stands as a powerful remedy. Many Bible scholars affirm that giving is at the core of Christianity itself. It reflects the nature of our Heavenly Father, who graciously bestowed His only Son for our redemption. As believers, we are called to emulate this spirit of generosity, for through giving, we can address two pressing issues that plague our society.

Economically, we find ourselves trapped in an unjust capitalist ideology that perpetuates the divide between the rich and the poor. Yet, the solution lies within the simple act of charity. Imagine if those who possess excess, those with multiple clothes or abundant food, were to share with those in need. By embracing the principle of “when he gives right, he does not see left” (Matthew 6:3-4), we can begin to heal the societal wounds caused by economic inequality.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the source of all wealth, assures us that when we help the least of our brothers and sisters, we are serving Him. The words of Theophan the hermit resonate with wisdom, reminding us that the excuses we make to avoid helping the poor often stem from hardened hearts. Overcoming these barriers can lead us to rectify the economic imbalances that burden us.

Justice, too, is woven into the fabric of almsgiving. It entails a system where everyone’s social, physical, and economic conditions are treated equitably. The Bible teaches us that through almsgiving, justice can be promoted and the burdens of others can be shared. Galatians 6:2 encourages us to bear one another’s burdens, fostering equality in various realms of life. Saint John Chrysostom, a revered figure in the Church, emphasizes the importance of practicing almsgiving without bias or partiality. He reminds us that even if we encounter someone whom we perceive as wicked, we should not hesitate to give. For God’s grace shines equally upon the righteous and the wicked. We must recognize that the world and everything in it belong to God (Psalm 24:1), and as stewards of His blessings, we are called to be generous and just.

Therefore, if we possess more than enough for ourselves, let us consider that God has blessed us to be givers and providers for those in need. The abundance in our homes is not meant to be hoarded but rather shared with the impoverished. Let us all embrace the call to be givers, for in giving, we foster justice and compassion. As the words of Luke 6:38 remind us, “Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over.”

FOR REFLECTION

How can you embrace the virtue of almsgiving in your life to contribute to economic justice and compassion in your community?

PRAYER

Gracious God, help us cultivate hearts of generosity and justice. Teach us to see the needs of others and empower us to share our resources with compassion. May our acts of almsgiving be a reflection of Your love and a means of bringing economic justice to our world. Amen.



Our Responsibility

Scripture: Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” ~ Genesis 1:26

Reading Genesis 1:26-28 clearly shows us that God charged us to subdue the earth. To subdue the earth and have dominion over everything is to control these things so they fulfil the will of God as they serve the purpose of His Children. Our privilege to live on this green earth comes with responsibility – taking care of God’s green Earth.

As followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, we should be taking the lead in this matter of caring for God’s green earth and respecting the environment that God has given to us. It’s part of our mission. Caring for the earth is as an act of love and obedience to its creator and redeemer.

As we read the creation account, we realize that the responsibility to represent God begins with and includes the way we treat creation. To subdue and have dominion is not to simply consume everything and use the earth only for our benefit. In as much as we are to use for our benefit, the use of natural resources must be done in a sustainable manner.

The overexploitation of earth’s resources has reached alarming levels. The earth is groaning, with no one to speak for it. The overexploitation of natural resources has resulted in global

warming. We all have seen the devastating effects of this. In the name of doing business, we have depleted most of the forests and today we are paying the utmost price – global warming.

The church must rise up, using scripture, and advocate for environmental justice. Our responsibility as human beings here on earth is to represent God by caring for his creation; using it to sustain human life. There’s nothing wrong with using the resources God has given to us. We are supposed to do that. But we do that in a way that cares for the creation he has given to us and allows that creation to reflect the glory of God. That’s our responsibility.

This responsibility for the environment, the common heritage of mankind, extends not only to present needs but also to those of the future. It is very true that we have inherited a green and clean environment from past generations, and we have benefited. For this reason, we have obligations towards all, especially to those who will come after us.

A human being is identified with nature and counted among animals and so if a human can be identified and protected, so it must be with other non-human living things. Nature is desperately looking for someone to raise a voice so it is saved from the current ecological injustice. Has the church been that voice that can save nature? Where is the prophetic voice of the church? Amen.

PRAYER

Heavenly father, grant us wisdom to care for the earth you have given us. Open our eyes that your love might be reflected in our care for the earth. Help us to act now for the good of the future generation. Help us to be instruments of new creation. Through Jesus Christ our redeemer. Amen.



The Ecological Sins

Scripture: ...for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. ~ Genesis 3:5

The beginning of faith is the recognition of our sins. Recognising sin will change our prayer, revealed in our action and commitment. When we look at the destruction of creation, it requires us to recognise ecological sin. Instead of screaming at Jesus, who died only for our sins, we should take for granted confessing our ecological sins, looking at the destruction of creation by our desire and greed. In the Bible, an original sin is described in Genesis 3:5.

...for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. (Gn 3:5, NRSV)

Christian tradition has confessed that eating fruit from the tree knowing good and evil is a sin. However, the Bible is no longer talking about empty tradition. The Hebrew Bible says that when you eat of it (the fruit from trees) your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. The Bible is unequivocal that becoming God is a sin of our desire to determine good and evil.

It seems that nuclear power is convenient, clean, and abundant to us. Therefore, some have thought that people could be God (or demi-God) if they had nuclear power or nuclear weapons. Furthermore, Christians could also be God (or a representative of God) even if they could not resist temptations—like Eve and Adam, who wanted to be God and admitted the temptation of the serpent. Nuclear technology has threatened all existence on Earth due to nuclear power, seeking to achieve geopolitical hegemony through a system of science, technology, military, and infinite growth. When it comes to nuclear technology, the political power does not take care of the orphan, the widow, or the stranger. Also, it does not pay attention to the groans of women, the oppressed, those who are marginalised, and the Earth.

As we have seen, Japan has determined to discharge Fukushima radioactive water, and moreover it will have long-term effects on people and marine ecosystems around the ocean. The Bible makes us realise that it is a sin to open our eyes so that we become like God. However, we have already opened our eyes to nuclear power, leading to the destruction of all existence on Earth. How could we respond to faith in this culture of death? As an anonymous Christian says, the faith required of us in terms of the climate crisis is gratitude and praise towards God. The Bible invites us to recognise the sinfulness of our desire that wants to be like God.

Christian faith does not go hand-in-hand with nuclear technology. Our faith in climate justice points out justice instead of money, peace instead of violence, and integrity of creation instead of destruction. As confessors of the Bible, I hope we should recognise our ecological sins, and furthermore should keep faith on the relationship among God, humans, and the universe (creation).

PRAYER

God of life, grant us your wisdom and faith to realise ecological sins related to the climate crisis. Help us to recognise climate justice and re-think our relationships with God, humans, and the universe (creation). Bless our faith so that we achieve climate justice, saving our planet, the Earth.



Who is Your Neighbour?

Scripture: *Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed mercy." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise. ~ Luke 10:25-37*

The sermon "Who is your Neighbour?" explores the broader meaning of 'neighbour' in the context of the parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10:25-37. Traditionally, the term 'neighbour' has been confined to human relationships and social interactions. However, the sermon suggests that in light of the ecological crisis, this definition should be expanded to include the Earth and its ecosystems.

The parable tells of a traveller who is attacked by robbers and left for dead. A priest and a Levite pass by without aiding the man, likely due to concerns about ritual purity and social hierarchy. But a Samaritan, regarded as an outsider, stops to help. This act of kindness from the Samaritan, who was of a different ethnic and religious background, is the central focus of the parable and exemplifies the sermon's message: true neighbourliness knows no boundaries.

In the sermon, the narrative of the Samaritan is paralleled with our duty to the environment. Just as the Samaritan cared for the wounded traveller, humans are called to care for the 'wounded' Earth. The ecological crisis is likened to the plight of the beaten traveller, and the Earth is personified as a neighbour in need of our mercy and compassion.

The Greek word for neighbour ('plesion') extends beyond human interactions to anything in close proximity. This interpretation encourages the congregation to consider all living beings and the natural world as part of their community. The sermon calls for a transformation in perspective where caring for the environment is seen as a moral obligation, similar to helping a neighbour in need.

The message is action-oriented, stressing that understanding our duty to the environment must lead to concrete actions. It advocates for engaging in practices that benefit the planet, such as reforestation, responsible consumption, and supporting renewable energy. The idea is not just to know what is right but to put that knowledge into practice, reflecting the biblical injunction to "Go and do likewise."

The sermon concludes by emphasizing the interdependence of all life and the importance of extending the principles of love and mercy to all creation. It suggests that Jesus' teachings compel us to include the care of every living creature and the Earth itself in our definition of neighbourliness. By doing so, we fulfill a divine mandate to tend to the needs of our wounded world, ensuring a sustainable future for all.

This message is timely and relevant, challenging us to reflect on our daily actions and our impact on the environment. It is a call to expand the circle of compassion to include the entire web of life and to recognize our role as stewards of creation. It is an invitation to honor our deep connections with the natural world by acting in ways that nurture and protect our planet. Through such actions, we not only address the urgent ecological issues but also live out the call to love our neighbour in its fullest sense. The sermon is a reminder that in caring for the Earth, we are participating in a sacred task, one that honors life and reflects the glory of the divine in the world.

PRAYER

Teach us to see every living being, every blade of grass, every mountain, and every stream as our neighbours. Instill in us the spirit of the Good Samaritan, to not pass by those in need, be they person or place. Grant us the courage to act with mercy, extending our hands not only to our human kin but also to the Earth You have entrusted to us. May we tend to this planet with the love and attention of a gardener who nurtures and watches over the growth of every plant.



Human Dignity

Scripture: “First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” “Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.” ~ Mark 7: 27-29.

The indigenous people in the Northeastern regions of India typically share features that are commonly associated with East Asians, and this often leads to misconceptions and stereotypes. Regrettably, they are frequently mistaken for foreigners or even Chinese by mainstream Indians. These indigenous communities face racial discrimination and humiliation regularly, ranging from their culture and food choices to being unfairly labelled as primitive. The situation worsened during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, coinciding with a rise in discrimination against Asians, with allegations of virus spreading.

This situation is reminiscent of the discrimination and humiliation faced by the Syrophenician woman in the Bible. In the scripture, Jesus and his disciples ventured into the Gentile territory of Tyre and Sidon, where a Gentile Syrophenician woman sought his help to cast out a demon from her daughter. Jesus’ initial response was surprising, as he had previously exorcised demons from a Gentile and raised a girl from the dead. He seemed to challenge her

faith. Some believe he did so to test and bring out her unwavering faith, while others speculate that it revealed a more relatable, human aspect of Jesus, possibly depicting a moment of exhaustion or uncertainty, where he hadn’t fully grasped the extent of his own mission yet. Some interpret the incident as reflecting the wealth disparity in the Roman Empire, where food produced by the poor, which may have included Galilean farmers, was taken to feed the rich in the prosperous trading center of Tyre city.

Jesus’ response was initially harsh, using a metaphor to express the disparity in wealth: “First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children’s (poor) bread and toss it to the dogs (rich Tyrians).” The woman, however, identified with the poor and concurred that food should not be taken from them. Her dignified response, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,” moved Jesus, and he subsequently healed her daughter, saying, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”

In Mark’s account of this encounter, we find a valuable lesson about Jesus’ learning from a Gentile woman in a Gentile place about human dignity. The connection between human dignity and poverty is mirrored in Matthew’s gospel, where dire poverty can crush one’s spirit. This woman, enduring constant humiliation due to poverty, asserted her dignity and asked for help. Having realised this Jesus restores her self-worth. He also challenged the unjust system where the food grown by the poor should not feed the rich. Therefore, just as Jesus upheld the dignity of the oppressed and addressed an unjust system, we are called to uphold the cause of indigenous peoples who have faced spirit-crushing humiliation and injustice.

FOR REFLECTION

How can we actively support those working on indigenous issues when we are not directly involved? And how can we learn from indigenous peoples and their experiences?

PRAYER

O Sacred One, we humbly come before you seeking forgiveness for our long history of dishonoring the lives of indigenous people. We recognise that the path to restitution lies in learning from and supporting indigenous peoples. We are committed to pursuing acts of justice, so that we may no longer value one human life over another. As you are a life-giving God, grant us the strength to work toward the collective upliftment of those broken in spirit. Amen.



Oppressed Land

Scripture: *How long will the land lie parched and the grass in every field be withered? Because those who live in it are wicked, the animals and birds have perished. Moreover, the people are saying, "He will not see what happens to us." ~ Jeremiah 12:14*

My grandpa's house was in a war zone in Batticaloa (Sri Lanka). It was a green eco-farm, with a vegetable and fruits garden. It was heaven when I was a child. After many years, I was able to visit there in 2011 after the end of the genocidal war. When I visited there the place was chaotic, the piece of land was full of broken building crumbs, used militant parts, and human wastages. It was messy and polluted. Eventually, I started to clean the piece of the land. I removed all the building crumbs, militant wastages, and other rubbish. It took nearly one week for me to bring it as clean land and I also spent a sum of money from my wages. For me, it was not just a cleaning process, rather a liberating process from the hand of human oppression.

After a few months, I visited there again; it was amazing, full of the glory of God, heavenly feelings. After the cleaning, grasses and bushes started to grow and flourished colorfully. Also I noticed some bees, butterflies, and birds enjoyed their life. I understand that the land should be liberated from human conflict and human occupations. From that day, I have been hearing the cry of the land in my context. Most of the land is being militarized, industrialized, capitalized, and made inorganic.

In the name of development, economic growth, national security, civilization and religion, many parts of the land have been forcibly occupied, destroyed and made toxic. There are the violent behaviors and attitudes of human beings; we are violating God's given responsibility, doing sin against God's purpose and its creation. As the book of Job says, "My land has cried out against me" (Job 31:38), nowadays the land is crying out against us, because, in the ground we remove its plants, mining its resources and killing its biodiversity. Furthermore, in the name of religion, race, caste and culture, we make the natural land a battlefield, throwing hazardous bombs and chemicals.

Let us mediate the following prophecy; "How long will the **land mourn**, and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who live in it the animals and the birds are swept away, and because people said, 'He is blind to our ways.'" (Jeremiah 12:4).

Let us realize our wickedness that violates God's purpose and kills the land through our lifestyle. Now, we are called to liberate the land which is mourned and crying out.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, we thank you for giving us the most valuable earth and all in it. All the soils, plants, animals and rocks are part of our community life. Please help us to understand it and open our eyes and mind to see your glorious presence among them. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.



Training Up Children in the Way of the Lord

Scripture: *The Word of the Lord says, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” ~ Prov. 22:6*

According to the Indigenous custom and deep belief that a mother keeps a handful of rice in the pot at every cooking, mothers usually take this rice to give as an offering in the Sunday service. One hand takes a of handful rice, and the other hand holds her son or daughter forward to give offering to the altar. She is very thankful to God. She believes that by the grace of God, she got children. This is the vital great offering of Mother to the God, an offering accepted by Him.

Children are gifted by God to the family. It's Bible-based faith. Psalms 127:3 says, the family is the centre of education. The biggest university is family in the world and teachers are parents and other family members. Social science says that children acquire knowledge from 1 to 6 years—knowledge that will lead them all their lives. Parents teach children academic education and also spiritual-moral teachings. Mother teaches her children how to behave with others and what they can do or not. So family is the foundation to give teaching for the children.

As a church, we should give pastoral nurture to families, and ensure Sunday school programs for children. From the Sunday school, children build their strong faith and knowledge about God. It's proven that, when families are prayerful to God and children are involved in their Sunday school programs, they do not fall into troubles or spoil. In the future, they will lead the church.

There are presently challenges in our families and societies: parents are very busy in their jobs, their businesses and their social networks. They have no time for their children. We know that parents have no time to go to church or church activities. Children are very busy with their studies, careers and other business. On the other side, where I am working as a priest among a tribal area, most people are very poor and struggling with the poverty. They keep their children at home and they to work very early in the morning, and come back home in the dusk. So, these children face risks. Here we can pay attention to the children, and we have to plan for children. Otherwise, they will go far away from our society and church.

As we are the household of God's family, we should take care each other, help each other, and extend our helping hand for the children so that they can grow up properly in the way of the Lord. God wants that, as parents and as church leaders, our main duty is to give children rights. It means to ensure them a family life, their happiest environment where they can use their talent, and also ensure Christian education and moral education.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we praise you and thank you for our children whom you have given us in our family and in the church. Show us the way we ought to walk. You give us your wisdom so that we can ensure their rights of the way of the Lord. Enable us to understand the value of their lives and also understand your purpose in our life. In Jesus name we pray. Amen!



Living Hope: Anchored in the Unfailing Promises of Christ

Scripture: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*
~ 1 Peter 1:3

The concept of 'hope' is as ancient as humanity. Every civilization, every culture, and every individual has grappled with hopes – some fleeting, some lasting, but none as enduring as the Living Hope we find in Christ.

The Magi in the Gospel of Matthew, who we remember during the Feast of Epiphany, embarked on a journey fueled by hope. The Star of Bethlehem wasn't just a guiding light for them; it was a beacon of hope pointing to the Living Hope for all of humanity.

1. A Hope Rooted in God's Love. The very birth of Jesus was a testament to God's immense love for all of humanity. This was not a love restricted to one nation, race, or group, but it was (and is) a universal love. The Magi, Gentiles from the East, were the first testament to this. Their journey to the manger symbolized that the good news of Jesus Christ was meant for all. This inclusivity of God's love is the foundation of our Living Hope.

- 2. Living Hope vs. Worldly Hopes.** Our world is full of transient hopes. We hope for good health, success, peace, and happiness. Yet, all these are temporary and can falter. The Living Hope we have in Jesus is unwavering. It's not based on our circumstances or abilities, but on Christ's resurrection. Our Savior conquered death, and this victory assures us that our hope in Him is not in vain.
- 3. The Calling to Share the Living Hope.** If the Magi symbolized the universality of God's promise, we are now the bearers of this message. We are called to share the Living Hope we have in Christ. This is not merely about verbal proclamation but living out this hope in our daily lives. When we stand for justice, love unconditionally, and serve selflessly, we become living testimonies of the hope Christ offers.
- 4. Creation's Cry for Living Hope.** Paul's letter to the Romans highlights that all of creation is yearning for the redemption that comes in Christ (Romans 8:21-23). Our mission extends beyond humanity. It's about restoring the entirety of creation back to its original design. Every tree, bird, and river is a testament to God's glory, and they too await the fullness of God's promise.
- 5. Our Anchor in Stormy Seas.** Life is unpredictable. There are moments of joy, and there are seasons of despair. In the midst of life's tumultuous waves, the Living Hope we have in Christ becomes our anchor. It keeps us grounded, ensuring that we are not swayed by the fleeting trials of this world.

FOR REFLECTION

How can you be a beacon of Living Hope in your community? How does the promise of Christ shape your understanding of hope?

PRAYER

Everlasting God, thank You for the gift of Living Hope through Christ. May our hearts always find solace in Your promises, and may our lives radiate this hope to every corner of the Earth. Strengthen us to be bearers of this good news, not just in word but in deed. Amen.



Celebrating the *Imago Dei*: Challenging Racism

Scripture: *So God created mankind in his own image in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ~ Genesis 1:27*

According to Genesis 1:27, humanity is created in the image of God. Revelation 7:9a challenges the idea that only some are worthy of God's recognition. It reads: *"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages [...]"* (ESV). Such passages refer to all humans as bearers of God's image. This message is distorted and lost when human dignity and worth is undermined by racism. Racism distorts and contradicts the essence of the declaration in Genesis 1:27 that we are all made in the image of God (*imago Dei*).

Racism emerged around the 1400s as a socially constructed, human classification system that exerts power to distinguish one group of people from another based on phenotypic characteristics. In such a historical context, "racism exists when one ethnic group or historical collectivity dominates, excludes, or seeks to eliminate another on the basis of differences that it believes are hereditary and unalterable" (George M. Fredrickson). Racism built on older systems that used social, religious, political, economic, and cultural factors to legitimise the dominance of one people over another.

Racism, as a system of human classification, was developed to help explain and justify the claims of those considered to be the "superior" races. Some well-known examples of how racism

has directly influenced domination and oppression are chattel slavery, colonisation, segregation, and apartheid. Racism continues to cause harm by subjecting people to hatred, injustice, poverty, torture, and marginalisation.

In the absence of evidence for a natural racial hierarchy, proponents of racism have appealed to pseudo-science, philosophy, and the Bible for support. However, as far as the Bible is concerned, racism has only developed in the last 500 years or so, making it a younger phenomenon than Christianity, which emerged in 1 CE. This makes it impossible to validate racism on Biblical grounds. However, the Bible does contain passages that can be seen as providing some of the building blocks of racism. In particular, the idea that some are "chosen", "blessed" and "elected" over others. It is also important to consider the role that interpretations of passages such as Genesis 9 (the curse of Ham) have played in promoting ideas of a God-ordained racial hierarchy. In light of such passages, it is worthwhile to consider how the first Christians practised their faith in a diverse world. Some questions to consider include:

Was there a skin-color hierarchy in the early church?

Did the early church teach that some groups were destined to rule over others based on their skin colour?

Did the early church believe that Jesus taught that there was an inherent hierarchy among His Kingdom's members; and if so, was this hierarchy based on race?

Exploring such questions can help us better understand the impact of racism. Interrogating and combating racism helps to highlight its harmful effects and promote a society in which all people are seen as God's image bearers deserving of dignity, love, and justice.

May we all do our part in working towards a world in which we embrace diversity, respect differences, and advocate for just, equitable societies where everyone thrives.

FOR REFLECTION

What are we doing to combat racism within our communities and beyond?

PRAYER

God in whose image we are created, restore to us we pray, all that we have lost because of racism.



Breaking the Chains: The Call to Liberation

Scripture: *The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners. ~ Isaiah 61:1*

Throughout biblical history, a recurrent theme is that of liberation. From the Israelites' exodus from Egypt to the oppressed finding hope in Jesus' teachings, God has always stood as a beacon of freedom. Today, as we stand against gender-based violence during these 16 days of activism, we see the urgent need for another kind of liberation.

1. The Divine Heart for Liberation

The heart of God is one that yearns to set captives free. Jesus, in His earthly ministry, echoed this sentiment, emphasizing spiritual and physical freedom. When gender-based violence holds someone captive, it's a direct affront to this divine intent. The Lord's call is clear: bring freedom to the oppressed.

2. The Dual Liberation

The liberation God seeks is two-pronged: a) For the victims: Freedom from pain, trauma, and the chains that bind them. b) For the perpetrators: Freedom from the vicious cycle of violence, guilt, and societal constraints. Our role as God's vessels is to facilitate this dual liberation, offering healing, understanding, and transformation.

3. Our Role in This Liberation

To stand by silently is to be complicit. We must be the hands and feet of Christ, actively working to dismantle the systems, structures, and attitudes that perpetuate gender-based violence. By fostering awareness, extending support, and advocating for change, we play our part in God's grand narrative of freedom.

Action Steps

- Dedicate time to educate yourself on the root causes of gender-based violence.
- Collaborate with or support organizations tirelessly working to break these chains.
- Encourage dialogues within your community to challenge and change harmful norms and beliefs.

Conclusion

We are God's instruments of liberation in a world still rife with chains. As we echo the heart of God, may we be relentless in our pursuit of justice, healing, and transformation. In every word we speak and every action we take, may the resonating theme be one of true liberation.

FOR REFLECTION

Reflect on the chains that still exist in our society. What personal steps can you take this week to contribute to the narrative of liberation?

PRAYER

Sovereign Lord, You who broke the mightiest chains and set the captives free, guide us in this mission. Fill us with Your spirit of compassion, strength, and justice. As we walk this path, may our steps be firm, our resolve unshakable, and our hearts ever aligned with Yours. Amen.



Empathy and Action: “Walking in Their Shoes”

Scripture: Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ~ Romans 12:15

The ministry of Jesus Christ on Earth was not only about profound teachings but also about profound relationships. He saw individuals, recognized their pain, and responded with both empathy and action. As we mark the closing days of the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, let us deeply contemplate what it truly means to walk in the shoes of another, and how this understanding can motivate genuine change.

1. The Depth of Empathy

Empathy goes beyond mere understanding; it is about deeply feeling the emotions of another. Jesus displayed this when He wept at the death of Lazarus or when He felt compassion for the multitudes. In the face of gender-based violence, our call isn't just to understand the statistics but to genuinely feel the pain of every individual story.

2. The Transformative Power of Genuine Care

Stories of gender-based violence are not just news bulletins; they are real experiences of real individuals. When we allow ourselves to be touched by these narratives, it prompts a transformative action within us. It is this genuine care that can be a catalyst for systemic change.

3. Merging Empathy with Action

Empathy without action is incomplete. Once we've stepped into the shoes of the oppressed, we must also be willing to walk the path of justice and advocacy. Our faith, deeply rooted in the actions of a compassionate Savior, calls us to be bearers of both comfort and change.

Action Steps

- Spend time listening to and sharing stories of those affected by gender-based violence.
- Advocate for policy changes and support initiatives that aim to eradicate such violence.
- Build a culture of respect and equality in your own spheres of influence.

Conclusion

Empathy is not passive; it's a powerful force of connection, understanding, and eventual transformation. As members of Christ's body, may we continually strive to intertwine our empathetic hearts with hands that actively work towards a world free from violence and oppression.

FOR REFLECTION

Consider the moments when someone showed genuine empathy towards you. How did it make you feel? How can you extend that same understanding and care to others, especially the marginalized and oppressed?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, grant us hearts that truly feel and hands that actively work. Let our empathy not be fleeting emotion but a driver of tangible change. As we stand against gender-based violence, guide our steps, amplify our voices, and use us as instruments of Your peace and justice. Amen.



Bearing the Image: Affirming the Dignity of Every Individual

Scripture: *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ~ Genesis 1:27*

In the breathtaking vastness of creation, with its galaxies, stars, and endless wonders, God placed a unique mark on earth – humanity. Each one of us, irrespective of gender, age, race, or creed, bears an indelible imprint: the image of God. This divine characteristic sets us apart and grants every individual an inherent dignity and worth. As we navigate the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, this truth becomes central to our conversation.

1. Understanding the Divine Imprint

Before the mountains were formed, before the oceans were filled, God had a design - a design where His image would be mirrored in every individual. This isn't just a theological concept but a profound truth. Our value isn't determined by societal norms, roles, or hierarchies, but by this divine image.

2. The Affront of Gender-Based Violence

When acts of violence, especially those rooted in gender, are perpetuated, it's not just a crime against the individual, but an affront to the Creator Himself. The very act of violence diminishes and distorts the divine image within the person. By standing against gender-based violence, we're not just advocating for human rights but reaffirming God's design.

3. Restoring God's Design Through Action

The 16 days of activism challenge us not to be passive listeners but active changemakers. We are called to rise above cultural and societal norms and stand firmly on the foundation of God's Word. When we do so, we don't just fight against a societal issue, but we work towards restoring God's original design of harmony, respect, and love.

Action Steps

- Engage in open dialogues about the value of every individual in the eyes of God.
- Extend support, whether emotional, financial, or logistical, to victims of gender-based violence.
- Foster an environment of respect, equality, and love in our homes, churches, and communities.

As believers in a world marred by violence and inequality, our response must be firm and rooted in God's truth. We must recognize the inherent value in every individual and take tangible steps to affirm and protect that value.

FOR REFLECTION

In your daily interactions, how can you actively affirm the inherent dignity and worth of those around you? How can you be a beacon of God's love and respect in a world that often forgets its divine image?

PRAYER

Lord, in this season of activism, let our eyes be opened to the value You've placed in each one of us. Grant us the wisdom, courage, and strength to stand against any form of injustice and violence. As we move forward, may our actions reflect Your heart, and may Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.



Hopeful Anticipation

Scripture: *The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. ~ Isaiah 9:2*

As we draw near to the celebration of the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, we are reminded of the profound anticipation that the season of Advent brings. It is a time of waiting, a time of hope, and a time of preparation for the coming of the Light of the World.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of a people walking in darkness who would see a great light. This was a prophecy given during a time of despair, uncertainty, and gloom. Yet, amidst that darkness, there was a promise of hope, a promise of a coming light that would change everything.

This imagery of darkness and light is powerful. It speaks to the human condition. We all have moments, or even extended periods, of darkness in our lives. Times of doubt, of despair, of feeling lost or overwhelmed. And yet, the message of Christmas, the heart of the Advent season, is that into that very darkness, the light of Christ will shine.

The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem was not marked by grandeur or spectacle. It took place in humble surroundings, in a stable, amidst animals. It was a quiet, simple event, yet it was the

moment that changed the course of history. The Light had come into the world.

In the same way, Christ's light often enters our lives not with loud fanfare but in quiet, unexpected moments. It can be a kind word from a stranger, a scripture verse that speaks directly to our situation, or a moment of prayer where we feel God's comforting presence.

The question that Advent poses to us is: Are we prepared to receive that light? Are our hearts open and ready to welcome the Christ child afresh into our lives?

In the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, with its gifts, decorations, and festive meals, it is easy to lose sight of the true meaning of this time. The lights we see on trees and houses are beautiful, but they pale in comparison to the true Light that comes to dwell among us.

As we anticipate the celebration of Christ's birth, let us remember to make room in our hearts for Him. Let us seek His light in the midst of our own darkness and share that light with others.

FOR REFLECTION

In what ways can we be bearers of Christ's light to others during this Christmas season?

PRAYER

Eternal God, in this season of waiting and anticipation, help us to be ever mindful of the true Light that is coming into the world. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ, fill our hearts with hope, joy, and love. May we not only receive your light but be bearers of that light to all we meet. Amen.



Preparing the Way

Scripture: *A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." ~ Isaiah 40:3*

When talking about preparing the way, we are directly compelled to think about the call in Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark:1:1-8. This chapter in Isaiah treats of the comforts of God's people; of the forerunner and coming of the Messiah, which is in line with the chapter in Mark, talking about John the Baptist calling the people from wilderness, from the desert. The desert, that empty, unconnected place, often frightening, sometimes fascinating, as if to lose oneself in it. For the desert is a place without paths, without landmarks, a place of wandering. The people of Israel wandered there for 40 years, experiencing every possible doubt. In the desert, they rebelled, but also recognized their poor, sinful condition. The desert is like a waiting place. But waiting for what, if not for an encounter, for humanity? Nowadays, the call is not addressed in the desert but the context is similar. It is spoken to a place where hope is frail, many people are in despair and living is scarce.

If we read the newspapers or listen to the news on a regular basis, it won't be hard to see how many stories of violence and scandal surround us. Every day we hear of countless murders, robberies, sexual assaults, scandals involving our rulers, multiple demands with an attitude of

violence and contempt. The latest murder of the week, or the latest incest crime in town, are laid out before us with lengthy explanations. Many of these detailed descriptions would never have been uttered or even imagined by our grandmothers. But today, everyone, including our children, has free access to all this information. We feed on it, we live on this perpetual climate of aggression and this affects our lives.

Some parts of the world are at war while some others are facing famine or other calamities. The fact remains that we live in oppression. Our society is trapped in a form of slavery from which it is quite incapable of freeing itself, and which manifests itself in a wide variety of forms. The problem is not simply violence against women, disdain for the elderly or injustice towards this or that group of employees. It's about an oppression of a much deeper and more encompassing spiritual nature, which has existed since the fall of our first parents, and whose instigator is the devil himself. He exercises his cruel domination because of man's sin.

However, the Church of God is encouraged to expect renewed strength and persevering grace, and is blamed for giving way to a distrustful and murmuring spirit, Isa 40:26-31. Now the call is addressed to the church: Comfort my people, seek the lost sheep of Israel and tell them I am coming soon to bring peace and salvation. This is a call for evangelization. The Church then should not remain silent in such a context.



Embracing the Overflowing Love of God

Scripture: *We love because he first loved us. ~ 1 John 4:19*

In the grand tapestry of life, there exists a divine thread that weaves through every moment, connecting us to a love greater than we can fathom – God’s love. It’s a love that flows from the very heart of our Creator, an overflowing river of grace and compassion that has no end.

1 John 4:19 succinctly reminds us of the beautiful truth that underlies our ability to love. We love because God first loved us. This verse encapsulates the essence of our faith journey, the foundation of our relationship with the Divine.

Imagine a child who learns to love by experiencing the unconditional love of their parents. In a similar way, we learn to love one another by basking in the vast love God has poured upon us. It’s a love that has been present from the very beginning, even before we could comprehend it.

The scripture given above presents a beautiful analogy for the relationship between God’s love and our capacity to love. It’s like a lamp that is lit by the sun. Just as a lamp can only shine when it is first illuminated by the sun’s rays, our ability to love others is ignited and sustained by the radiant love of God. Without the sun, the lamp remains in darkness, but when it is exposed to the sun’s light, it becomes a source of warmth and illumination for others. Similarly, it is through experiencing God’s love that we are empowered to love others in a way that reflects His divine light and warmth.

God’s love isn’t just a distant concept; it’s an ever-present reality. It’s the reason behind every sunrise that paints the sky with vibrant hues, the laughter of children at play, and the comforting embrace of a friend in times of need.

So, how do we embrace this overflowing love daily? It begins with recognizing the love that surrounds us. Take a moment to reflect on the countless ways God has shown His love in your life, both big and small. Gratitude is the gateway to understanding the depth of His love. Furthermore, let 1 John 4:19 guide your interactions with others. When we grasp the truth that we love because God first loved us, our capacity to love becomes boundless. Reach out to those around you with a love that mirrors God’s own love, a love that is forgiving, patient, and unwavering.

FOR REFLECTION

How can you demonstrate God’s overflowing love in a specific way today, both in your actions and in your interactions with others?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we are humbled by the depth of your love, a love that transcends our understanding. Help us to be mindful of your love in every moment, and may it inspire us to love others as you have loved us. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.



The Hope of Advent

Scripture: *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ~ Isaiah 9:6*

Christmas is not just a time of festivity and celebration; it is a season that embodies the very essence of hopeful anticipation. At the heart of this season is a world waiting, yearning for a Savior, and the promises that His coming holds.

Imagine the world before the birth of Christ. A world in spiritual darkness, waiting for the prophesied Messiah. The prophets had spoken, promises had been made, and a nation held its breath, anticipating the dawn of salvation. That anticipation was not of mere passive waiting but of active preparation.

Mary, a young woman, would find herself at the epicenter of this divine plan. When given the news of her role in this salvation story, she responded with faith and expectancy. Similarly, Joseph, faced with circumstances beyond human comprehension, chose to trust in God's purpose and plan.

Now, take a moment to reflect on the shepherds. These were humble men, tending to their flocks, when suddenly, the heavens erupted in praise, heralding the birth of the Savior. They could have simply marveled at the celestial proclamation, but they didn't. They actively sought out the Christ Child, drawn by hopeful anticipation.

Christmas invites us to rekindle this spirit of hopeful anticipation in our own lives. As we commemorate the birth of Jesus, we are also reminded of His promise to return. Just as the world waited for the Messiah's first advent, we now await His second.

This hopeful anticipation isn't merely about looking to the future; it's about living in the present with purpose and faith. It's about seeing the needs of those around us and becoming bearers of hope. It's about sharing the love of Christ, the reason for the season, with those who might be lost in the shadows.

FOR REFLECTION

How can you live in hopeful anticipation this Christmas season? How can you be a bearer of hope to those around you, reflecting the promise and love of the Christ Child?

PRAYER

Gracious Father, as we celebrate the birth of Your Son, Jesus Christ, fill our hearts with the same hopeful anticipation that filled those who awaited His first coming. Let our lives be illuminated by the hope of Christ, and may we actively share that hope with a world in need. As we remember the baby in Bethlehem, let us also live in eager expectation of Christ's triumphant return. Amen.



Redemptive Love: The Heart of the Christmas Message

Scripture: *In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ~ 1 John 4:10*

Christmas is more than the twinkling lights, carols, and gifts exchanged. At its core, Christmas is a story of profound love, a narrative of God's redemptive plan for mankind. This is the season where love took on human form, descending from the grandeur of heaven to the manger of Bethlehem.

Before the birth of Christ, the world was entangled in the chains of sin, desperately needing a Redeemer. Prophets spoke of a coming King, One who would break these chains and set the captives free. Hearts ached for this promised redemption, seeking a beacon of hope amidst the looming darkness.

Enter Mary and Joseph. Two ordinary individuals, chosen to play extraordinary roles in this divine love story. Mary, chosen to carry the Savior, responded with a heart full of gratitude and love, echoing, "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word." Joseph, in the face of societal judgment, chose to stand by Mary, demonstrating love's sacrifice and commitment.

Consider the Magi from the East. These wise men, led by a star, embarked on a journey filled with uncertainty. Their quest wasn't for gold or fame but to honor the King of Kings, a testament to the magnetic power of divine love.

Christmas challenges us to reflect on this boundless love in our lives. It's a reminder that just as God took the first step in love towards us, we are called to step out in love towards others. As we celebrate Jesus, the embodiment of love, we anticipate His promised return, where love will reign supreme.

Redemptive love isn't just about understanding God's sacrifice; it's about replicating that love in our actions. It's about reaching out to the broken, the lost, and the hurting, offering them the same love that was once extended to us.

FOR REFLECTION

How can you reflect God's redemptive love this Christmas? How can you extend a hand of love to someone in need, mirroring the gift given to us through Jesus?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, as we bask in the joy of Christmas, let us never forget the magnitude of Your love. May the birth of Your Son, Jesus, be a constant reminder of the lengths You went to redeem us. As we rejoice in the gift of salvation, empower us to be agents of Your love, touching lives and making a difference. As we remember the Savior in the manger, may we eagerly await His glorious return, where love will be the anthem of eternity. Amen.



Embracing Transitions: Stepping Into the New with Courage

Scripture: *Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. ~ Isaiah 43:18-19*

The end of the year is a time of reflection, of looking back at the journey traveled and forward to the path yet to be treaded. It's a moment where past meets the future, and we stand at the cusp of transition. This Sunday, as we bid farewell to 2024, let's embrace this transition, understanding that with every ending comes the promise of a new beginning.

Reflect on the world before the dawning of a new year. There's a mixture of nostalgia, the weight of lessons learned, gratitude for blessings received, and perhaps even regret for opportunities missed. But in this reflection lies the promise of the prophets: a God who is doing a new thing, one that springs forth even in unexpected places.

Think of Sarah and Abraham, called to a new land in their advanced age. With doubt and uncertainty, they stepped forward, trusting in God's promise of making them a great nation. Their story wasn't just of movement but of transformation - from barrenness to abundance.

Consider the disciples. They left everything behind to follow Jesus, stepping into the unknown. Their transition wasn't just geographical but spiritual, moving from mere fishermen to fishers of men.

As we stand on the brink of 2025, let's be inspired by these biblical heroes. Let's embrace the transitions in our own lives, knowing that they are orchestrated by a God who turns wastelands into rivers of joy.

Transition isn't just about the change of dates or switching calendars; it's about personal growth, about shedding the old to make room for the new. It's about trusting in God's plan, even when the future seems uncertain, and stepping into the new year with courage, faith, and expectation.

FOR REFLECTION

How can you navigate transitions with faith and grace? As you step into 2025, what old habits or mindsets do you need to let go of to embrace the newness God has in store?

PRAYER

Almighty God, as we close the chapter of 2024, we thank You for Your faithfulness through every season. As we stand at the threshold of a new year, fill our hearts with hope and expectation. May we embrace the transitions in our lives, confident in Your promise of doing a new thing in and through us. Guide our steps in 2025, and may we walk in alignment with Your perfect will. Amen.

