

“Called to proclaim the mighty works of God” (I Peter 2:9)
Homily proclaimed during the ecumenical service of prayer for Christian Unity
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St Andrew’s PCEA Church, Nairobi
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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, how wonderful it is to be here today, to celebrate together our dignity as children of God, who share the same baptism, the same hope and the same faith in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Our coming together as Christians from different churches, is itself a sign, a miracle, a fulfilment of the prayer of Jesus: “That all may be one, so that the world might believe that you sent me.” (John 17:21)

Our brothers and sisters from Latvia, in North East Europe, have proposed to the universal Church a beautiful and inspiring theme for our reflection and meditation during this week of prayer for Christian Unity. Their reflection comes from a concrete daily lived experience of ecumenism where Protestants, Orthodox and Catholics pray together to celebrate their common baptism and their common mission: “called to proclaim the mighty works of the Lord.” (I Peter:2:9)

It is a message that it is much more positive in its content. It does not focus on the division of the past, nor on the current division in the Church of Christ. It assumes that there is already unity among Christians. Through the turmoil of their past history, especially during the communist government, both Orthodox, Protestants and Roman Catholics, have stood together, holding each other’s shoulders, supporting each other, united in a common witness to the Gospel. The sufferings they went through created a strong bond, a deep communion among them. Together they rediscovered their baptismal priesthood. It is a wonderful testimony. Let their experience be a source of our inspiration here in Kenya, as we journey together towards a more visible and greater unity among Christians.

We too as we come together during this Week, we want to celebrate in a special way our common baptism. And the same time we are called to proclaim what the Lord has done in our lives. Using the words of Pope Francis, we are called to proclaim “the joy of the Gospel” (1). We cannot keep to ourselves this great treasure we have received from the Lord.

The underlying theme of this Week of Prayer comes from the letter of St Peter:
“ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1 Peter 2:9-10)

Once again how beautiful it is to realise that we are a chosen race. St Peter says that before we knew Christ, we were nobodies, we were not a people, we were living in darkness. But, out of his own Mercy and Love, God has brought us out of darkness into his wonderful light. This is a pure and gratuitous gift that we have received from God. We are who we are today, because of God’s own mercy. We cannot take this for granted. The candles we have brought today are a powerful symbol. We are no longer living in darkness and the same time we are called to bring the light of Christ to the world. We cannot keep this light to ourselves. It must shine for the world to see. It is an act of charity. If we keep this light to ourselves, then we have become

selfish. This light must shine on the hilltop of our cities and villages: A light that illumines our hearts so that our acts may become acts of children of light and not of children of darkness. How wonderful and transformative it would be, if we all walk in the light of Christ.

St Peter tells us that we have become a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. We have become God's own children. Once again we cannot take this for granted. Out of his own mercy God has clothed us with an incomparable dignity. This is the first and the greatest work that God has done in our lives. He has raised us to the dignity of his own children. This is good news. It is amazing. What the Lord has done to me and for me, what he has done to us and for us, we cannot tell it all, as one song says.

This good news of Jesus Christ is the source of our great joy. What are we to proclaim to the world, if not the joy that comes from the transformation of our lives in Jesus Christ? We are called and sent, as Christians, to proclaim the joy of the Gospel. The theme of the second day of this week of Christian unity is precisely this: "Called to be messengers of Joy." We are called to be messengers of joy in a world flooded with news of sadness, suffering, death, corruption. I know many people who do not read daily newspapers or follow the news anymore because there is no good news. We Christians have something to offer as an alternative: that is the joy of the gospel, good news for the poor, the marginalised, the prisoners, the captives and the oppressed.

We are called to be that salt which gives taste to the world. Jesus says: "You are the salt of the earth." The pot of salt we have brought today is a symbol of our common mission in this world. We are called to give hope to so many people who have lost hope in the world, people who have lost hope in our human institutions. As Christians we are called to bring hope to so many hopeless situations.

The fact that God has raised us to the dignity of his own children is also a source of our Unity. We have only one Father, and we are brothers and sisters. We share the common origin, a common humanity, and a common destiny (2). Our unity as Christians, is even stronger by virtue of our common baptism. Now if we have all been raised to the dignity of the children of God, how is it that we are still divided? Pope Francis often says that division in a Christian community is one of the worst sins. Division does not come from God. It comes from the devil, the Pope says. It is a scandal, above all because it comes from the devil.

On the third day of this Week, we will be invited to reflect on the joy that we experience when we fellowship together. Our presence here today is itself proclamation of the "mighty works of God". Those who are a bit older than me can recall that not so long ago, it was unthinkable to see Protestants and Catholics fellowship together. Our country was very much divided along denominational lines. How beautiful it is today to gather together in an ecumenical fellowship. But at the same time we feel the pain of not being yet able to partake and receive together the body and blood of Christ at the Eucharistic table.

Not so long ago I was invited for a healing and thanksgiving mass in a family. As I was giving communion, a certain lady did not respond; actually she was hesitating when I presented to her the body of Christ. So I passed by. I did not give her communion. Few weeks later, we met again in the same family for mass. After mass, she introduced herself to me. She fellowships with the Baptist Church. She said: "It is the second time that I attend your mass. Each time I felt a strong desire to come and receive the Eucharist but I could not have the courage to come forward." I could see the pain of this lady, who went home with a Eucharistic hunger. I also felt

very bad. Actually it was painful. Are we not all of us members of the same body of Christ, the Church?

Allow me to quote part of the commentary of the third day of this Week of Prayer: “The world cannot believe that we are Jesus` disciples while our love for one another is incomplete. We feel the pain of this division when we cannot receive together the body and blood of Christ at the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity.”

We humbly acknowledge that we still have a long way to go before we reach the full sacramental unity, where we shall be allowed to partake at the same Eucharistic table. Meanwhile let us celebrate the achievements we have made so far towards a visible unity of the Church of Christ. There is hope for the future. Next year we shall celebrate 500 years of the Reformation. I think that it is going to be a moment of grace and some major decision will be made towards a greater unity. This is my hope. Already in 1999 both the Catholics and the Lutherans published a document on the common understanding of justification by faith.

Meanwhile let us continue to proclaim the joy of the Gospel to the world. Let us continue to proclaim the mighty works of the one who has brought us out of darkness into his wonderful light. May this light of Christ shine in our hearts and in our world for all to see now and forever. Amen.

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(1) *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) is the title of Pope Francis' first apostolic exhortation, 24 November 2013.

(2) See no 1, *Nostra aetate* (In this age of ours), the Vatican II Council's Declaration on the relations of the Church to non-Christian religions, 28 October, 1965.