

Week of prayer for Christian Unity 2006
Biblical reflections and prayers for the year 2006

Day 1 United through the presence of Christ

‘One Lord, one faith, one baptism’ (Ephesians 4:5, 6)

Ezek 37:15-28	My dwelling place shall be with them
Ps 67 (66)	Let the peoples praise you, O God
Eph 4:1-6	One Lord, one faith, one baptism
Jn 14:23-27	We will come to them and make our home with them

Commentary

The scriptures stress that God’s will is for the unity of God’s people. Through Ezekiel the prophet, God affirms that Judah and Israel – two divided, often estranged kingdoms – will again be one. God’s cleansing presence will strengthen and bless them in a covenant of peace.

The natural response to God’s gift of unity is our gratitude and praise. The psalmist calls upon all the nations to unite in praise of God, whose saving power may be seen in all nations and throughout the whole earth.

Jesus taught his first followers that he, with the Father, would be present with them, “making a home” with each one who loved him. And he promised that this presence would not end with his death, that he would continue to be present with each one of his followers – and with us, today – through the Holy Spirit.

But the promise of Jesus’ presence is not limited to individual believers: for, as the evangelist Matthew affirms, wherever even two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name they form a community, a community in which Jesus has promised to be present, strengthening and accompanying them on their way.

This common belonging is shown powerfully in our common recognition of baptism. In baptism Christ calls each one of us, bringing us into his body, the church. Because we each belong to Christ, we all belong to one another. That common belonging – to Christ, and to one another – makes us one, despite all our differences of history, culture, and theological conviction: “for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt 18:20).

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank you for your presence among us, strengthening and encouraging us on our way. Make us aware of your presence in us and responsive to your promptings in all that we do. Grant us the wisdom and humility to recognize your presence in our brothers and sisters. Make us truly one, O Lord. Amen

Day 2 Building Christian unity with Jesus in our midst - daily ecumenism

'You also ought to wash one another's feet' (John 13: 14)

Deut 30: 15-20 Then you shall live and become numerous
Ps 133 (132) How good it is to be amongst kindred
1 Cor 12: 12-31 God arranged the members in the body
Jn 13: 1-15 You also ought to wash one another's feet

Commentary

As the psalmist proclaims, unity is attractive. Because Christ is among us, all Christians have an obligation to harmonize the daily life of their communities more closely with the spirit of the gospel.

Washing the feet of his disciples on the evening before he died, Jesus left us a specific example of Christian behaviour towards our neighbour. In 1 Corinthians 12, Saint Paul, writing of the need to care for each other, adds the fact that in the Holy Spirit everyone is different, although part of the same body. The word of God invites us, as brothers and sisters in the church, to accept the concrete task of making the church grow, in order to be of service to the world.

Participation in the life of the Holy Trinity is not a simple affirmation of an article of faith. The gospel urges us to commit ourselves daily to the ecumenical task, so that the church better reflects the trinitarian communion. In the one God, whom we confess along with our sisters and brothers in other monotheistic faiths, is there not for us an example to follow in the love shared between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit? Among the members of the church, moving forward with Christ implies recognizing that a positive action, however modest, accomplished in community has more value than one made in isolation.

To wash the feet of one's sisters and brothers is more than a simple gesture, it is opening one's heart in faithfulness to Jesus who bids us serve the one church, of which we desire to be both the living stones and the builders.

Prayer

Eternal Father, united in the name of your son, Jesus Christ and in the presence of your consoling Spirit, we commit ourselves to build a Christian community with heart and enthusiasm renewed in the fire of your love.

With those whom we encounter in daily life, may we live an ecumenism in the image of your Son, who washed the feet of his disciples, so that together we may enter into new life in his presence. Amen.

Day 3

Praying together in Jesus' name

'The Lord waits to be gracious to you...' (Isaiah 30:18)

Is 30:18-26	He will surely be gracious to you
Ps 136 (135)	His steadfast love endures forever
Acts 1:12-14	Together in prayer
Mt 18:18-20	Prayer in Jesus' name

Commentary

Gathering together for prayer, as a single worshipping community, despite differences on the human plane, is a consistent theme of the Bible. Communities gathered to worship and praise God, to seek God's forgiveness and to intercede for God's mercy and help. The graciousness of God is revealed even more in the fact that the Lord is a God of justice. Our prayers are responses to God's justice, to what God has first done for us, for "while we were still sinners Christ died for us". Throughout the Bible the character of God is revealed as gracious, patient, redeeming love.

The Psalms have been preserved as the hymns and prayers of God's people, recited when they met together to worship God. The shared words bound the people together and created a sense of belonging, which in turn gave them confidence and security.

It was natural that this tradition should continue in the early church. Didn't Jesus himself teach his disciples how to pray? In today's gospel reading, Jesus teaches about granting whatever we ask, if we are agreed. When we meet together, as Christians, to love and pray with one another, we can be assured of Christ's presence with us. Together, as we pray in Jesus' name, we are also bound by him to each other and to the object of our prayer. Therefore, united prayer is powerful prayer.

The disciples of Jesus devoted themselves to prayer and sought to be united. It is quite possible that Jesus' prayer for his disciples to be one, offered on the eve of his death, was made because they were not yet united in his name. Twenty centuries later, we need to ask ourselves, how much closer are we to being united in prayer, life and work? Our unity is indeed a gift that comes from God. Moreover, we realize that we must humbly and continually seek this gift. The apostle exhorts us to pray without ceasing that the Holy Spirit falls afresh upon us in our diversity but unites us through his prompting.

Prayer

Lord, teach us to pray as Jesus taught his disciples. As they were united in their hearts, so may we be one in our faith, love and service. May we celebrate difference, rejoice in diversity and willingly share the riches of our patterns of prayer. Allow our coming together in Jesus' name to transform us to be one in reality so that the world may believe in his abiding presence. Amen.

**Day 4 From the past to the future –
 forgiveness and healing of memories**

‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times’
(Matthew 18: 22)

Jon 3	The repentance of the great city of Nineveh
Ps 51 (50)	A plea for mercy
Col 3: 12-17	Above all, clothe yourselves with love
Jn 8: 1-11	Neither do I condemn you

Commentary

Acknowledgement of the sins of the past, the grace of forgiveness and reconciliation are the recurrent themes in these readings. In their mutual relations, our Christian communities still carry the traces of a past marked by human frailty and sin. Some wounds are healing, others are still the source of pain and division. Facing up to the past can be difficult and require sincere soul searching, both for individuals and communities. Yet this is what God asks of us if we are truly to live as his chosen people and to allow the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts and among us.

Jonah challenges the people of Nineveh to be honest in confessing their self-centredness, their disregard for goodness and their acts of violence. He addresses this call to the whole city and all its inhabitants. All must turn away from their evil ways and from the violence that is still part of them.

The psalmist pleads for God’s forgiveness as he, too, is deeply troubled by his past. He recognizes his failings and implores God not to abandon him. He also feels responsible for the people of Nineveh and wishes to show them the way of truth and an upright life so that they also might be reconciled with God.

The scribes and Pharisees see only failure and sin in the adulterous woman. They identify her with her past. At the same time, they refuse to recognize their own past and their own sins. Jesus invites us not to cast the first stone, not to condemn, and finally, to sin no more. Our search for unity is founded on this call.

Pardon cannot be measured. It is as inexhaustible as the love of God: as much as seventy times seven times. In their ecumenical journey our communities are called to witness to God’s mercy in its infinity.

Prayer

Reconciling God, help us to overcome the grievances and bitterness which the failings and sins of the past have built up in us. Teach us your forgiveness so that we may, in humility, seek reconciliation with you and with our neighbour. Strengthen in us the love of Christ, source and guarantee of the unity of your church. Amen.

Day 5 God's presence among us: a call to peace

'The Lord is with us' (Psalm 46)

1 Kings 19: 1-13a The sound of sheer silence (the whisper of a gentle breeze)

Ps 46 (45) The Lord is with us

Acts 10: 9-48 God shows no partiality

Lk 10: 25-37 Who is my neighbour?

Commentary

As we reflect on the biblical texts which speak of the presence of God among us, we are aware of substantial challenges on our ecumenical journeying.

As in Elijah's time, it is no use looking for God in a hurricane or an earthquake. Rather, his peaceful and comforting presence is to be found in the whisper of a gentle breeze or even in sheer silence.

We must make the psalmist's conviction our own: God is our only strength. Following the example of a God who destroys bows and breaks spears, we are invited to bring all conflict to an end.

The episode recorded in the Acts of the Apostles invites us to meditate on the spirit of the Risen Christ at work throughout the world. In the image of an impartial God, we must learn to go beyond all too human frontiers.

The parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us that we cannot look away when we come across a brother or sister in need. How can we *not* feel concerned when another ecclesial community is in difficulty?

Prayer

Gathered in the name of Christ Jesus, Father, we pray, make us attentive to your presence in this world and help us discern the ways along which you want to lead us in our ecumenical pilgrimage. All honour and glory be to you, for ever and ever. Amen.

Day 6

Mission in Jesus' name

'So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost' (Matthew 18:14)

Dan 3:19-30	Witnessing for faith
Ps 146 (145)	In praise of God the Saviour
Acts 8:26-40	Philip witnesses to the Ethiopian eunuch
Lk 10:1-12	Jesus sends out his disciples

Commentary

Today we meet people who are called by God to witness to their faith. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego have a strong and firm belief in the One who saves them. Their fervour, courage and united witness, in the face of great personal danger, convince the king and his officials that their God is the one true God. However, their faith-witness served also to rally the fainthearted of Israel. In this way the people of God were strengthened and united once more around their God.

The psalmist sings the praises of the Lord who reaches out to the people in many different circumstances so that they may find safety and salvation. The definitive example of God's continuous care for his people may be seen in the sending of Jesus. He not only gathers in those who are weak and have gone astray, but also expects his disciples to be enthusiastic and committed in sharing the good news of the kingdom of God when sent on mission in his name.

Philip reflects the enthusiasm of the early church. He capitalises on every opportunity that presents itself to fulfil the mission of Jesus.

As Christ's followers to-day we are called to be a missionary people. Moreover, the message of the gospel is always stronger when Christians are united in offering a common witness to its truth. It is our turn to share the good news with all people. We are called:

- to have courage in the face of unbelief
- to move out from the security of our own culture and religious tradition
- to find new and innovative ways of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ
- to be inspired and excited by our common faith
- to be motivated by the compassion of Jesus to work together to alleviate suffering in our world
- to challenge the injustice in the world and stand alongside the poor

In the face of a rapidly evolving world, the united witness to the gospel that Christians give comes from both our activity of going out to the world, and our gathering in the weak so that not one of the little ones should be lost.

We have a double calling to fulfil!

Instead we might learn from him and he, from us. In this way, we advance along the road to unity.

It is in our awareness of Jesus' continuing presence in so many different ways that we recognize that he is indeed part of our lives. Not just a figure in history who taught us how we should live, but through the Holy Spirit he is present and active in the world today.

Prayer

Eternal Father, grant us so to recognize your presence among us in different ways that our desire for true community in our own churches and society may be increased, and our prayer for unity within the body of Christ, your church, may be ever more fervent. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Day 8

One in hope

'On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you' (John 14:20)

Ex 40:34-38	Throughout all their journeys the cloud of the Lord was upon the tabernacle
Ps 42 (41)	Hope in God, for I shall again praise him
Rev 21:1-6	God himself will be with them
Jn 14:15-31	I will not leave you desolate

Commentary

The people of Israel were led by Moses through the desert. As they journeyed in the wilderness, God was present in a column of cloud by day and of fire by night.

The theme of the psalm is a vital longing and hoping for the community of God which will take away all doubts and sorrows.

The new people born out of the gospel is a pilgrim people, journeying towards the fullness of life in the new creation when God will dwell among us wiping away every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more. Pain and divisions are overcome. There will be one renewed and unified humanity in God.

Now, however, we are together on the way. We have the same hope and belong to the one God. On our pilgrim way we are not desolate. Jesus has not left us orphans because the Spirit has been given to us. It is the Spirit of hope and the Spirit of love. The peace of Christ has been given to us, encouraging and leading us to remain in love. If we love Christ, we will keep his word.

The theme of this week reminds us of Jesus' promise: "where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst". With Jesus, the eternal Word of God living among us, we travel together on a journey of hope. We can help one another to be faithful to this way. In the power of

the Spirit, Jesus Christ will introduce us more and more into the Father's will of renewal. The reconciled and reconciling community to which we are committed in our ecumenical movement is a sign and an anticipation of the coming new creation. With God's grace, we are on a journey to live now already as much as possible "on earth as it is in heaven".

Prayer

Eternal Father, united in the name of Jesus, give us the certainty that despite everything, death will not win out, that our divisions will cease, that we will not give way to discouragement and that we will attain in hope to that fullness of life, love and light that you promise to those who love you and keep your word. Amen.