

2017 WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

**Sermon given by Rev. Dr. Lesmore Gibson Ezekiel at the Lutheran Cathedral,
Nairobi, on 21st January 2017**

Texts for Reflection: Ezekiel 36:25-27; Psalm 18:25-32; 2 Corinthians 5:11-20

Text of Focus: Luke 15:11-24

Theme: Return and Be Reconciled: Making LOVE Real

Introduction

This week-long ecumenical action by the body of Christ, regardless of confessional differences to intentionally come together in fellowship and prayers has a history. Time will not permit me to talk about it, but know that the dates of 18–25 January proposed in the year 1908 by Paul Wattson was informed by the understanding of the days between the feasts of St. Peter and St. Paul. Both feasts are integral to our quest for visible Christian unity. Some few years ago, I was among the ecumenical guests to the Holy See (Vatican) during a week of prayer for Christian unity.

We are also reminded that this year is significant to those classified as Protestants. Nearly 500 years ago Martin Luther, a German theologian and at that time a Catholic monk on 31st October 1517 made public his 95 theses technically known as “Luther’s Disputation against the church.” The central message of Luther’s 95 Theses was and is “Forgiveness (Salvation) is Free, not contingent on human Merit.” All the actions of Martin Luther are today referred to as “The Lutheran Reformation”. We, as part of the global Lutheran family continue to celebrate Christ the crucified through the ecclesial witness of Martin Luther without prejudice to any ecclesial group in particular. This year is very special to us and to the entire body of Christ as we commemorate the 500 years of the Reformation’s witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Worthy of note is that last year in the month of October, his Holiness Pope Francis joined in the joint Lutheran and Catholic commemoration of the Reformation which took place in Sweden. For me this particular event is a profound sign of hope and bears witness to the gospel of reconciliation and ecumenical fraternity of unity in diversity.

Engaging the Text of Focus

In a nutshell, the authorship of the gospel of Luke is popularly attributed to Luke the physician, sometimes referred to as “The companion of Apostle Paul.” Acts of the Apostles is also attributed to him because of some similarities in style and themes. What stands out is his address to “Theophilus”, which means “Lover of God”.

Scholarship points to the fact that Luke was addressing the entire body of Christ, those who love Christ (God).

The narrative of Luke 15:11:24 on the prodigal or lost son is not found in other gospels. It is only Luke that has written such a parable. Most, if not all of us here are well familiar with the story of the prodigal son. Maybe some of us took part in theatres or drama shows on the parable when we were younger. I myself did.

The parable itself is alien to most African cultures. It is abnormal in my culture for a child, whether grown-up or not, to go to his father and demand a portion of his possessions while he is still living. You can request something but not a share. It is considered sacrilegious, a disrespect and in some cases it is viewed as wishing your father dead. Children are expected to wait until their father is dead before they can demand their share of the inheritance. In the modern age, children will wait for the "Will" left by their father to be opened and read by the family counsel. Doing the opposite is unacceptable by many families.

Here we are faced with a parable that may not make sense to many who hold on to the African culture that forbids children from demanding their share from their parents while they are still alive. Meanwhile, what makes the parable appropriate to us is its central focus on the 'father': he is the main character in the narrative. The father being the central figure of the parable clearly indicates that the narrative is most applicable to us today and to those coming after us.

Lesson from the father for us today

The father has demonstrated impeccable attributes and a disposition that none other but God Almighty could exhibit. He was a merciful, patient and forgiving father despite the fact that his youngest son demanded his share in an unimaginable circumstance. Not only did the young fellow demand his portion. He went and squandered all that was given to him. Yet the father opened his arms to welcome the naughty boy back home. What a father! How many of us seated here will be able to exercise such patience, mercy and forgiveness? These attributes are what make our God a loving God. God mercifully waits for our return like the father in the parable. The father anticipated and longed for the return of his son. The father taught us a powerful lesson of BEING EAGER TO FORGIVE in order to begin afresh, regardless of past wrongs and hurts. The prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 25-27 talked of having new hearts, soft hearts, not hearts of stone, a new and soft heart that embodies and practices authentic love, forgiveness, care and compassion.

Lessons from the lost son

1) He realized that he has done wrong; 2) He recognized that he has a father who will be generous to accept him back; 3) He resolved to RETURN, not as son but as one of the servants in his father's household; 4) He exhibits a sense of humility; 5) He takes the first step towards home; 6) He confesses his wrongs to his father.

Let us be genuine in our confession one to another and most importantly to our merciful God. 2 Corinthians 5:14-24 talks of starting anew. Being in Christ makes us new beings embracing and exercising unconditional love that forgives and cares. Christ forgives us generously. Therefore, we should reciprocate by forgiving each other. Regarding the eldest son, he demonstrates our common attitude: we find it difficult to forgive. We outline reasons why we are not ready to forgive and even attempt to persuade others not to forgive those who have wronged them. The elder son was lost while the younger was lost but was found. Are you lost in your prejudices and malicious actions? Let us return and be reconciled to God and one another.

Conclusion

All the texts we have read today embody messages of forgiveness, renewal, and indeed Reconciliation. The younger son was reconciled to his family but the elder son strayed away. Christ commissions us to radically and relentlessly work for RECONCILIATION in and out of season. You and I must embody and exercise forgiveness that is not predicated on any human condition or standard.

In the atmosphere of love, healing and reconciliation, let us celebrate our unity in diversity by not allowing our confessional and doctrinal differences to stand in the way of Christian fellowship.

May God continue to be our help as we seek to live out the Christian vocation of RECONCILIATION in a fragmented and injured world.

Amen.