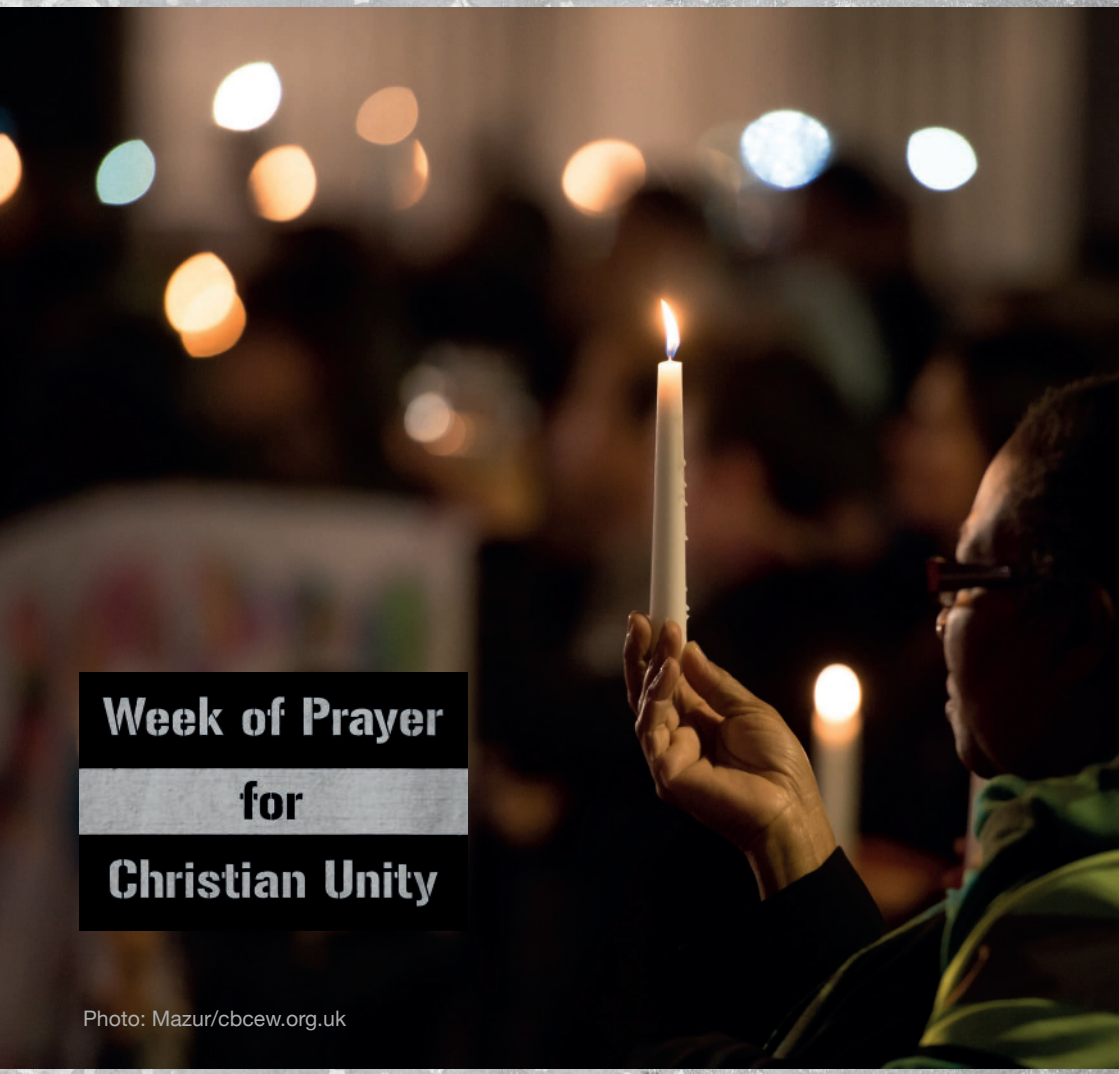
Be-Longing:

Praying for Unity amidst Injustice



Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

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Caidreabh: Ag Urnaigh airson Aonadh am-measg Ana-cheartas

churches together IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND

18-25 January 2023

www.ctbi.org.uk/weekofprayer

Welcome

The murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis in May 2020 was described as a watershed moment. There was a sense that the global wave of solidarity that brought people out onto the streets during a pandemic would make it impossible to ignore the deadly consequences of institutional racism and the power imbalances that deny human dignity.

The Black Lives Matter movement has certainly sparked uncomfortable yet necessary conversations, shaking the complacency that allowed racism and xenophobia to slip down the agendas of political and civic leaders alike. It has also questioned their reliance on legislation to protect people's rights and challenged the failure to invest in the deeper work of examining the quality of our relationships in society, the attitudes that shape them and the language that defines them.

Yet with each passing year we see continued evidence that, across the world, the powerful institutions of the state continue to treat people differently based on race, ethnicity and other facets of identity that are protected in legislation. Those who live in fear are still waiting for their watershed moment.

Despite the heightened awareness of the nature and consequences of racism in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement there is a persistent resistance to dialogue about issues of power and privilege, exclusion and alienation in society. Christians bring to this dialogue a vision of reconciliation grounded in mercy and faithfulness, justice and peace, from which we draw hope for the healing of relationships.

For this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we are guided by the churches of Minneapolis as we seek to explore how the work of Christian unity can contribute to the promotion of racial justice across all levels of society. Through this resource, the CTBI writers' group has also focussed our attention on the 30th anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, which we mark this year. The work of restoring hope through justice undertaken in Stephen's memory continues to inspire and change lives for the better.

As we join with other Christians around the world for this year's Week of Prayer we pray that our hearts will be open to see and hear the many ways in which racism continues to destroy lives, and to discern the steps we can take as individuals and communities to heal the hurts and build a better future for everyone.

Dr Nicola Brady, General Secretary, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland

Do good; seek justice (Isaiah 1:17)

On 22 April 1993 a teenager was murdered on the streets of London while waiting for a bus. Stephen Lawrence was a promising young man looking forward to fulfilling his dream of becoming an architect. He was murdered simply because he was black. The murder was to have a seismic effect on society and its reverberations were felt across the four nations of Britain and Ireland. It revealed the ugliness of racism, and this was compounded by the systemic failures of the police to bring Stephen's murderers to justice. Following a public inquiry, the Macpherson Report of 1999 brought to wider attention the concept of "Institutional Racism", the racism that is deeply embedded in society or in institutions.

This year we mark the 30th Anniversary of Stephen Lawrence's murder and this will be a major focus for many who work for a society that is free from racism. As long as racism exists, we live in a divided society and a divided world, so during this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we reflect upon how these divisions impact our shared life as we pray together for the unity for which Christ prayed. But we also acknowledge how much churches have contributed to division and prejudice within our institutions and also society. As long as there is racism there will be no Christian unity!

This year's resources are inspired by the experience of our Christian sisters and brothers in another part of the world who are wrestling with this very issue. They have reflected on how we pray for Christian unity when Christians are part of unjust and racist structures. For the churches of the US State of Minnesota, the murder of George Floyd and the institutional racism it embodied provide the focus for their prayer for unity and justice. They place before us the prophet Isaiah's challenge to do good and seek justice (Isaiah 1:17). The prophet is writing to the people of Judah at a time when formal religion is thriving, in a culture which understands wealth as blessing from God and poverty as punishment. Seeking justice and doing good is not on the agenda of either the priests in the Temple or the ruling authorities in the neighbouring palace.

Isaiah seeks to awaken the conscience of the people to the reality of their situation. Instead of honouring their religious expression as a blessing, he sees it as a sacrilege. Isaiah denounces the political, social and religious structures which encourage the hypocrisy of offering sacrifices whilst oppressing the poor. He speaks out vigorously against corrupt leaders and in favour of the disadvantaged. Isaiah teaches that God requires righteousness and justice from all people, all the time, in all spheres of life.

Our world today mirrors the challenges that Isaiah confronted. Justice, righteousness and unity originate from God's profound love for each of us. They are at the heart of who God is and how God expects us to be with one another. Yet injustice and oppression continue. The sin of racism is evident in practices that set one racial group over and against another. When accompanied or sustained

by imbalances of power, racial prejudice moves beyond the individual to take up residence in the structures of society.

Like the religious people so fiercely denounced by the biblical prophets, some Christian believers are complicit in supporting and perpetuating prejudice and oppression, thereby fostering division. Christians involve themselves in structures of sin that strip others of their dignity; structures that enable and promote slavery, colonisation, segregation, apartheid. Sometimes within the Church, we fail to welcome racial difference; when we fail to recognise the dignity of any, we trample on the dignity of all.

The prophet Isaiah calls us to learn to do good and requires us to decide to engage with the issues. We are challenged to engage in self-reflection. Praying together during this week allows us to reflect on what unites us and enables us to commit ourselves to confront all instances of oppression and injustice. Undertaking this commitment requires churches to acknowledge their own complicity in racial injustice. We must confess how our silence has allowed other voices to sound out without challenge. As Christians we must be willing to disrupt systems of oppression and advocate for justice. Our commitment to each other requires us to engage in restorative justice (mishpat). We must speak out, dismantle unjust structures and create a society in which people can live with freedom and dignity. We must engage in dialogue and so increase awareness and insight about the lived experience of all people. Together, we must engage in the struggle for justice in society – because we all belong to Christ.

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, through the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, stands in solidarity with our sisters and brothers in the United States by reflecting upon racism in our own context.

DAY 1

Made in the image of God

Readings

Genesis 1:26-28

Revelation 7:9-12

Commentary

In the first book of the Bible, we are told that we are made in the image of God, not just individually but corporately. All of humanity, people of all ethnicities, cultures, languages and religions, together represent the image of the Creator. This means that to deny that image in any one race, indeed in any one person, is to reject God's presence in the whole of humanity.

To be Christian means to be a disciple. We are called to learn together what it is to do good, and who and what it is in God's creation that needs us to stand in solidarity.

As society becomes more indifferent to the needs of others, we, as the children of God, must learn to take up the cause of our oppressed brothers and sisters by speaking truth to power and if necessary, plead their case so that they may live in peace with justice. In doing this we will always do the right thing, will always be recognising God's image in all of us.

Our commitment to eradicate and to be healed of the sin of racism requires us to be prepared and willing to be in relationship with our Christian sisters and brothers. That will be a sign of unity for the whole world.

Reflection

We give them names:
refugees,
asylum seekers,
migrants,
economic migrants,
some more welcome than others.

But you know their human names
because they are your kin,
stamped with your image,
divinely human.

Prayer

You made us, God,
in your own image,
and then became one of us,
proud of those you have made.

Make us proud of being part of that
worldwide family,
and eager to discover and celebrate
your image
in every person, every culture,
every nation
that we are privileged to encounter.

Questions

Do you find it easy to recognise the image of God in other people? Or is that sometimes a challenge?

How does your church or group of churches welcome those new to your community?

How can we see the image of God in people we find difficult to love?

Go and do

(see www.ctbi.org.uk/goanddo)

Take time to learn about a culture/language/nation of which you know nothing, or very little. Learn as much as you can about those people and, if at all possible, learn more directly from a person or persons from that group.

Include a different language in the worship of your church at your next service – it may be even more effective if no one in your congregation understands it!

Look back in the news from 10 years ago to find a group of people who were endangered at that time. Find out what their situation is now and how you, your church or group of churches could support them and/or learn from them.

DAY 2

That they may be one

Readings

Isaiah 1:12-18

John 17:13-26

Commentary

Jesus prays that we will be "completely one", praying for an authentic and selfless unity, one with no half measures, reflected in the person of God, in the unity of the Trinity. Such unity is challenging, it requires self-reflection, humility, a release of power and control, and an openness to change. Is this the unity that you are praying for this week?

Isaiah reminds us of the hypocrisy that can still exist in our churches, claiming a love for others, but really only extending a full welcome to those who are like us. Many have experienced pain, rejection, abuse, and exclusion within the Church. A Christian expression of unity must include everyone and offer healing and justice. This is rarely done in isolation, but more often together.

Instead of offering empty worship Isaiah calls us to "learn to do good; seek justice" (Isaiah 1:17). Learning to do good also requires an openness to change. This is the perfect season for Christians to reflect not just on unity but on the role we can all play together in promoting racial justice.

To seek justice is to create space for God's just ordering and enduring wisdom in a world all too often unmoved by suffering.

And yet, there is joy in doing what is right. There is joy in affirming that "Black Lives Matter" in the pursuit of justice for God's oppressed, dominated, and exploited beloved. There is power in giving in to wisdom's call for justice, and in doing it as a church together.

Reflection

Trample my courts no more, says the Lord,
cease your offerings to me.
I cannot endure your worship,
it is too heavy to bear.

Put down your burden,
release the load of others.
Rescue, defend, and plead as one,
in my name, seek justice together.

Prayer

God of Unity,
forgive us when we are self-serving
and help us to grow in unity and understanding
as we extend your love and justice to all.

Questions

Where can you speak out together with other Christians against racial injustice?

What burdens are people carrying in your area that the churches could support together?

Where do you need God's help in recognising, understanding and overcoming your own prejudice?

Go and do

(see www.ctbi.org.uk/goanddo)

Consider trying a devotional tool or app from another tradition. Pray that God will give you the humility and openness of heart to be open to receive something new from the tradition.

What social justice or local outreach projects are active in your area and led by those from a different tradition or background to you? Find out and get involved.

Join the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Prayer Cycle praying with people from all around the world.

DAY 3

Difference

Readings

Luke 5:27-29

Amos 5

Commentary

The identity of the Minnesota Working Group is immersed in the rich and haunting harmonies that tell the history of many peoples.

"Our bodies can be in tune with the ancestral, while acknowledging all of the pain, joy, brilliance, fatigue, connection and more wrapped up in one. We centre ourselves in the stories of the place we call home. We are men, women, mothers, fathers, storytellers and healers."

We can recognise the diversity within our communities if we take time to look. Even within our gatherings there is a beautiful tapestry of worship experience and spiritual expression, woven together from the indigenous population, from those who have immigrated, or those who are displaced and who now call this place home.

God has shown us what is good through our interconnectedness. We are blessed and we are to bless others. We are loved and we are to love others. We are to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God, together. We. Not Me. Our kinship and God's teachings guide us into community together as we learn and act as We. Not Me.

So our gatherings, prayers, hymnody, art and culture should reflect this, and be infused with the beauty of difference, all the while reaching toward the unity of God's divine justice.

A tapestry is a beautiful work of art, but if you look at the back, you see the messy edges, and frayed ends, the knots and snags – how do we celebrate the beauty of the tapestry while acknowledging the work that is necessary to maintain the beauty, not as a façade, but as a result of recognising and celebrating difference?

Reflection

What is this noise?
These meaningless festivals of
falsehood,
litanies of lip service and diatribes of
doxologies,
that seek to drown out the reality of

poisonous polity,
that hope to mask the clanging
cymbals of fear and frailty.
We do not seem to understand
that disharmony is our downfall.

But in the midst of our din,
God calls forth
from each corner of this earth,
songs of justice that roll down
like waters –
interwoven melody and haunting
harmony
deep enough to hold our dissonance
and the unresolved tension
of our journeys to this place.

Questions

How often do we think and act as 'We. Not me'?

How do we recognise and celebrate difference in our communities?

How much of the necessary work are we doing to make a beautiful tapestry in our communities? What projects can you identify, or gaps in provision do you notice in your area/ community?

Prayer

Gracious and loving God,
expand our vision
that it may be wide enough
to recognise the beautiful complexity
of the tapestry you chose to weave
with each and every one of us.

Gather our frayed edges,
our loose ends
and bind us together for your glory.

Go and do

(see www.ctbi.org.uk/goanddo)

Meet people from another community and share stories together.

Invite people from another community to help you to reflect on how you can act as 'We. Not Me'.

Identify some different groups within your community and reflect on how you might pray and work 'with' them, rather than 'for' them.

Dates

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is traditionally observed from 18th to 25th January (the octave of St Peter and St Paul). However, some groups choose other tim es of the year, particularly around Pentecost which is a symbolic date for the unity of the church. Do make your own decision, taking local factors into account. To allow for use at any time in the year, the Days material uses the notation 1-8.

Order of service

The order of service in the centre of the pamphlet can be pulled out and photocopied if you wish. Alternatively, all resources can be downloaded from the CTBI website and you are welcome to further edit or adapt them for local use. Please acknowledge the source of material as Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, Week of Prayer for Christian Unity resources.

Christian unity wall

Please add details and photos of your events, prayers and messages of unity to the Christian unity 'wall' at weekofprayer.org by posting to Twitter using the #wpcuwall hashtag. Posts appear automatically (after a slight delay).

Photo credits

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Order of Service

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churches together
IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND

Parts of the service assigned to a Reader may be shared among several different readers. Similarly, texts assigned to the Leader may be shared among clergy or leaders from the different traditions and communions participating in the worship. These leaders may pronounce the Sending together.

The Gathering

Leader God is here.

Congregation **The Spirit is with us.**

Leader How great is this place,
for it is the touching-place of God.

In Christ, we are gathered from the edges
and woven into the dream.

Here we feel the hint of heaven,
where justice, love and mercy meet.

Here we celebrate
the blessedness of unity in God.

We, who were once far off,
are brought near.

And so we pray,
God, creator of all,

in your love, you have made each one of us
in your grace, you gather us together in your image
in your mercy, you make us restless until we find our rest in you.
Disturb us in our contentment,
distract us from our comforts
deter us from our conflicts
until your kingdom comes and your will is done.

Congregation **Amen.**

A Hymn of Praise

Invitation to Confession and Forgiveness

We gather to pray for the unity that is Christ's gift to the Church. We gather in hope that the world might believe and be reconciled to God.

We recognise that we are part of churches and communities that are divided by injustice, especially the sin of racism, which stands contrary to the image of God shining from every human face.

"And what does the Lord require of us but to do justice, and to love kindness, and walk humbly with our God?" (Micah 6:8)

And so we come in penitence and faith to confess…

Silence

Leader Forgive us Lord, when we come to worship without walking humbly before you.

Congregation **May we be forgiven**

Leader We ask forgiveness for the complicity of churches in the evils of colonialism.

Congregation **May we be forgiven**

Leader We ask forgiveness for our sins of injustice and oppression.

Congregation **May we be forgiven**

Leader We have been called to unity. Forgive us anew and reconcile us to one another.
May God's mercy free us from our sins, to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

Congregation **Amen! Thanks be to God!**

Prayer

God of all,
because of your great love
our sins have been washed away
and we are part of the beloved community.
We come before you, a holy family,
a rainbow people,

united in the beautiful diversity of your creation.
We celebrate the rich tapestry of the human family.
We commit ourselves to overcome prejudice and disunity wherever we find it
and to walk humbly in your presence.
Amen

Ministry of the Word

Micah 6:6-8

Psalm 85:5-12

Leader — Righteousness and peace have kissed

Congregation — **Righteousness and peace have kissed**

Reader

Bring us back, O God, our saviour!
Put an end to your grievance against us.
[6] Will you be angry with us forever?
Will your anger last from age to age?

[7]Will you not restore again our life,
that your people may rejoice in you?
[8]Let us see, O LORD, your mercy,
and grant us your salvation.

Reader

[9]I will hear what the LORD God speaks;
he speaks of peace for his people and his faithful,
and those who turn their hearts to him.

Photo: REUTERS / Alamy Stock Photo

[10]His salvation is near for those who fear him,
and his glory will dwell in our land.

Reader

[11]Merciful love and faithfulness have met;
justice and peace have kissed.
[12]Faithfulness shall spring from the earth,
and justice look down from heaven.

Luke 10:25-37

Hymn

A Homily or Sermon may be offered

(Moment of silence or hymn)

Stones and Stories

At this point everyone is invited to listen to two or more stories or testimonies from people who have challenged racism in their personal or professional life. Videos or sound files can be downloaded from the CTBI website at ***https://ctbi.org.uk/weekofprayer****. If you are using these, you may wish to suggest that people listen either with their eyes closed or focused on a crucifix or cross, or some other focal point. If it is appropriate, local testimony can be offered instead. After each story/testimony it is recommended that silence is kept.*

Leader When you came into the church you were given a stone. Hold that stone now as we listen to stories of injustice.

[We listen to a story of how someone has experienced racism and sought to challenge it]

Leader As we hold our stones, heavy with pain and suffering and injustice, we remember.

Thirty years ago a British teenager waiting for a bus was murdered. We remember Stephen Lawrence. We remember and honour his parents, who fought tirelessly for justice. We bow our heads in shame that society has moved on so little in thirty years.

[We listen to a story of how someone has witnessed racism and sought to challenge it]

We stand in solidarity with our sisters and brothers in Minnesota. We remember George Floyd, slowly suffocated to death in an appalling example of racism and abuse of power. We give thanks for the outrage and anger which resounded throughout the world and which loudly proclaimed, "Black Lives Matter!"

We honour all those people who are and have been victims of racism and xenophobia. We fall silent, acknowledging that their names are not known, their stories not heard, justice not delivered.

Silence

We pray that their suffering may bring forth the fruit of transformation and justice.

Finally, we remember and honour those we know who are victims of prejudice, injustice, abuse, bullying, or violence of any kind. We ask Christ crucified to bless them, give them strength, lead them to freedom. We ask forgiveness of anything we may have done, or omitted to do, to contribute to their suffering or collude with their abuse.

Leader — We invite you now to bring your stones, heavy with pain and suffering, remorse and repentance to the cross.

As the congregation moves forward to place their stones at the foot of the cross, we listen to 'Lift Every Voice', an African American Jubilee Spiritual which was written by James Weldon Johnson (1900). It is often referred to as the Black national anthem in the United States. The song is a prayer of thanksgiving for faithfulness and freedom for the enslaved, voicing a cry for liberation and affirmation for African American people.

https://www.jamesweldonjohnson.org/lift-every-voice-and-sing

Lord's Prayer

Concluding Prayer

God for all,
we place before you
our willing complicity in the evil of racism,
our ready complacency in the face of injustice,
the hardness of our hearts and the heaviness of our souls.
Judge us, not for these things,
but for the manner in which we act
to transform the world
into the place of your Kingdom.
Amen

Concluding Hymn

The Sending: A Franciscan Benediction

Attributed to the earliest followers of St Francis

May God bless you with discomfort
at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger
at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people,
so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears
to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,
so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them
and turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness
to believe that you can make a difference in the world,
so that you can do what others claim cannot be done
to bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.
Amen

~ • ~

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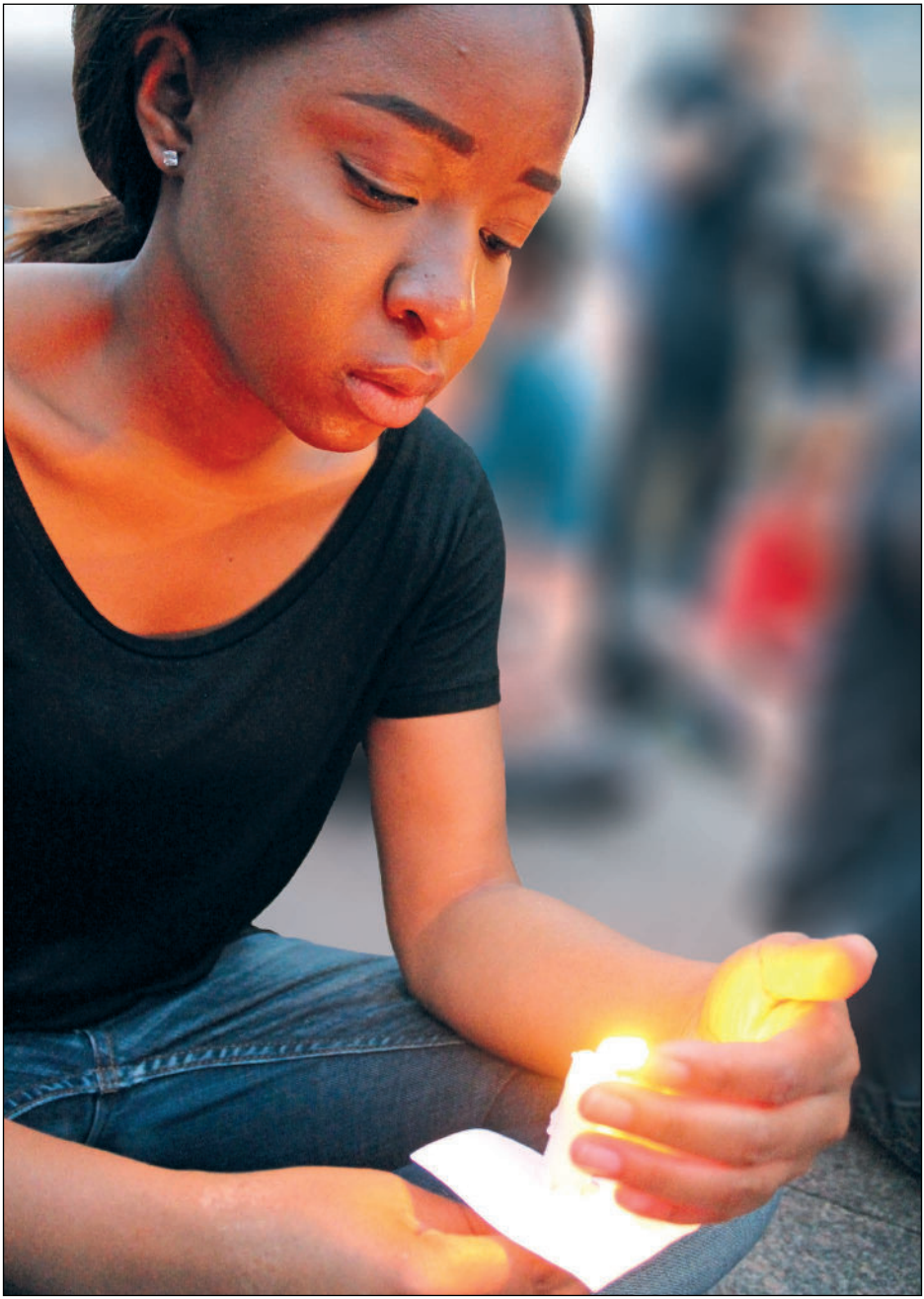


DAY 4

Lament

Readings

Psalm 22:1-5

Matthew 27:45-50

Commentary

Lament requires us, sometimes even demands us, to really look and see. A young woman looked and saw the tears of the oppressed. The video she shot on her phone of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 was seen all around the world and unleashed a holy rage as people witnessed, and finally acknowledged, what African Americans have experienced for centuries: subjugation by oppressive systems in the midst of privileged blind bystanders.

In the UK, black men between 18 and 25 years are five times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police and black women are four times more likely to die during childbirth. We have much to lament.

The two passages today speak of lament. Jesus, and David, the brutally honest psalmist, set this example for us of what to do when we're in pain.

"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" is a pain-filled cry at the very beginning of Psalm 22 that is mirrored by Jesus himself on the cross in Matthew 27.

The pain is not sanitised and polished for us.

It is raw and honest.

Lament is a hard practice to embrace. Our society wants us to rush towards positivity and victory. What does it mean to truly lament? To sit with the pain. Lament demands that we open ourselves, it demands from all of us, that we no longer ignore the pain.

Reflection

"Lament is a protest so deep that it must become a prayer, for only God can provide needed hope that justice will prevail and that the future will be different."

Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope, Kathleen D Bilman and Daniel L Migliore, The Pilgrim Press 1999

Prayer

God of justice and of grace,
remove the scales from my eyes so
I can truly see the oppression
around me,
and give me courage not only to
name it,
but to fight it while providing
authentic presence,
witness, and compassion to the
oppressed.

Questions

How have you been involved in the practice of lament?

In what ways are marginalised groups in your community experiencing pain?

How are you affected when you observe people's grief in other parts of the world, for example in the aftermath of a violent attack or a natural disaster?

Go and do

(see www.ctbi.org.uk/goanddo)

Sit and reflect, lament the pain you have noticed in your community (when it gets uncomfortable, stay for a while longer).

Who do you need to move closer to in order to hear their pain?

Connect with some people on the margins in your community to learn about their narrative of history and its consequences. What steps can you take to be a truth-teller of history?

DAY 5

Holy rage

Readings

2 Samuel 12:1-12

Mark 11:15-17

Commentary

In the passages today, both David and Jesus demonstrate holy rage through a strong resistance and anger towards the situation in front of them. Throughout Scripture we are reminded that injustice can provoke strong emotions, anger and even violent responses. These can be heightened when people have been deliberately silenced.

Throughout history we have seen a demand that comes from the oppressor to marginalised people to smile and make merry, to sing the songs of a happy past. Whether it was in minstrel shows, or Geisha dances, or Wild West cowboy and Indian shows, the oppressors have demanded that the oppressed perform happily to ensure their own survival. Their message is as simple as it is cruel; your songs, your ceremonies, your cultural identity, that which makes you sacredly unique, is only allowable so long as it serves us.

Even when the victims of oppression are encouraged to tell their stories they often find that people are only willing to listen to their pain and sadness, but draw back when they articulate angry demands for change.

Martin Luther King Jr said: "...in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard.... our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay [on justice]" He understood that the path to true peace lies in the healing of relationships through the work of justice, addressing the barriers that keep people from feeling included as full members of the community.

Are we truly ready to listen to the experiences of those who have been oppressed? Are we open to their tears but defensive against their anger? How might God be calling us to act to address the suffering that prompts this rage?

Reflection

You ate their meagre fare
you drank from their cup
and then you showed no remorse

As surely as the Lord lives
no justice, no peace

We chew up their stories

we pollute their wells
and then we show no remorse

As surely as the Lord lives
no justice, no peace

Turn our tables
set a place for everyone
disrupt our comfortable seats
drive us out
hungry for justice
thirsting for peace

As surely as the Lord lives
no justice, no peace

Prayer

God of the oppressed, open our eyes to the harm that continues to be inflicted on our siblings in Christ. Give us the courage to stand up and advocate for all who are silenced, even if it means releasing some of our own privilege to do justice.

Questions

Think of a situation in history where a community was able to channel its rage at injustice into meaningful positive change. What can we learn from this story?

Who might be most marginalised and at risk of being ignored in your local community? How can the Church help amplify their voice?

How could you help raise awareness today about a situation of injustice in the world?

Go and do

(see www.ctbi.org.uk/goanddo)

Research opportunities to participate virtually in global gatherings to raise awareness of situations of injustice, connecting with people across borders and cultures.

Identify a group in your local area that is working to address the exclusion or stigma that can leave people feeling unheard or unseen, and support one of their events or initiatives.

Consider using social media, or other personal networks, to share examples from around the world of people who are courageously speaking out to challenge injustice.

DAY 6

Walking humbly in the way

Readings

Micah 6:6-8

Philippians 2:5-11

Commentary

Scripture reminds us that we cannot separate our love for God from our love for others. We love God when we feed the hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the prisoner. When we care for and serve "one of the least of these," we are caring for and serving Christ himself.

But we are called to go beyond giving or serving from a position of power, where we maintain our status above the person to whom we are ministering. How are we to emulate Jesus who, though he was Lord of all, became truly the servant of all? What is power, and how are we to use it and to share it in the work of God?

God calls us to honour the sacredness and dignity of each member of God's family. Caring for, serving and loving others reveals not who they are, but who we are. As Christians, we must be unified in our responsibility to love and care for others, as we are cared for and loved by God. In so doing, we live out our shared faith through our actions in service to the world and we find our true calling as servants of the Servant King.

Reflection

Yours are the power and the glory.
Yet we see your greatest greatness
when you stoop to serve.

Creator, give us the power
to be powerless
and bestow on us the dignity
of the servant rich in love.

Prayer

Lord of the power and the glory,
you became for us the servant of all.
Show us the power and the glory
of servanthood
and enable us to minister to
your world
according to its needs and our abilities.

Questions

Where in your personal life could you bring blessing by yielding power?

How could the churches in your community share power to become more effective in service?

Find out about a country which has little political power, but which has much to teach you.

Go and do

(see www.ctbi.org.uk/goanddo)

What power do you have? Put that power to use for the service of others.

Find three ways in which the churches in your area could serve your community. And act on those things!

Agree as a group of churches on a project that empowers people locally, nationally or internationally, and form an action plan to put that into practice.

DAY 7

Agency

Readings

Matthew 5:1–8

Job 5:1-16

Commentary

Matthew's account of the Beatitudes begins with Jesus seeing the crowds. In that crowd he must have seen those who were peacemakers, the poor in spirit, the pure in heart, men and women who mourned, and those who hungered for justice. In the Beatitudes Jesus not only names people's struggles, he names what they will be: the children of God and inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Howard Thurman, African American theologian and spiritual advisor to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., believed, "the religion that Jesus lived produced the kind of life for Him that identifies with the downtrodden, outcast, broken, and disinherited of the world." Yet, Thurman also believed that, "It cannot be denied that too often the weight of the Christian movement has been on the side of the strong and the powerful and against the weak and oppressed – this, despite the gospel."

If we listen hard enough, we will hear a diversity of voices crying out under the weight of oppression. Action is needed today to bring love, hope, justice and liberation for us and others in the future.

Oppression of any kind demands that each of us chooses to engage in order to eradicate the injustice(s) that break our hearts open.

In prayer we align our hearts with the heart of God, to love what God loves and to love as God loves. Prayer with integrity therefore aligns and unites us – beyond our divisions – to love what, whom and how God loves, and to express this love in our actions.

Let us all work together with God in our hope and commitment to shut injustice's mouth and eradicate oppression in all areas of our society.

Reflection

I see you there,
You – blessed ones,
You – poor in spirit,
You – mourners, meek ones and
merciful ones.
I hear your stomachs rumble
with hunger.
Is righteousness enough to satiate
your thirst,
like rain upon the earth?

You have had your fill of the schemes
of crafty ones,
been force fed so-called wisdom by
the wily.
With pure and undivided hearts
you train your eyes upon God's cause –
to lift high the perceived lowly,

to bring to safety any who are in danger
of being trampled
by pride-filled footsteps of trespassers,
or stabbed by weaponised words
hell-bent on cutting down and
dehumanising.

Shut the mouth of injustice, God,
tear down the strongholds of the
power-hungry
and give us the desire and the strength
to rebuild a realm
where all who are wounded are
brought comfort,
where the inheritance is shared by all,
where swords and shields are beaten
into tools for sowing peace
and reconciliation,
where healing abounds
and mouths open to sing stories of
shared blessing and hope.

Prayer

God of justice,
Empower us to be agents of your grace
and mercy.

Questions

Can you think of a time when you felt powerless? How would you have liked others to respond?

Think about the ways you might have influence in your local community? How might you use that influence to help those who feel powerless?

Around the world whole communities find themselves powerless as a result of corruption and exploitation. How might the choices we make in our daily lives impact these situations?

Bless us with the courage to relinquish
our power.
Bless us with the humility to stand
with the oppressed.
Bless us with the integrity to love our
neighbours as we ourselves would
seek to be loved.

Go and do

(see www.ctbi.org.uk/goanddo)

Try volunteering for a local community organisation.

Where do you see people being denied agency in your local community? Explore ways to take action that raises awareness.

In the work of international development there is increasing recognition of the need to address the legacy of injustice and exploitation and restore to marginalised communities the power to make decisions about their own future. Explore ways to help further this work through your giving and advocacy.

DAY 8

Restoring hope through the work of justice

Readings

Isaiah 40:1-11

Luke 1:46-55

Commentary

In facing up to the harm caused by racial injustice, we hold before us the promise of God's love and the healing of relationships. The Prophet Isaiah speaks of God gathering and comforting all people who have been lost and have experienced suffering. In the Magnificat, Mary reminds us that God never abandons us and that God's promise to us is fulfilled in justice.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence. Stephen was a young man growing up in south-east London with big dreams for his future. His life was tragically cut short when, on 22 April 1993, he was murdered in an unprovoked racist attack. The pain of his family and the wider community was compounded by serious failings in the investigation of this crime, which were later exposed in the Macpherson Report. In his memory a foundation has been established to support and inspire young people to have a bright future. Stephen's mother, (Baroness) Doreen Lawrence, says of this work: "Justice for Stephen is about all of us, every one of us, in society having justice. There are still too many young people who do not have a sense of hope, who just don't get the chance to live their dreams. I want all our children and young people to feel inspired, be confident and have hope in their own future. We are building hope, but there is more to do."

It is easy to feel hopeless as we are time and again reminded that we live in a fractured society that does not fully recognise, honour, and protect the human dignity and freedom of all human beings. An alignment of love of God, love of all our human family and love of justice are deeply needed for hope and healing. God calls us to continually live into hope, trusting that God will be with us in the midst of our individual and communal liminal space – on the threshold of what has been and what is, while yearning for what is yet to be.

Reflection

Fr Bryan Massingale, one of the world's leading Catholic social ethicists and scholars in racial justice, reminds us of his hope and challenge:

"Social life is made by human beings.
The society we live in is the result of
human choices and decisions.
This means that human beings can
change things.
What humans break, divide
and separate,
we can with God's help,
also heal, unite and restore.
What is now does not have to be.
Therein lies the hope and
the challenge."

Prayer

Creator God,
please teach us to go inward
to be grounded in your loving spirit
so we can go outward in wisdom
and courage
to always choose the path of love
and justice.

Questions

Many of the global protests that took place after George Floyd's killing were led by young people, some of whom were connected to the Church. How can we use their ardour for racial justice to bring about change in the Church?

What substantive actions should have taken place after Stephen Lawrence's killing? Why do you think they did not occur?

How did you respond to the killings of Stephen Lawrence and/or George Floyd? How have these tragedies encouraged you to take a greater interest in racial justice?

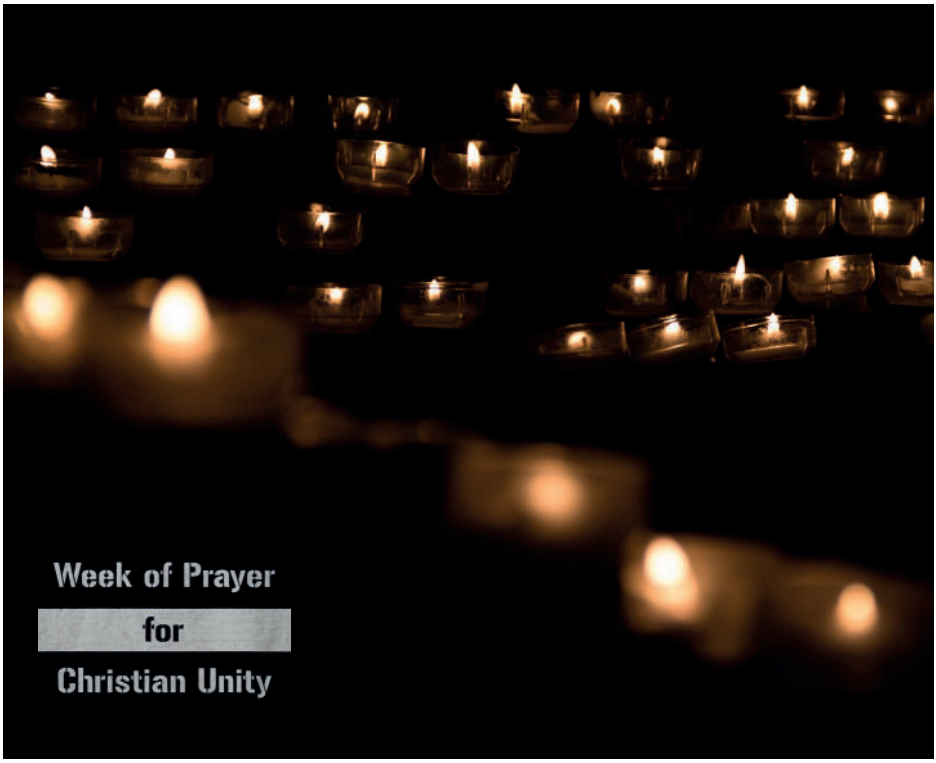
Go and do

(see www.ctbi.org.uk/goanddo)

Racial justice will only take root in churches if they take the issue seriously. What tangible changes could your church make to connect to the global movement for racial justice?

Racial Justice Sunday is marked annually on the second Sunday in February. Encourage your church to celebrate this day, which is committed to fighting for justice, equality and dignity in church and society.

Stephen Lawrence wanted to become an architect. Why not mentor or support a teenager like Stephen, so that she or he will be able to realise their dreams.



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