

The Theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2018

Today Caribbean Christians of many different traditions see the hand of God active in the ending of enslavement. It is a uniting experience of the saving action of God which brings freedom. For this reason the choice of the song of Moses and Miriam (Ex 15:1-21), as the motif of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2018 was considered a most appropriate one. It is a song of triumph over oppression. This theme has been taken up in a hymn, *The Right Hand of God*, written in a workshop of the Caribbean Conference of Churches in August 1981, which has become an “anthem” of the ecumenical movement in the region, translated into a number of different languages.

Like the Israelites, the people of the Caribbean have a song of victory and freedom to sing and it is a song which unites them. However, contemporary challenges again threaten to enslave and again threaten the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God. While human dignity is inalienable it is often obscured by both personal sin and social structures of sin. In our fallen world societal relationships too often lack the justice and compassion that honour human dignity. Poverty, violence, injustice, addiction to drugs and pornography, and the pain, grief and anguish which follow, are experiences that distort human dignity.

Many of the contemporary challenges are themselves the legacy of a colonial past and slave trade. The wounded collective psyche is manifested today in social problems related to low self-esteem, gang and domestic violence, and damaged familial relationships. Although a legacy of the past, these issues are also exacerbated by the contemporary reality that many would characterize as neo-colonialism. Under existing circumstances it seems almost impossible for many of the nations of this region to pull themselves out of poverty and debt. Moreover, in many places there is a residual legislative framework that continues to be discriminatory.

The right hand of God that brought the people out of slavery, gave continued hope and courage to the Israelites, as it continues to bring hope to the Christians of the Caribbean. They are not victims of circumstance. In witnessing to this common hope the churches are working together to minister to all peoples of the region, but particularly the most vulnerable and neglected. In the words of the hymn, “the right hand of God is planting in our land, planting seeds of freedom, hope and love”.

Biblical - Pastoral reflection on the text (Ex 15:1-21)

The Book of Exodus takes us through three periods: the Israelites’ life in Egypt (1:1-15:21); Israel’s journey through the wilderness (15:22-18:27); and the Sinai experience (19-40). The passage chosen, the ‘Song at the Sea’ led by Moses and

Miriam, details the events leading up to the redemption of the people of God from enslavement. It closes the first period.

“This is my God, and I will praise him” (15:2)

Verses 1-3 of chapter 15 emphasize the praise of God: “The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him” (15:2). In the song, led by Moses and Miriam, the Israelites sing the praises of the God who has freed them. They realize that the plan and purpose of God to set the people free cannot be thwarted or frustrated. No forces not even Pharaoh’s chariots, army and trained military power could frustrate the will of God for his people to be free (15:4-5). In this joyful cry of praise, Christians from many different traditions recognize that God is the Saviour of us all, we delight that he has kept his promises, and continues to bring his salvation to us through the Holy Spirit. In the salvation that he brings we recognize that he is our God and we are all his people.

“Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power” (15:6)

The liberation and salvation of God’s people comes through the power of God. The right hand of God can be understood both as God’s sure victory over his adversaries, and as his unfailing protection of his own people. In spite of the determination of Pharaoh, God heard the cry of his people and will not let the people perish because God is the God of life. By his control of wind and sea God shows his will to preserve life and to destroy violence (Ex 15:10). The purpose of this redemption was to constitute the Israelites as a people of praise recognizing God’s steadfast love.

The liberation brought hope and a promise for the people. Hope because a new day had dawned when the people could freely worship their God and realize their potential. It was also a promise: their God would accompany them throughout their journey and no force could destroy God’s purpose for them.

Does God use violence to counteract violence?

Some Church Fathers interpreted the narrative as a metaphor for the spiritual life. Augustine, for example, identified the enemy which is cast into the sea not as the Egyptians, but as sin.

“All our past sins, you see, which have been pressing on us, as it were from behind, he has drowned and obliterated in baptism. These dark things of ours were being ridden by unclean spirits as their mounts, and like horsemen they were riding them wherever they liked. That’s why the apostle calls them ‘rulers of this darkness’. We have been rid of all this through baptism, as through the Red Sea, so called because sanctified by the blood of the crucified Lord...” (Sermon 223E).

Augustine saw the story as encouraging the Christian to hope and to persevere, rather than despair, at the pursuit of the enemy. For Augustine baptism was the key constitutive event in establishing the true identity of each person as a member of the Body of Christ. He draws a parallel between Israel's liberating passage through the Red Sea and that of the Christian people in baptism. Both liberating journeys bring a worshipping assembly into being. As such Israel could freely praise the saving hand of God in the victory song of Miriam and Moses. Their redemption constituted the enslaved Israelites as members of the one people of God, united with one song of praise to sing.

Unity

Exodus 15 allows us to see how the road to unity must often pass through a communal experience of suffering. The Israelites' liberation from enslavement is the foundational event in the constitution of this people. For Christians this process climaxes with the incarnation and Paschal mystery. Although liberation/salvation is an initiative taken by God, God engages human agencies in the realization of his purpose and plan for the redemption of his people. Christians, through baptism, share in God's ministry of reconciliation, but our own divisions hamper our witness and mission to a world in need of God's healing.