

Week of prayer for Christian unity 2005 Biblical reflections and prayers for the year 2005

Day 1 Called to spiritual maturity (1 Cor 3: 1-4)

Hos 2:21-23	I will say to Lo-ammi (not my people) "you are my people"
Ps 24	Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
Col 1:25-28	The mystery hidden throughout the ages
Jn 15:1-8	I am the vine, you are the branches

Commentary

In Saint Paul's letter to the Christian community of Corinth, a community for whom he had played an important role in laying the foundations of faith, Paul is eager to call the Corinthians to spiritual maturity. While celebrating the gifts God had bestowed on this community, he confronts them with the echoes of division which have been reported to him, as expressed in the conflicting slogans: *I am for Paul; I am for Apollos; I am for Cephas*. Paul responds with the evocative question: *Has Christ been divided?*

There is a Hebrew tradition, found in the Old Testament, of God giving a people a name, reflective of their spiritual state, in order to call them to fidelity or conversion. In an analogous manner, Paul names the Corinthians as *people of the flesh*, as *infants in Christ*, lamenting that for the moment he cannot address them as *spiritual people*. He identifies their preoccupation with allegiances as immature and not in keeping with the mind of Christ. His words are abrupt, not because their behaviour is unusually small-minded, but because of its stark contrast with the magnitude and divine origin of their Christian calling: for they are God's temple, wherein God's Spirit dwells; they belong to Christ, and will be given all things in him. This identity in Christ carries with it a mission: with Paul, they are to make known *the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages*, and to be stewards of this mystery, proclaiming the great redemptive action of God in Christ and witnessing to it in their transformed lives.

It is worth noting that the divisions in Corinth had to do with conflicts in their reception of the preaching of the apostles: *I am for Cephas; I am for Paul*. Here we see a foreshadowing of the divisions which historically would scar our unity in Christ, built on the faith of the apostles. It is in a deepening acknowledgement of the faith of the early church that Christians today seek to find their unity. We live with Paul's question still: *Has Christ been divided?* Spiritual maturity has to do, in part, with retrieving and incarnating the unity given us in Christ. To what extent does our disunity derive from our being less than mature in the faith, less than expansive in our Christian vision? In what ways does our disunity keep us from carrying out the healing and reconciling mission of Christ in a broken and needy world?

Prayer

Gracious God, you continue to call us to spiritual maturity. You desire to name us as your own. Open our hearts and minds to the greatness of our calling, and help us to walk in unity - in communion with Paul and Apollos and Cephas

- as we proclaim and place ourselves at the service of your redeeming work in the world. Amen.

Day 2

God is in charge of growth (1 Cor 3: 5-9)

Gen 1: 26 - 2 : 9	The Lord God planted a garden in Eden.
Ps 104: 24-31	You renew the surface of the earth
Rom 8: 14-25	Creation awaits with impatience the revelation of
the Son of God	
Lk 8: 4-15	It is those who hear the word ...and bear fruit

Commentary

Speaking to the people of Corinth, Paul uses an image familiar to them, of planting and growth. It is a rural image taken to illustrate the works of God, who is directly at work in their midst, calling forth servants who will collaborate in his work.

Like the Corinthians, we are called to be instruments, faithful servants who will be judged for the way in which we accomplish this work. It is an important task, both to be in this service and to bear the responsibility of the work to be accomplished to the glory of God. We must offer our talents to him whom we serve; and place our competence on the only foundation which is Christ, in order to build an edifice in the service of love.

God has made this world good. We see this in the first chapter of Genesis. Humankind has gone beyond the role given us therein; we have destroyed this perfect world. That is why we are called to a ministry of healing in the world (Rom 8). This multi-faceted ministry unites us. It consists of diverse facets, transcending confessional and cultural barriers. The world is wounded, in the same way as the traveller lying on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. We must not be afraid to touch what is broken in our world. God desires to heal through our intervention. Creation awaits with impatience the healing which will come from God.

Within the unity which is sought, Christians can exchange their own experiences to show that beyond being of Paul or of Apollos, they are Christ's. Only Christ can help them grow in the love of the Father, in the service of the Spirit of holiness and of unity who desires to save the world and its marginalized people.

Prayer

O God,

We thank you for the confidence and blessing which you offer to those who work for the coming of your reign in this world.

Help us to find new ways of carrying out your work in the service of those around us.

May we serve, rather than seek to be served, and may your healing power be at work among us.

United as one family of your only Son, may we be faithful stewards of your creation so that you may be known by all men and women, great and small, by all things and all people, as the true living saviour and creator of all. Amen.

Day 3

Christ is the foundation (1 Cor 3: 10-11)

Is 28: 14-16

I am laying a foundation stone, a precious
cornerstone, a sure foundation

Ps 118: 16-24

The stone rejected has become the cornerstone

Eph 2: 19-22

Christ Jesus as the cornerstone

Mt 7: 24-27

A house built on the rock will not fall

Commentary

God in Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, has laid down a common foundation for all the baptized. Christians can therefore affirm their faith in Christ, the one foundation on which the church of God is built. Since nobody can lay down any other foundation, Christians can confess together that the foundation on which their faith is built, is what God in Christ has done. This conviction is a source of thankfulness and humility.

In their efforts to be rooted in the one foundation, many Christians have been and continue to be challenged by other voices that contradict and tend to reject Christ. Christians in such situations are called to be like leaven in society, trusting that they will be supported by the grace of God. Therefore in the face of testing, Christians must never waver. Since Jesus was rejected, his followers too must be prepared to endure the same trials.

On the foundation of Christ and his teaching, we are able to meet the challenges of present day society. As Christians, we are not afraid to make use of what others consider useless, as a starting point for witness in the world.

Christians are convinced that to build on Jesus Christ as the sure and common foundation implies the idea of working together from a common starting point towards a common goal, namely the unity of all the followers of Christ.

The meaning of Jesus Christ for us predefines in a unique and profound way the character of every joint activity or whatever we do separately. The power of Christ's love fills us with great hope that whatever we create in his name has a capacity to last, and survive even in the midst of difficulties, because Christ is the beginning and the end.

Prayer

Lord our God, through the work of the Holy Spirit you have established in Christ the one foundation on which your church is built. We thank you for what you have done for us in Christ. We thank you too for continually upholding your church in the midst of all attempts to destroy it. Help us by your grace that we may build on the foundation you have laid down in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Day 4

Neh 2: 17-18

Ps 127

1 Cor 12: 4-11

Mt 20: 1-16

You are to build on the foundation (1 Cor 3: 12-13)

Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit

A landowner went out to hire labourers to work in his vineyard

Commentary

Christ is God's gift to the world. In him the salvation and liberation of the whole of humankind is revealed. He is the basis and the source of the new life which God has given us. There is no need for us to add anything to complete this gift of God.

But this does not mean that we should remain passive and detached. Paul writes of the commitment to build on the foundation. He affirms our vocation and response. We are called to be workers in God's work of renewal and labourers in his household.

God has given us different gifts (1 Cor 12). We have to make use of them for the one purpose: to glorify Christ and the power of his peace. Through our work we are to be witnesses to God's love and to our unity in Christ.

In the history of the churches we can see that not everything which is done in the name of Christ was really "Christ-like". Sometimes Christ and his reconciliation have been overshadowed by arrogance, divisions and the struggle for power. "Church building" is not a matter of building confessional barriers against each other or of building our own "monuments".

In today's world, churches have to demonstrate how to build bridges and how to cooperate as a sign of hope and a fruit of unity in Christ. Old wounds can be healed and new challenges in a changing society can be met together, each respecting the other's traditions and gifts.

This foundation in Christ makes us sisters and brothers. It is the basis for being the one, true church of Christ, filled with love for the poor, the marginalized, trusting God and in the hope of his coming kingdom.

God's reconciliation commits us together and as individual churches to be living stones of unity in Christ, so that the foundation in Christ will become more and more evident.

Prayer

God, we thank you for your unique gift of life and peace in Christ. You have given our churches many different gifts. Help us to see this diversity as an enrichment to building your house in this world. Let us witness to what strengthens our unity and encourage all that helps us to bring your love to the people with whom we are living. Amen.

Day 5

God judges our efforts to build (1 Cor 3: 13-15)

Gen 4: 2b-10a	Am I my brother's keeper?
Ps 51: 1-4, 9-13	Against you, you alone, have I sinned
Phil 2: 1-5	Regard others as better than yourselves
Mt 25: 14-30	A man entrusted his property to his slaves

Commentary

It is a continuing wonder that in all ages God wants and needs people to work with him in what he is doing in the world. Though the one foundation, Jesus Christ, is laid there is always a task of building to be done.

In explaining this to Christians in Corinth, Paul also insists on God's quality control: how well we build is to be tested. Our works do not bring about salvation, but we remain responsible for our works before God.

Paul saw this in terms of the purifying fires of the final judgement which he thought would come soon. For us it is still a matter of urgency – regarding each opportunity as if it could be the last – and realizing that we all bring judgement on ourselves by how well we use the gifts God has given us for building up the kingdom. And for Christians in Slovakia, there is a special urgency because they sense new opportunities for Christian service in the community which are not to be missed.

We are all accountable both to God and to each other. Indeed churches too are accountable to each other in the quest for unity. Like the servants in the parable, entrusted with their master's property and required to make good use of it, we have all been given treasure: the life of a fragile planet, sisters and brothers world-wide to care for, the precious word of the gospel to share. They are given to all God's people together and provide an opportunity for us to share with one another, to learn from our successes and failures. And how well we work and build together is even now being put to the test.

Prayer

God, through your coming to us in Jesus and through using fallible people, you have shown yourself to be a vulnerable God; we thank you that you still trust us to offer service and work for the building of your kingdom. Keep us alert to your will and purpose and open our eyes that we may see the true needs of people around us. Enable us in humility to learn from one another, that we may be united in our mutual accountability and devoted in service for your kingdom; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Day 6

You are God's temple (1 Cor 3: 16-17)

Gen 1: 26-27	God created humankind in his image
Ps 8	What are human beings
1 Pet 2: 9-10	God's own people
Mt 16: 24-27	If any want to become my followers

Commentary

The question of identity is by no means a new one. Human beings have always asked themselves and sought to live out who they really are and what they are meant to be. Today, living in a world which is characterised by constant changes and a fundamental pluralism, the search for identity has become an even more crucial issue. We struggle with that question not only as individuals but also as communities and as churches. We try to find our own identity in what distinguishes us from others and makes us unique.

The apostle Paul – although addressing the Christians of Corinth 2000 years ago – reminds us even now that the question of identity has to be approached from another perspective: we are not “special” because we are different from others, but because we have all received the gift of the Holy Spirit – a gift which is present in every human being since we are all created in the image of God.

We are God's temple – sacred and full of dignity; nobody has the right to destroy this temple. We are those with whom God wants to feel at home – a place where his good Spirit dwells. God wants to have fellowship with us, which includes and requires that we have fellowship with each other. Since this call to fellowship extends beyond the borders of our Christian communities, the scandal of our divisions as Christian churches is heightened, making it imperative to overcome them.

Differences are also part of our Christian identity since we live in different situations and cultures, we live as women and men, we are shaped by particular personal experiences and by the history of the communities in which we live. But wherever we live, whatever the challenges we face or the talents we are given, we are united by the Holy Spirit who enables us to live as God means us to live, and as has been made manifest in Jesus Christ: holy, and in love-giving and love-receiving relationships.

Prayer

Eternal God, you created heaven and earth, you created human beings in your image, giving each of us identity and dignity. We thank you for your gift of life – life which binds us to you and to your creation. Help us – as Christians and as churches – to receive your gift in all its fullness so that we may be able to overcome whatever limits or reduces your gift of life. Fill us with your good Spirit so that we may grow into the image of Christ and become his image in the world. Amen.

Day 7 **20)**

Folly and wisdom, life in Christ (1 Cor 3 : 18-

Job 32: 7 - 33

It is the breath of the Almighty that makes for understanding

Ps 14: 1-7

The Lord looks down to see if there are any who seek after God

1 Cor 1: 17-30

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise

Mt 10: 17-25a

It is the Spirit of your Father who will speak through you

Commentary

Democracy and liberty bring us many advantages but also temptations. That is as true for individuals as it is for churches. In countries which have been Christian since ancient times, churches are often tempted by a misplaced use of power. In consequence, their witness has offered human perspectives rather than the word of God. Nowadays, we can still be tempted to rely on relations of power and the advantages which come from being in the majority, or, alternatively, to abandon debate in our societies, too often futile. However, as churches we have been commanded to witness to a common foundation for the life of the world, that is Jesus Christ and his word, and nothing can change that.

The prophets underlined that what they proclaimed was not their own words, thoughts or opinions, but a word received from God. Job understands that he must seek wisdom elsewhere, in the inspiration of God, rather than from within his own resources.

The apostle Paul delved into this wisdom to proclaim to all the crucified Lord Jesus Christ. He says that he has decided to know nothing other than Jesus Christ. For the sake of the message of Christ crucified, he was ready to appear a fool in the eyes of the wise of his time. He writes to the Christians of Corinth that God's wisdom was to offer salvation "through the folly of what we preach": Christ crucified. It was a scandal and madness for the people of the time. But Paul says that the madness of God is wiser than human wisdom and that the fragility of God is more solid than human force. The Christ depicted in the gospels does not act like a hero but as somebody whose power is not of this world. He reaches out to the marginalized, he touches the dying, he forgives sins, even where the just and pious saw no possibility of forgiveness. This is the God who came down to walk the dusty ways of humankind! The word of the cross has also been entrusted to us, Christians of today. Between our churches, which the madness of humankind has separated, the pursuit of unity might seem a crazy project. Yet at the heart of a divided world, torn apart by war and violence, the search for peace and reconciliation remains the only wisdom. In the light of the cross, the foundation of our common witness takes shape here. With Christ, God reaches out towards humanity and sends us towards those who seek him in order to proclaim: the way to life passes through the crucified and risen Christ.

Prayer

O God, full of wisdom and truth, you made known to us the folly of your love when humanity crucified your only son, Jesus, and when you raised him from the dead as the Christ, we began to grasp your great wisdom. We pray you, keep us in the steps of your Son on the narrow road to Life. May we proclaim the good news of salvation by the cross of Jesus Christ which witnessed to life for all. May your church today stay faithful to him who is its foundation and may it lead all nations to the wisdom of your Spirit. Amen.

Day 8

You are Christ's (1 Cor 3: 21-23)

Is 44: 1-8

I am the first and I am the last

Ps 89: 1-4

Your steadfast love is established forever

Rev 4: 1-11

Worshipping the one who lives forever and ever

Mk 9: 33-35

Whoever wants to be first must be last

Commentary

We belong to Christ. We are his and no other's. This fact is the foundation for our unity: In baptism, Christ has claimed us for his own, and made us all one in him. The unity we share in Christ is greater than all the differences, past and present, which divide the churches today.

Because we belong to Christ, we belong to one another and are accountable to one another. That is why Christ calls us to build up his body, the church, together as co-workers and fellow-servants. That is why Christians and churches are called to live and work together, as fellow-servants in witnessing to their faith and in serving those in need. And that is why divisions, dissension, quarrelling, factions based on personalities (even if they are Paul or Apollos or Cephas) – all these are denials not only of our brothers and sisters in Christ, but of Christ himself.

As God's temple, the church is a place of worship, and common worship is the most powerful expression of our common belonging to Christ. Every act of common worship is a victory over our division and a celebration of the unity which we do have in Christ. We are united with all those, in all places and times, who have belonged to Christ and who in the Spirit have worshipped God. We do not always act, of course, in accordance with the unity given us in Christ. When we cannot worship together, especially at the Lord's table, our disunity is plain for all to see. Here there is more "building" to be done – and that by all churches!

Because we belong to Christ, we belong to God. Paul affirms in all boldness: "all things are yours". We live and move, together with all our co-workers and fellow-servants, within God's plan for all of creation. God acts within history, for salvation, for healing of the broken, for reconciliation of those at war, for the renewal of the whole creation. God acts, too, in judgement: we know that what we build together is being tested and the results made known. We anticipate a final accounting being made of our work. We do not know the exact time or form of this judgement; but we know that we will be judged by the God whose nature is life and love.

For all God's gifts of creation and redemption, we give praise and thanks to God who has made us one through his Spirit in Christ. May our building together of Christ's church, may our search for unity, be offered in praise of God.

Prayer

Loving God, we thank you for making us one in Christ. Give us imagination and courage to build your church together in unity and in love. Make our lives,

and the lives of our churches, a witness to your love for us and for the whole creation. Grant us unity in our time, O Lord. Amen!