

COMMENTARIES on the Bible readings

Walking in conversation

DAY 1

Readings

Genesis 11: 1-9	The story of Babel and legacy of our diversity
Psalms 34: 11-18	"Come...listen". God's invitation to conversation
Acts 2: 1-12	The outpouring of the Spirit, the gift of understanding
Luke 24: 13-25	Conversation with the Risen Jesus on the road

Commentary

To walk humbly with God is to walk as people speaking with one another, and with the Lord, always attentive to what we hear. And so we begin our celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity by reflecting on scripture passages which speak of the essential practice of conversation. Conversation has been central to the ecumenical movement, as it opens up spaces for learning from each other, sharing what we have in common, and for differences to be heard and better understood. In this way mutual understanding is developed. Meaningful conversation and active listening are part of our basic call to respond to what God requires of us: doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly.

The story of the tower of Babel describes how, where there is no language barrier, great things are possible. However, the story tells how this potential is grasped as a basis for self-promotion. "Let us make a name for ourselves ..." is the motivation for the building of the great city. In the end this project leads to a confusion of speech. After Babel we must learn our proper humanity through patient attentiveness to the other who is strange to us. It is with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost that understanding across difference is made possible in a new way, through the power of Jesus' resurrection. Now we are invited to share the gift of speech and listening orientated toward the Lord, towards freedom. We are called to walk in the Spirit.

The experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is a conversation taking place in a context of travel together, but also of loss and disappointed hope. As churches living with levels of disunity, and as societies divided by prejudices and fear of the other, we can recognise ourselves here. Yet it is precisely here that Jesus chooses to join the conversation - not presuming the superior role of teacher, but walking alongside his disciples, the power of his word burning within them. It is his desire to be a part of our conversations, and our response of wanting him to stay and speak more with us, that enables a living encounter with the Risen Lord. This resurrection experience calls us into a deeper unity in Christ. Active conversation with one another and with Jesus keeps us walking together towards unity.

DAY 2

Walking with brokenness

Readings

Genesis 32: 22-32	Wrestling Jacob limps away
Psalms 22: 1-8	God's servant, mocked and insulted, cries out to God
Hebrews 13: 12-16	The call to go to Jesus "outside the camp"
Luke 22: 14-23	Jesus breaks the bread, giving the gift of himself before his suffering

Commentary

To walk humbly with God means hearing the call for us to walk out of the places of our own comfort, and accompany the other, especially the suffering other.

Jacob, having tricked his brother out of his birthright, has to face up to him again. Crossing the border into Esau's land he wrestles with an unknown opponent (God? an angel? his own conscience?) and hobbles away crushed. In India, it is the 'crushed' people of the Dalit communities whose lives speak vividly of this suffering - a suffering in which Christ, the crucified one, shares. With limping people of every time and place, Jesus cries out to the Father: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Christians are called into this way of the cross. The Epistle to the Hebrews makes clear not only the saving reality of Jesus' suffering, in the place of the margins, but also the need for his disciples to go 'outside the camp' to join him there. When we meet those who have been excluded, like the Dalits, and recognise the crucified one in their sufferings, the direction we should be going is clear. To be with Christ means to be in solidarity with those on the margins whose wounds he shares.

The body of Christ, broken on the cross, is "broken for you". The story of Christ's suffering and death is prefaced by the story of the last supper: it is then celebrated as victory over death in every Eucharist. In this Christian celebration, Christ's broken body is his risen and glorious body; his body is broken so that we can share his life and, in him, be one body.

For Christians walking with brokenness on the way to unity, the Eucharist is where the scandal of our disunity is painfully real. Today's readings suggest that walking with Christ's broken body opens up a way to be eucharistic together: to share our bread with the hungry, to break down the barriers of poverty and inequality. These, too, are "eucharistic acts", in which all Christians are called to work together. Pope Benedict XVI says that the Eucharist is a sacrament not only to be believed in and celebrated, but also to be lived. In the Orthodox understanding of "the liturgy after the liturgy" it is recognised that there is "nothing authentically human" that does not find its pattern and life in the Eucharist.

Walking towards freedom

DAY 3

Readings

Exodus 1: 15-22	The Hebrew midwives obey God's law over Pharaoh's commands
Psalms 17: 1-6	The confident prayer of one open to God's gaze
2 Cor. 3: 17-18	The glorious freedom of God's children in Christ
John 4: 4-26	Talking with Jesus leads the Samaritan woman into freer living

Commentary

Walking humbly with the Lord is always walking towards the freedom of all people. With this in mind we embrace the struggle for freedom, which takes place even where oppression, prejudice and poverty seem relentless. The resolute refusal to accept inhuman commands and conditions - like those given by Pharaoh to the midwives of the enslaved Hebrew people - can seem like small actions, but they are often steps towards freedom, being taken in local communities everywhere. So we affirm all steps towards dignity, social inclusion, and a proper share in all that is good, as seen in the Dalit communities. Such journeying towards fuller living offers a gift of Gospel hope to all people caught up, in different ways, in patterns of inequality across the globe.

The step by step journey into freedom from unjust discrimination and practices of prejudice is illustrated by the story of Jesus' meeting at the well with the Samaritan woman. She questions the prejudices which confront her, as well as seeking ways of alleviating the practical burdens of her life. These concerns are the starting place for her dialogue with Jesus, who engages her in conversation about both his need for her practical help (he is thirsty) and the social prejudices which make this a problem.

Bit by bit the way to a greater freedom is opened up before the woman, as she sees the complexities of her life more clearly in the light of Jesus' words. In the end these personal insights return the conversation to a place where what visibly divided the two of them was transcended. "Worship in spirit and in truth" is what is required to be free from all that holds us back from life together, living it to the full.

To be called into greater freedom in Christ is a calling to step outside our comfort zone. Those things which separate us - both as Christians searching for unity and as people kept apart by unjust traditions and inequalities - keep us captive, hidden from one another. Our freedom in Christ is characterised, rather, by that new life in the Spirit which enables us, together, to stand before Christ "with unveiled faces". It is in this glorious light that we learn to see each other more truly, as we grow in Christ's likeness towards the fullness of Christian unity.

DAY 4

Walking as children of the earth

Readings

Lev. 25: 8-17	The land is for the common good, not personal gain
Psalms 65: 5b-13	The fruitful outpouring of God's grace on the earth
Romans 8: 18-25	The longing of all creation for redemption
John 9: 1-11	Jesus' healing, mud, bodies and water

Commentary

Walking in humility with God, we always need to be aware of ourselves as part of creation and recipients of God's gifts. Among Christians there is a growing awareness of the ways in which ecological concern is a part of 'walking humbly with God', the Creator, for all we have is given by God in his creation and so is not 'ours' to do with as we wish. For this reason Christians are called to observe a Time for Creation each year, from 1 September to 4 October, 'dedicated to prayer for the protection of Creation and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles'.

The Christian story of redemption for all creation is creation's own story. All Christians gather around the belief that in Jesus, God becomes a human person, in a particular place and time. This shared belief in the Incarnation carries with it a profound recognition of the importance of creation - of bodies, food, earth, water, and all that feeds our life as people on the planet. Jesus is fully part of this world. It may surprise us to hear how Jesus healed using his spittle and the dust from the earth; but it is true to this real sense of the created world as integral to God's bringing us to new life.

Across the world the earth is often worked by the poorest people, who frequently do not themselves share in the fruitfulness that results; such is the experience of many Dalits in India. At the same time it is these communities who have a particular care for the earth, and their practical wisdom of working the land is shown forth in their labours.

Care of the earth includes basic questions of how human beings are to live within creation, in ways which are more fully human for all. That the earth - its working and ownership - should so often be a source of economic inequalities and degrading work practices is a cause for great concern and action for Christians together. These dangers of exploitation with regard to the earth are referred to in Leviticus' instructions concerning the Year of Jubilee: the land and its fruits are not given to be an opportunity for "taking advantage of one another" but rather the working of the land is to be for the benefit of all. This is not just a "religious idea"; it is tied to very real economic and business practices concerning how the land is managed, bought and sold.

Walking as the friends of Jesus

DAY 5

Readings

Song of Solomon 1: 5-8	Love and the beloved
Psalms 139: 1-6	You have searched me out and known me
3 John: 2-8	Hospitality to friends in Christ
John 15: 12-17	I call you friends

Commentary

To walk humbly with God does not mean walking alone. It means walking with those who are the vital signs of God's presence among us, our friends. "But I have called you friends" says Jesus in John's Gospel. Within the freedom of love, we are able to choose our friends, and to be chosen as a friend. "You did not choose me, but I chose you" Jesus says to each of us. Jesus' friendship with each of us transfigures and transcends our relationships with family and society. It speaks of God's deep and abiding love for us all. It is a friendship we can never earn or deserve but only receive as a gift.

The Bible's love poem, the Song of Solomon, has been interpreted in various ways, such as the love of God for Israel, or the love Christ for the Church. It remains the testimony of passion between lovers which transcends the imposed boundaries of society. While the lover says to her beloved "I am black and beautiful", her words come with the plea "do not gaze at me because I am dark." But the lover does gaze, and chooses love, as does God in Christ. Dalits know that when God gazes upon them it is with this same passionate love. When Christ says to Dalits "I have called you friends" it is a form of liberation from the inhumanity and injustice inflicted upon them by the caste system. In India today, it is a costly response for a Dalit to become a friend of Jesus.

What does the Lord require of those called to walk with Jesus and his friends? In India it is a call to the churches to embrace the Dalits as equal friends of their common friend. Such a call, to be friends with the friends of Jesus, is another way of understanding the unity of Christians for which we pray this week. Christians around the world are called to be friends with all those who struggle against discrimination and injustice.

When we meet Christians from other countries we may have little in common with them in race, language, culture or education, but there is a transcendent bond between us because we are friends of Christ. This is one understanding of the 'communion of saints'. The walk towards Christian unity requires that we walk humbly with God with - and as - the friends of Jesus.

DAY 6

Walking beyond barriers

Readings

Ruth 4: 13-18

The offspring of Ruth and Boaz

Psalm 113

God the helper of the needy

Ephesians 2: 13-16

Christ has broken down the dividing wall between us

Matthew 15: 21-28

Jesus and the Canaanite woman

Commentary

To walk humbly with God means walking beyond barriers that divide and damage the children of God. Christians in India are aware of the divisions amongst themselves. The treatment of Dalits within the churches and between them is a church-dividing issue that betrays the biblical vision of that unity for which we pray this week. St Paul lived with the devastating divisions in the earliest Christian community between Gentile and Jewish Christians. To this barrier and to every subsequent one, Paul proclaims that Christ “is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall between us.” Elsewhere Paul writes, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3.27-28). In Christ, all the deep barriers of the ancient world—and their modern successors—have been removed because on the Cross Jesus created in himself one new humanity.

In a world in which religious barriers are often difficult to cross, Christians who are a tiny minority in the multi-religious context of India remind us of the importance of interreligious dialogue and cooperation. Matthew’s Gospel tells of the difficult journey for Jesus—and his disciples—to cross the barriers of religion, culture and gender when he is confronted by a Canaanite woman who pleads with Jesus to cure her daughter. The disciples’ visceral instinct to send her away and Jesus’ own hesitation are overcome by her faith, and by her need. Jesus and his disciples were then able to cross the imposed human barriers and boundaries of the ancient world. Such barrier-crossing is also found in the Hebrew Bible. The book of Ruth, about a Moabite woman of a different culture and religion, concludes with a list of her offspring with the Israelite Boaz. Their child Obed was the father of Jesse, the father of David. The ancestry of the hero-King of ancient Israel reflects God’s will being fulfilled when people cross the barriers of religion and culture.

The walk with God today requires that we cross the barriers that separate Christians from one another and from people of other faiths. The walk towards Christian unity requires walking humbly with God beyond the barriers that separate us.

Walking in solidarity

DAY 7

Readings

Numbers 27: 1-11	The right of inheritance to daughters
Psalms 15	Who shall abide in God's sanctuary?
Acts 2: 43-47	The disciples held all things in common
Luke 10: 25-37	The Good Samaritan

Commentary

To walk humbly with God means walking in solidarity with all who struggle for justice and peace. This poses a question for those who pray for the unity of Christians this week: what is the unity we seek? The Faith and Order Commission, which includes the members of the World Council of Churches as well as the Roman Catholic Church, understands unity as “visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship.” The ecumenical movement is dedicated to overcome the historic and current barriers that divide Christians, but it does so with a vision of visible unity that links the nature and mission of the Church in the service of the unity of humankind and the overcoming of all that harms the dignity of human beings and keeps us apart.

‘The Church is called and empowered to share the suffering of all by advocacy and care for the poor, the needy and the marginalised. This entails critically analysing and exposing unjust structures, and working for their transformation... This faithful witness may involve Christians themselves in suffering for the sake of the Gospel.’ (Nature and Mission of the Church).

There are many examples of such acts of healing and reconciliation by the Indian churches. Until very recently, Christian inheritance laws in India disempowered daughters. The churches supported the demand for a repeal of this archaic law, invoking the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, in which Moses turned to God for justice in support of the rights of the daughters. Thus, Dalit Christians have been moved in their struggles for justice by such biblical witness. They have engaged with Dalits of other faiths and with secular networks and social movements in India and all over the world in their resistance to injustice. Dalits have been inspired in their struggle for justice by the examples of other social structures’ movements.

A biblical image of Church united in solidarity with the oppressed is Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan. Like the Dalits, the Good Samaritan, from a despised and outcast community, is the one in the story who cares for the man abandoned by the wayside, and who proclaims, by his solidarity in action, the hope and comfort of the Gospel. The walk towards Christian unity is inseparable from walking humbly with God in solidarity with any and all in need of justice and kindness.

DAY 8

Walking in celebration

Readings

Habakkuk 3: 17-19	Celebrating in a time of hardship
Psalms 100	The worship of God through all the earth
Philippians 4: 4-9	Rejoice in the Lord always
Luke 1: 46-55	The Song of Mary

Commentary

The visitor to India is struck by the hardships and struggles endured by Dalits but also by their sense of hope and celebration. There was a slum on railway land near Bangalore that was inhabited largely by Dalits and other migrant workers from Tamilnadu who came to build the original railways before Indian independence. After it was threatened with expulsion by the railway company in the early 1980s, the community - through its women's leadership - organized itself in such a way that it was able to find new land and build permanent housing for nearly a thousand people. The community of Dalits and others moved into their new homes in 2011, homes paid for by themselves. This is but one instance of struggle against injustice carried out with great hope, which calls for celebration.

Hope and celebration occur together in today's biblical readings. The prophet Habakkuk rejoices in the Lord at a time of drought and crop failure. Such testimony that God will walk with his people in their difficulties is a celebration of hope. The Blessed Virgin Mary walks to her cousin Elizabeth in order to celebrate her pregnancy. She sings her Magnificat as a song of hope even before the birth of her child. And from prison, Paul exhorts the Christian community at Philippi to celebrate: "Rejoice in the Lord always." In the Bible, celebration is linked to hope in God's faithfulness.

Praying for Christian unity this week we have turned to the celebration of life in India, focussing on the faithfulness of Dalits to their Christian identity in the context of their struggles for life. Our celebration of a unity amongst Christians which has yet to be achieved likewise occurs in hope and struggle. It is grounded in hope that Christ's prayer that we may be one will be achieved in God's time and through God's means. It is grounded in gratitude that unity is God's gift and, in recognition of the unity we already experience as the friends of Jesus, expressed in one baptism. It is grounded in the conviction that God calls each of us to work for that unity, and that all our efforts will be used by God, as we "in everything by prayer and thanksgiving let our requests be made known to God." The walk towards Christian unity requires that we walk humbly with God in celebration, in prayer, and in hope.