

Ecumenical Prayer Service at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church
Thursday 22nd January 2004
Homily by Fr. Dr. Francesco Pierli

Reading: Romans 14:13-23: The kingdom of God is joy, justice and peace in the Holy Spirit

Africa: a Continent at Prayer

Africa is a continent in love with Christ! It seems that the destinies of Jesus and of Africa are deeply intertwined. At an early age Jesus found a haven, a place of safety in Egypt. On the last day of his life, on the way to Calvary, the so-called “way of the cross”, he managed to reach the top of the hill with the help of Simon of Cyrene, an African from Libya. Over the last 100 years there has been an unprecedented growth in the number of faithful followers of Christ on the African continent.

Africa is a continent at prayer! Here in St. Andrew’s we are near St. Paul’s University Chaplaincy; every Sunday both churches overflow with people! Not far away there is the Nairobi Arboretum: it is an open church on Sunday mornings: groups at prayer, singing, reading the Bible, listening to preachers, etcetera. Three hundred meters from this church there is Uhuru Park! On Sundays it is also filled with groups of people at prayer; in addition there are the groups at crossroads or in the shadow of trees along the roads of Nairobi. The presence of God is felt deeply in relationships; indeed, we believe fervently that our lives are a testament to God’s presence and to his action in the world.

But what about the Kingdom of God?

But now a question arises: are all these prayers conducive to the Kingdom of God? Do these prayers reveal the presence of the kingdom of God in the continent? Let us now re-read part of the letter to the **Romans 14:13-23** just heard: *... for the Kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, whoever serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by others. Let us then pursue what leads peace and to build one another.* St. Paul in this passage provides us with indicators to gauge whether our prayer is the kind of prayer Jesus had in mind when, in his discourse of the mountain he warned his disciples: *When you pray do not babble like the pagans* (Mt 6:7). Jesus distinguishes his prayer from the prayer of the pagans. The prayer of the pagans neither reveals the Kingdom nor is conducive to it. St. Paul, in the passage from Romans, tells us that the indicators of the presence of the Kingdom in our midst are **joy, justice and peace**. These three indicators are called *gifts of the Holy Spirit* by the same apostle in the letter to the Galatians (5.22). Let us examine briefly to find out whether these clear signposts of God’s kingdom are indeed in our midst.

Joy

All in all, Africa is a joyful continent. We can see smiling children all over. Africa is well known world wide for dancing, for singing, and for celebrations. Yes! There is joy but it is not a perfect joy; there are indications that this joy is often superficial. For example, the addiction to alcohol and to drugs reveals a deep dissatisfaction. There is also much fear, many different kinds of fear. Fear is the opposite of joy. Let us thank God for the joy that is already present in our midst but let us also pray that the joy might come from deep down in the heart and might overcome addictions and fear. Then the Kingdom will be seen to grow.

Justice

What about justice? Justice means perception; it means effective respect and honour for the dignity of human beings. Three weeks back we celebrated Christmas; we manifested our strong and deep faith in Jesus the Son of God born as human being. His mystery reveals our mystery, that is: our divine dignity. God’s divinity is in us, our divine human dignity. Do we manifest this real faith in our divine dignity in the way we treat one another, in our private and social relationships? This answer is not obvious! Some

years back I used to be the chaplain in the Juvenile Prison at Athi River. I was astounded at the way the prisoners were treated, by the prison warders and even by the Catholic catechist. They were treated as objects, as creatures without any dignity; they were trampled upon, despised and abused.

They were treated as if human dignity depends on behaviour! But this is not so!. The passage we read from the letter of St. Paul to the Romans exhorts us not to criticize, not to judge. And this repeats what Jesus said: “Judge not and you will not be judged.” (Lk 6:37-42) Judgment is disrespectful of the dignity of human beings and focuses only on external behaviour. Judgement only touches behaviour, disregarding the immense dignity of persons; judgment is short-sighted because is centred on external behaviour only.

For me, the perception of human dignity constitutes a decisive element of our faith in Jesus, of Jesus, divine and human who reveal in himself the immense mystery in each human person.

A few days ago, on the front page of *The Nation* I saw a person being “necklaced” and about to be burnt alive; all the people on top of him had no thought of mercy. When we pray together we must be aware of the mystery of the human person for without this awareness our prayer is not conducive to the Kingdom of God, it remains prayer yet to be Christianised. Prayer that is not inclusive of justice is a pagan prayer.

Peace

Peace in the passage of Saint Paul is the last indicator of the presence of the Kingdom. Peace means relationship, a relationship that is consistent with justice. Peace is a divine relationship in the blessed Trinity. The differences between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are not disruptive: there is immense dignity in the three persons. Somewhere I read: **remember that difference is OK**. However, for many of us difference is not OK; we are afraid of difference, we criticize difference, we like all others to be like us.

St. Paul tells us in the letter to the Galatians that joy, justice and peace are gifts of the Holy *Spirit*: they are divine sparks, gifts from above. Let us then keep praying as we are doing this evening so that these gifts: joy, justice and peace might be bestowed on us all. Let them be the longing of our hearts, the pursuit of our prayer. But these gifts are more than just gifts from above to be merely received passively; they should be received **dynamically**, we are to pursue them with our intelligence, our heart and our energy. We should pursue them all the time, to make them our task and our mission. It is our duty to spread joy in and around us! We have the mission to build justice, to be reconcilers and peacemakers.

Prayer for empowerment

Let us then intercede for the Holy Spirit to be upon us, to empower us to harbour joy in ourselves and to spread to others, particularly to those who are harassed by tribulations and addictions. Let us pray that we might have peace in ourselves and that we might see the dignity of all human beings. Let us pray that our slums, where conditions at present are so contrary to human dignity, may also become places of peace.

Let the beatitude “Blessed are the peacemakers because they shall be called sons and daughters of God” inspire us. May the Holy Spirit of God help us to be peacemakers like Christ Jesus who came at Christmas as the King of peace. May our own commitment to peace reveal the divine dignity of all human beings. Yes! Commitment to peace reveals what we are: sons and daughters of God. If we build peace, we reveal our own dignity and justice and peace will be embraced in and through us.

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