

Biblical reflections and prayers for the 'eight days'

Day 1

Theme: Witness through Celebrating Life

*Text - Why do you look for the living among the dead?
(Luke 24:5)*

Readings

Genesis 1:1, 26-31	God saw all that he had made, and indeed, it was very good
Psalms 104:1-24	O Lord, how manifold are your works
1 Corinthians 15:12-20	If the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised
Luke 24:1-5	Why do you look for the living among the dead?

Commentary

Our journey of Christian unity is firmly rooted in our common belief that in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we celebrate not only the life God has given us but the offer of new life through Jesus' conquering death once and for all. As we meet together during this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we witness to our shared faith by our concern for the life of all. Life is God's gift to us, and the more we support and celebrate life, the more we give witness to the one whose generous love brought us to life initially.

The reading from the book of Genesis reminds us of the creative power and energy of God. It is this power and energy that St Paul encounters in experiencing Jesus' resurrection.

He challenges the people of Corinth to put their total trust in the Risen Lord and his offer of new life.

The psalm continues this theme as it proclaims the glory of God's creation.

Our gospel passage challenges us to look for new life in the face of a culture of death that our world frequently presents to us. It encourages us to trust in Jesus' power, and so to experience life and healing.

Today, we thank God for all that shows God's love for us: for all of creation; for brothers and sisters in all parts of the world; for communion in love, for forgiveness and healing and for life eternal.

Prayer

God our creator, we praise you for all who give witness to their faith by their words and actions. In living life to the full we encounter your loving presence in the many experiences you offer us. May our common witness of celebrating life unite us in blessing you, the author of all life.

Reflection Questions

1. To what extent do your own witness and the witness of your church celebrate life?
2. Will others know from your witness that Christ has been raised from the dead?
3. What do you see as the areas of growth in your life?
4. Are there things of the past that the churches cling to which ought to be laid to rest because of a new ecumenical consciousness?

Day 2

Theme: Witness through Sharing Stories

Text - What are you discussing with each other while you walk along? (Luke 24:17)

Readings

Jeremiah 1:4-8	Go to all to whom I send you
Psalms 98	Sing to the Lord a new song
Acts 14:21-23	They strengthened the souls of the disciples
Luke 24:13-17a	What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?

Commentary

Sharing our stories is a powerful way in which we give witness to our faith in God. Listening to one another with respect and consideration allows us to encounter God in the very person with whom we are sharing.

The reading from Jeremiah offers us a powerful witness of God's call to the prophet. He is to share what he has received, and so allow God's Word to be heard and lived out.

This call to proclaim God's Word is also experienced by the disciples in the early Church, as witnessed to in the reading from Acts.

Our psalm allows us to sing to God with a spirit of praise and thanksgiving.

Today's gospel passage presents a Jesus who enlightens our blindness and dispels our disillusionment. He helps us to understand our stories within the one unfolding plan of God.

During this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we listen to the faith stories of other Christians in order to encounter God in the variety of ways God's very self is revealed to us. We are aware also that we can share with others through the virtual reality of technology. Modern means of communication can help us share more widely, and so create a community that is broader and more extensive than the purely physical.

In listening with attentiveness we grow in faith and love. In spite of the diversity of our personal and collective witness, we find ourselves intertwined in the one story of God's love for us revealed in Jesus Christ.

Prayer

God of history, we thank you for all who have shared their story of faith with us and so have given witness to your presence in their lives. We praise you for the variety of our stories both as individuals and churches. In these stories we see the unfolding of the one story of Jesus Christ. We pray for the courage and the conviction to share our faith with those with whom we come into contact, and so allow the message of your Word to spread to all.

Reflection Questions

1. Are you "gossiping the Gospel" or just gossiping?
2. How open are you or your church to be drawn into the stories of others?
3. How open are you to share with others your stories of faith, and so give witness to God's presence in your personal experiences of life and of death?
4. Are you aware of the enormous potential for good that modern means of communication offer the Church today?

Day 3

Theme: Witness through Awareness

Text - Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days? (Luke 24:18)

Readings

1 Samuel 3:1-10	Speak, Lord, your servant is listening
Psalms 23	The Lord is my Shepherd
Acts 8:26-40	Philip proclaimed to him the Good News about Jesus
Lk 24:13-19a	...their eyes were kept from recognizing him

Commentary

Growing in faith is a complex journey. Many people in our world today lead busy lives and have lots of pressures and responsibilities. It is easy to miss God's revealing love to us in our everyday life and experiences. The more pressure and activity we surround ourselves with, then the greater the possibility of overlooking what is in fact before our very eyes. Like the two disciples in the gospel, we sometimes think we know what is real, and try to explain our view to others, yet we are not aware of the full truth. In our world today we are invited to be aware of God in the surprising and unlikely events of life.

In our Old Testament reading, we hear how God calls and invites Samuel to bear witness. Samuel first of all has to hear this word. Hearing requires an open disposition and a willingness to listen to God.

This desire to hear God's Word is also experienced by both Philip and the Ethiopian in the reading from Acts. They witness to their faith by responding to what is asked of them at that precise moment in time. They listen attentively and respond accordingly.

The psalm of the Good Shepherd reflects the quiet trust of the one who is aware of the tender care of God, Who gathers the flock and leads them to green pastures.

During this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we seek to be aware of God in our everyday events and experiences. We meet people who are familiar and others who are strangers. In these encounters we learn from each other's spiritual experiences and so get a new view of God's reality. This awareness of God's presence challenges us to work for Christian unity.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, Good Shepherd, You encounter us and remain with us in everyday life. We pray for the grace to be aware of all you do for us. We ask that you prepare us to be open to all you offer us and bring us together in one flock.

Reflection Questions

1. When have you been aware of God's presence in your life?
2. Are you aware of global celebrations and tragedies, and how might our churches together respond to these?
3. Is being aware enough, or is there something more that you might do in order to give witness to your faith?
4. How do you make yourself aware of God when the reality of God's presence does not correspond to your expectations?

Day 4

Theme: Bearing witness through celebrating the faith we have received

Text - "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth." (Luke 24:19)

Readings

Deuteronomy 6:3-9	The Lord is our God, the Lord alone
Psalm 34	I will bless the Lord at all times
Acts 4:32-35	Of one heart and soul
Luke 24:17-21	But we had hoped...

Commentary

We have an enormous debt of gratitude to those whose faith has provided the foundation for our Christian lives today. Numerous men and women through their prayer, witness and worship have ensured that the faith is handed down to the next generations. In Scotland we have an impressive Christian history: Saint Ninian in the 4th century, Saint Columba in the 6th century and the many Celtic saints whose faith was rooted in the love of God and wonder at his creation. The faith of Scottish people can also be seen in the very important role played in the diffusion of the Reformation of the 16th century and the way in which this spirit has been firmly maintained since then.

Today's readings affirm the importance of supporting the community of faith in order to ensure the dissemination of the Word of God. The passage from Deuteronomy gives us the beautiful prayer of our Jewish sisters and brothers, who every day use these words to praise God. The Psalm invites us to bear witness through praise for what we have received as believers, so that our faith may be shown through glorifying and thanksgiving. The extract from Acts reveals a community united in faith and charity. The gospel passage shows us Jesus as the centre of what we have received in faith.

As we unite with our Christian brothers and sisters in praying for unity during this week, we welcome the rich variety of our Christian heritage. We pray that awareness of our common heritage may unite us more closely as we progress in faith.

Prayer

Lord God, we give you thanks for all the people and communities who have communicated the message of the Good News to us, and thus given us a solid foundation for our faith today. We pray that we too may together bear witness to our faith, so that others may know you and place their trust in the truth of salvation offered in Jesus Christ for the life of the world.

Reflection Questions

1. Who inspired you in your faith?
2. What are the aspects of faith which inspire you in your everyday life?
3. What do you feel were the most important teachings which were passed on to you?
4. How can you recognize God at work with you in the transmission of faith the future generations?

Day 5

Theme: Witness through suffering

Text - Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory? (Luke 24:26)

Readings

Isaiah 50:5-9	The one who vindicates me is near
Psalms 124	Our help is in the name of the Lord
Romans 8:35-39	God's love shown forth in Jesus Christ
Luke 24:25-27	He interpreted to them the things about himself

Commentary

In recent years two events which took place in Scotland led to this small country suddenly becoming the centre of attention of the world's media. The bomb attack on the plane above Lockerbie and the massacre of children in Dunblane school brought attention to the nation which will always remember these terrible losses of human life. The two events caused suffering and unimaginable anguish to a large number of people and the consequences were felt well beyond the physical borders of the two places. Innocent people met their death in horrifying circumstances.

The reality of suffering is something that the Prophet Isaiah speaks about forcefully in today's text, in which he reminds us that God is never resigned to seeing humanity suffer. In response the Psalm proclaims the trust that believers must maintain in their Saviour.

The letter to the Romans proclaims the certainty that love is always strongest and that suffering and sorrow will never prevail. For before offering the resurrection to the world, Christ entered into a terrible death and into the dark depths of the tomb so as to be completely with us at our very lowest ebb.

In the Lord's footsteps, Christians who seek full unity show their solidarity to those amongst them who are confronted in their lives with tragic situations of suffering, by confessing that love is stronger than death. And that it was from the extreme humiliation of the tomb that resurrection came like a new sun for humanity; a clamouring annunciation of life, forgiveness and immortality.

Prayer

God our Father, look with compassion on our situations of poverty, suffering, sin and death, we ask you for forgiveness, healing, comfort and support in our ordeals.

We give you thanks for all who manage to see light in their affliction.

May your divine Spirit teach us the greatness of your compassion and help us stand alongside our sisters and brothers in difficulty. Filled with its blessings, may we in unity proclaim and share with the world the victory of your Son who lives for ever.

Reflection questions

1. How can you show empathy to those who suffer and are in difficulties?
2. What wisdom and deeper understanding have you gained through suffering you have known in your own life?
3. How do you live out solidarity with the suffering and oppression that so many people living in poverty in our world experience, and what is your own experience of it?
4. How would you bear witness to the mercy of God and to the hope you find in the light of the cross of Christ?

Day 6

Theme: Witness through Faithfulness to the Scriptures

Text - Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us? (Luke 24:32)

Readings

Isaiah 55:10-11

The word that goes forth from my mouth does not return to me empty

Psalms 119:17-40

Open my eyes that I may see the wonders of your Law

2 Timothy 3:14-17

All scripture is inspired by God

Lk 24:28-35

Jesus opens the Scriptures to His disciples

Commentary

Christians encounter God's Word in a privileged way through reading the Sacred Scriptures and celebrating the sacraments. In faithfully listening to the proclamation of Holy Scripture, and by prayerfully reading the various books of the Bible, they open their hearts and minds to receive the very Word of God. Jesus promised His disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit to make them understand the Word of God, and to guide them in all truth.

Historically, Christians have been divided in reading and understanding the Word of God. They often used the Bible to emphasize their disagreement rather than to find ways for reconciliation. Fortunately, in recent times, in their search for unity, Sacred Scripture has brought Christians closer to one another. Shared Bible study has become a major means of growing together among them. The Christian journey that we celebrate during this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is one that is firmly rooted in our shared listening to God's Word, trying together to understand and to live it.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that God's Word powerfully proclaimed is indeed effective and operative. It does not return to God empty but succeeds in the purpose for which He sent it. This message is repeated in the words addressed to Timothy, as he is directed to believe in the efficacy of the Scriptures by which the faithful are equipped for every good work.

Our psalm gives praise for God's words and statutes and implores God to give understanding, that we may keep the Holy Law with our whole heart.

During this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we pray that all Christians may enter more deeply into the mystery of God's wonderful revelation as it comes to us in Holy Scripture. We beseech the Holy Spirit to help us better comprehend the Word of God and to direct us on our common journey of faith until we will all be gathered again around the one table of the Lord.

Prayer

God, we praise and thank you for your saving Word as it reaches out to us through the Sacred Scriptures. We thank you too for the brothers and sisters with whom we share your Word and discover together the abundance of Your love. We pray for the light of the Holy Spirit, so that Your Word may lead and direct us in our quest for greater unity.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the passages of Scripture that mean most to you?
2. Who or what in your life makes your heart burn with a passion for the gospel and a desire to give witness to Christ?
3. Which passages from the Scriptures have helped you to better understand the witness of other Christians?
4. How may our churches use the Scripture more effectively in their daily life and prayer?

Day 7

Theme: Witness through Hope and Trust

Text - Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?

(Luke 24:38)

Readings

Job 19:23-27	God whom I shall see on my side
Psalms 63	My soul thirsts for You
Acts 3:1-10	What I have, I give you
Luke 24: 36-40	The disciples were startled and terrified

Commentary

During their journey in life and faith, all Christians experience moments of doubt. When Christians cannot recognise the presence of the risen Christ, being together sometimes makes their doubts even heavier, rather than lighter.

The challenge faced by Christians is to continue to believe that even when they do not see or feel God, God remains with them. The virtues of faith, hope and trust allow them to give witness that their faith goes beyond their own possibilities.

The character Job gives us an example of someone who faced difficult trials and tribulations and even argued with God. In faith and hope however, he believed that God would remain on his side. This reliance and conviction is also shown by the actions of Peter and John in the account with the lame man as told in Acts. Their belief in the Name of Jesus allows them to witness powerfully to all who were present.

Today's psalm is a prayer reflecting our deep desire for God's steadfast love.

Our meeting during this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity allows our communities to grow in shared faith, hope and love. We bear witness to God's steadfast love to all people, and God's faithfulness to the one church we are called to be.

The more we witness together, the stronger our message will be.

Prayer

God of hope, share Your vision of the one church with us, and overcome our doubts. Increase our faith in your presence, that all who profess belief in you may worship together in spirit and in truth. We especially pray for all who are in doubt right now, or whose lives are spent in the shadow of danger and fear. Be with them and give them your consoling presence.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you deal with your own fears and doubts?
2. How might you be a cause of fear and anxiety for others by your behaviour?
3. When have you faced up to your own fears and doubts and so given witness to your faith in Christ by overcoming these difficulties?
4. How may Christian communities encourage one another in faith and hope?

Day 8

Theme: Witness through Hospitality

Text – Have you anything here to eat? (Luke 24:41)

Readings

Gen 18:1-8	Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves
Psalms 146	He who gives justice to the oppressed and gives food to the hungry
Romans 14:17-19	Pursue what makes for peace and mutual edification
Luke 24:41-48	Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures

Commentary

Today, electronic communication has made us neighbours in one small and overloaded planet. As in the time of Luke, many peoples and communities have had to leave their homes, wandering and journeying to strange lands. People of the world's great faiths have arrived bringing new beliefs and cultures to our communities.

In the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we recognise in our shared journey towards unity the hospitality and companionship of Christians of all churches. Christ also calls us both to offer and to receive the hospitality of the stranger who has become our neighbour. Surely, if we cannot see Christ in the other, then we cannot see Christ at all.

The story in Genesis describes how Abraham receives God in opening his house and offering hospitality to strangers.

The God of all creation also stands with the prisoner, the blind, the stranger. Our psalm is an offering of praise for God's everlasting faithfulness and all that God has done for us.

The text from Romans reminds us that the kingdom of God comes about through justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The resurrected Christ brings his disciples together, eats with them and they recognise him again. He reminds them of what the scriptures said about him and explains what they did not understand before. Thus, he frees them from their doubts and fears and sends them out to become witnesses of these things. In creating this space for encounter with him he enables them to receive his peace, that implies justice for the oppressed, care for the hungry and the mutual up-building as the gifts of the new world of the resurrection. Christians throughout history have found the risen Lord as they have served others and been served by others in faith, so we too can encounter Christ when we share our lives and our gifts.

Prayer

God of love, You have shown us your hospitality in Christ. We acknowledge that through sharing our gifts with all we meet you. Give us the grace that we may become one on our journey together and recognise you in one another. In welcoming the stranger in your name may we become witnesses to your hospitality and your justice.

Reflection questions

1. To what extent is the country in which you live hospitable to the stranger?
2. How in your own neighbourhood can the stranger find hospitality and a space to live?
3. How might you show gratitude for those who have shown you hospitality by being available?
4. How does the cross show us that God's hospitality is a hospitality lived out in total self-giving?