

## Pentecost 2016

### Christ comes to restore our human dignity



In conjunction with the *Season of Human Dignity* initiative which is gathering momentum within the DRC Family of Churches, the united focus of the church family during the 2016 Pentecost Season is on the biblical truth that God created all human beings to his image, and that Jesus sensitises his church in our time to hear and embrace this truth. As disciples of Jesus we hear the truth of God's word, and we long to react by obeying him as people who are sent to this broken world with the message that Christ came to restore our human dignity.

The series emphasises the belief that human dignity is rooted in God's act of creation and that Christ came to restore the sinful corruption of human value before God. Sinful ideological views and practices reached inhuman measures in our day, to such an extent that we treat other people as though they are not part of God's perfect act of creation.

In conjunction with the aim of the *Season of Human Dignity* this series of meditations in Pentecost 2016 wants to witness through the power of the Holy Spirit and call all people in our societies to restore human dignity in Southern-Africa. We also link to the program for human dignity of the World Council of Churches, as a sign of our unity with the ecumenical church across the world.

The series builds on the four values of the *Season of Human Dignity*; respect, listening, love and embrace. We present two contributions for each of the four values and deal with each contribution separately. Local circumstances and practices will determine the use of the different contributions. Each meditation on the four values (2-9) links to a specific Scripture reading for a unique perspective. The first meditation functions as introduction to the series, while the last meditation (10) focusses on the Feast of Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The overarching theme is: *Christ comes*

*to restore our human dignity*, while the meditations below are presented under different headings. For the purpose of identification, the names of the authors are also mentioned:

**Meditation 1: James 2:1-13. Dawid Kuyler.**

Do not judge a person's outward appearance.

**Meditations 2: Luke 6:6-11. Nina Muller van Velden.**

The nature of respect.

**Meditation 3: Luke 7:24-30. Ntozakhe Simon Cezula.**

Respect is an important aspect of salvation.

**Meditation 4: Mark 9:14-29. Janine Williams.**

Listening: prayer as dialogue with God.

**Meditation 5: Mark 5:21-43. Annes Nel.**

Listen carefully so that people can trust Jesus.

**Meditation 6: Luke 7:36-50. Derik Myburgh.**

Love

**Meditation 7: John 21:15-19. David Carelse.**

Love heals and brings hope - love reinstates us in our office.

**Meditation 8: Matthew 8:1-4, Mark 1:40-45 & Luke 5:12-14. Dawid Mouton.**

Embracing care.

**Meditation 9. Matthew 9:18-26. Dewald Niemandt.**

Embracing – for the sake of life, restoration and healing of people.

**Meditation 10: Acts 2:1-11. Henco van der Westhuizen.**

Pentecost: The Spirit of Christ transforms us into a new, dignified community.

We greatly appreciate our co-workers who work with us to make these meditations available. There were ten authors: Dawid Kuyler, Nina Muller van Velden, Ntozakhe Simon Cezula, Janine Williams, Annes Nel, Derik Myburgh, David Carelse, Dawid Mouton, Dewald Niemandt and Henco van der Westhuizen. There were also people who helped with translating texts from Afrikaans to English, or from English to Afrikaans. Thank you to Johan Botha, Derik and Margie Myburgh, Marinda Cilliers and Annes Nel in this regard. Amanda Carstens from CLF rendered much support to prepare the series for electronic availability. Thank you all, once again.

We pray for a blessed Pentecost in your congregation and that the Holy Spirit will help us in future to treat all people with dignity as we follow the example of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Leader.

*Eddie Orsmond, Donald Gantana, Gideon van der Watt and Dawid Kuyler* (on behalf of the United Ministries for Service and Witness & The Season for Human Dignity).

## Day 1: Do not judge a person's outward appearance

James 2: 1-9

### 1. Focus and motivation

James 2:9 serves as the focus text for this meditation: “But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers” (NIV).

In the unity talks between members of the Dutch Reformed Church Family since 2008, the interlocutors have come to the consensus that a distorted view of human beings (anthropology) was the cause for the historical development of a society that is today still marked by racial discrimination. Although at the beginning of the church life in South Africa people from the indigenous population became members of the church and society through baptism, they were increasingly discriminated against based on their appearance and origin. Gradually people were not treated with human dignity.

Discrimination and disregard for the human dignity of all is not a new phenomenon in the church. Long ago the apostle James had to instruct the congregation that they had to treat people equally, regardless of their appearance or social status. James therefor wrote: “Love your neighbour as yourself” (2:8, NIV). We have to treat our neighbour (each other) with love.

### 2. We must be different

From James's letter it is clear that the followers of Jesus at least, have to act differently towards people than society does. All of us belong to groups or have relations in society. Where one lives, or go to school, where one works, where one goes to church, all of these have an influence on how you view people who are not part of *your* group. We do have to recognize that we are conditioned by society on how we act towards others. We are not born like this. Our parents and family raise us in this way, our friends influence us, our social and financial status affects us. Sometimes we are not even aware of our attitude of superiority and how we behave towards others.

James wanted to assist his readers to remember that they were Jesus believers. Therefor hê wrote: “My brothers [and sisters / beloved], as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favouritism” (judge a person's outward appearance) (2:1, NIV).

Whoever believes in Jesus Christ as Lord, recognizes that he has all authority over us. He is the Lord of glory. As Bible believers we assume all humans are created by God. In Genesis 1:27 we read: “God created man in His own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (NKJV). As humans we were created with a certain status and with a command. We represent God on

earth. Our (yours and mine) attitude and behaviour towards other people should be determined by *this* God-given status. Too often we treat people according to the status that we and society give to them.

Our country has a sad history of people who "believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory", but discriminate against people based on their outward appearance. As far back as 1857 racial discrimination has led the church to the point that believers of European descent and those of indigenous descent could no more sit together at the Lord's table. In 1881 a separate church was even established for believers of indigenous descent. In 1948 the then South African government took over the church's point of perspective and they sanctioned apartheid as the law of the country. The majority of people in South Africa were therefore deprived of treatment that stood the test of human dignity, based solely on their outward appearance. The majority of the people in our country could not decide where they wanted to live or work. They could not decide who they wanted to associate with and with whom they wanted to marry. A minority of people decided for all who they were and what their value (non-value) would be within this society.

### **3. And now the Word of God challenges us ...**

Today, after more than 20 years of democracy and a good constitution with a modern Bill of Rights, our struggle continues for people to treat each other with human dignity. Laws will not change our attitudes and practices. As faithful people who "*believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory*", we must be the change and make a difference.

As Dutch Reformed Church family we decided on a Season of Human Dignity, to help people to again live with human dignity and to treat others with human dignity. We reflected intensely on the demands of the gospel and how to follow Jesus in our country. The scope and level at which people's God-given human dignity is violated, stand in stark contrast to the claims of the gospel. At this time, we want to witness to one another in an attitude shaped by four values which guide our behaviour: respect, listen, embrace and love. We are convinced that the practice of these values can create new habits for dignified living. The Season of Human Dignity will be our focus for years to come and we will continue with it until the Lord leads us otherwise. We hope later to involve other churches also and to create a national movement from within the church. Our mission is to bear witness to the new life in Christ in which the God-given value of each person is insured.

The Season of Human Dignity is not a program with 10 steps. It is a process in which we want to engage people to assist each other to listen to one another's stories in the presence of God and of each other. Stories of pain, relating people's experiences where their human dignity was violated, and

stories of hope, relating people's experiences of rediscovered their human dignity. It is a wonderful journey of discovery by all of us to be healed and made whole again.

The Season is a space in which reflection and dialogue on human dignity should be promoted. There are many issues that need our attention. For now, we have identified eight themes for deep reflection and focus: gender, sexuality, racism, poverty, disability, health, ecology and education and training.

#### **4. We invite one another to go along**

As believers who "*believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory*", we invite people to ensure that what the apostle James wrote will be made true in our churches and society.

During this Pentecost we want to listen obediently to what God says and we want to seek and live together in faith to bring healing to our society. Let us focus each day of Pentecost on one aspect of human dignity and on how to live with human dignity.

Verse 8. "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbour as yourself,' you are doing right" (NIV).

Verse 9. "But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers" (NIV).

#### **5. Themes for prayer**

Before we pray, let us tell each other about:

Incidents where you felt you were not treated with human dignity (in the home, family, school, work);

Incidents where you did not treat others with human dignity.

Let us pray:

We confess those times that we did not treat others humanely and with dignity;

We bring people to the Lord who experience daily that they are not treated with human dignity.

## **Day 2: The nature of respect**

Luke 6:6-11

### **1. The man whose right hand was paralysed**

“On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shrivelled. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shrivelled hand, ‘Get up and stand in front of everyone.’ So he got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them: ‘I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?’ He looked around at them all, and then said to the man: ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He did so, and his hand was completely restored. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.” (Luke 6:6-11, NIV)

### **2. The story seen through a magnifying glass**

Readers of the New Testament know the Pharisees well. They were a group of Jews who were particularly concerned about the application of the Mosaic law (the Torah, in Hebrew). These Jewish believers were scrupulous about what they were taught from childhood to be the rules and guidelines of life. They were convinced that all spaces in life, not just isolated events at the temple, had to be holy.

Of course, this was not a bad idea. Jesus encouraged this, in fact! But there is a huge difference in the way the Pharisees and Jesus applied this idea in practice. And it is this difference in practical application that unrolls in this story.

One of the Commandments, a key aspect of the Jewish religion, highlights this difference: The Sabbath must be remembered by keeping it holy. Remembering the Sabbath should be done in the following manner: no one in a Jewish household (parents, children, owners, servants, animals and even foreign visitors) may work (Ex 20:8-10). This day must be set aside for the Lord. The Sabbath was the day to remember the story of how God created the world, how he had created everything in six days and rested on the seventh day. In addition, it was a day on which the Jewish people could think back to how the Israelites were set free from slavery by the Egyptians. When they were slaves, there was no rest for them. But when they were rescued from oppression, freed from slavery by the hand of God, they could share in God’s rest and breathe freely every seventh day.

But there was a perplexing question as to what exactly constituted work. What exactly may and may not be done on the Sabbath? This question caused problems and, over time, more rules were added.

The joy that the Sabbath was supposed to bring people gave way to a legalistic list of `musts' and `must-nots' that struck fear into people. The last thing a faithful Jew wanted to do, was to break one of the Commandments. And the Pharisees kept watch that all Jews kept the rules. Their respect for the Law - the letter of the Law - came to blind them to the need to respect those loved by God. The Pharisees' respect of the letter of the Law made them lose sight of God's heart.

The story of the scripture reading reveals the incorrect perceptions about and application of the Law by the Pharisees. A man with a paralysed hand (probably his 'working' hand) is present in the synagogue where Jesus taught people as was his habit. It was a Sabbath, and the Pharisees watched him carefully. From experience they knew that Jesus did not really follow their doctrines and instructions. They were waiting for the chance to catch him out. But Jesus saw through them and called the man to him. And then Jesus asked all present a difficult question: Does the Law allow us to do good or to harm on a Sabbath? Are we allowed to save or to kill on the Sabbath? The silence greeting the question indicated the self-evident answer. Of course the good must be done. Of course we must save. This is exactly what Jesus does: he saves the man with the paralysed hand. The man stretched out his hand on Jesus' command, and he was healed. The Pharisees were raging angry; this man, who alleged that he was the Son of the Holy God had no respect for the Law!

### **3. Respect seen through modern eyes**

This account has relevance to our own context. Despite good and noble intentions, it still happens that people in communities of faith get stuck by a respect for rules and regulations, order and discipline as necessities for belief. The Bible is surely clear on this, such people maintain, that some things are right and other things wrong. We dare not, insofar as we can control our nature, commit sins in the eyes of the Lord. In our commitment to and respect for rules there is a direct reflection of our commitment to and respect for God. Those who do not want to hear have to feel. We dare not move across the sharply defined borders of the rules. It is imperative to stand by our principles. People must simply understand this.

The temptation of such an approach, of showing respect to something rather than to someone - the Someone behind the something - quickly becomes legalism. This is slavishly following rules and regulations as if obedience to a doctrine can procure us salvation.

But Jesus makes it clear through his teachings, his suffering on the cross as well as through his death and resurrection that slavish attempts to keep to `musts' and `must-nots' cannot contribute to our salvation. We cannot win God's favour by ticking off lists and by proclaiming with complaisance: I did it! The temptation would remain that our respect of the 'commandments' (in whatever form they

may take) may blind us to the most important of them all, that of walking in love. For there is no commandment greater than this: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength' and 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12:30 & 31, NIV).

#### **4. Respect seen through love**

The commandment by which every other rule or guideline should be measured is whether we 'walk in love' (2 John 1:6). We are commanded to serve God through our respect, compassion and care where others are concerned. Should I detract from any other person's God-given dignity, I will be guilty of disrespect - even if I try to convince myself that I am just following 'the rules'. When a rule or regulation diminishes my respect for my neighbour, I should ask myself very seriously: To what or to (W)hom is my respect directed in this instance?

May the Lord give us, every day, the necessary wisdom and discernment so that we will not incline towards a dissolute life without any limits, but that we will live in humility. May we constantly ask ourselves if our claim to be living respectfully in the space created by God is visible in our relationships with others. Or is our speech nothing more than the echo of a gong or of a clanging cymbal, because we have all the knowledge and no love (1 Cor 13:1)?

#### **5. Themes for prayer**

Pray to respect everyone, those we know and those that are strangers to us.

Pray that we will not only confess to respect others, but that we will use our hearts, hands and feet to live in respect.

Pray for those who fear the judgment of other believers, no matter what the cause for this may be.

Pray that congregations will have the courage to arrange churches and other spaces intentionally to be secure and full of love and respect.

Pray for discernment to live in obedience to the Word of God.

### **Day 3: Respect is an important aspect of salvation**

Luke 7:24-30

### **1. Scripture reading**

‘When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What did you go out to see? A man dressed in fancy clothes? Look, those who wear fancy clothes and live in luxury are in kings’ courts! What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, *‘Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.*’ I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he is.” (Now all the people who heard this, even the tax collectors, acknowledged God’s justice, because they had been baptized with John’s baptism. However, the Pharisees and the experts in religious law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.)’ (Luke 7:24-29, NET Bible)

### **2. What did the crowds expect to see in the desert?**

Jesus asks the crowds whether they went to the desert to see a reed swayed by the wind. Given that reeds swayed by the wind in the desert are not a common natural happening, they are unlikely to precipitate travels to the desert. They then definitely went to see John. Or did they go to see a man dressed in extravagant clothes? Still they did not, because such people are not in the desert but in the palaces. In that case, what is it then they went to see? Is it a prophet that they wanted to see?

Well, they actually saw more than a prophet, Jesus tells them. The one they saw is the one the Scripture talked about and he quotes from the Scripture to justify his statement. He then describes John as the greatest of all people on earth, junior only to the heavenly beings. When he said this, the crowd, even the tax collectors, acknowledged God’s righteousness because they had been baptised by John. The Pharisees and the law experts on the other hand were not baptised by John and thereby rejected the purpose of God for themselves.

### **3. The context for Jesus’ question**

In Luke 3:16 John talked of the one coming after him and who is more powerful than him. Preceding this passage is a passage where John’s disciples ask Jesus whether he is the one. Without giving a direct answer, Jesus referred them to the miracles he had performed. By that he assured them that he definitely was the one. If those who were not baptised by John rejected God’s plan, it stands to reason therefore that those who reject Jesus also reject God’s plan. The position of the crowd and the Pharisees in Luke 7:29 & 30 is the climax of this passage.

To make more sense of this text it might be helpful to explore it in a broader context. Some scholars argue that the Lukan community comprised of both Jews and gentiles (cf. Moxnes, 1994:387). However, the Jewish authorities ostracised those Jews who shared table-fellowship with gentiles for endangering Jewish ethnic identity (cf. Esler, 1987:45). The Pharisees and the teachers of the law feature most in this exclusion. I therefore present them as the representatives of the authorities. Additionally, in those times there were people who were marginalised by society such as tax collectors, sinners, poor, widows and the sick. Sometimes they were regarded as not worthy to participate in the community of God. Luke dismisses this persuasion and emphasises that no one is doomed merely on the basis of who they are, but everyone is capable of receiving forgiveness and escaping the wrath to come, thereby bestowing respect to the despised.

In Luke 3:6, Mark (1:2-4) is extended so that John's preaching of "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah" (Is 40), will lead to all flesh seeing the salvation of God. This addition emphasises the acceptance of the other which the authorities refused. In Luke 3:8 John bashes the self-righteousness of the discriminatory Jews by rejecting the hope that being Abraham's descendant justifies one before God. In Luke, like Jesus, John bestows respect to all humanity.

It is against this background that we should understand today's Scripture reading. This passage follows an enquiry by John's disciples (Luke 7:18-23) after they heard about Jesus' curing of a certain centurion's slave (Luke 7:1-10) and raising a widow's dead son (Luke 7:11-17). Although John's question might cause some uneasiness to some readers, it might also be that the question was precipitated by John's discernment of the Messiah in these deeds. Maybe that is why Jesus fed him back with His deeds for an answer. This passage is also followed by the forgiveness of a sinful woman in the presence of a Pharisee. These are deeds that brought salvation indiscriminately to humanity, in line with Luke 3:6.

In addition to the spiritual nature, salvation also concerns the needs of the people like deliverance from physical danger such as sickness, deformity, demon possession, death, or the 'evil one'. These deeds confer respect to the outcasts. To respect somebody is to acknowledge what one is capable of. These outcasts are also capable of receiving salvation, and acknowledgement thereof is to respect them. All this, John and Jesus did with authority because the Scripture talked about them. Those who reject them reject God's plan, like the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who were not baptised by John.

What message transpires for us from this reading as present readers?

#### **4. A message for our time**

To have a right relationship with God we need to respect those we encounter. On 19 February 2016, the *Times Live* online reported that the South African Human Rights Commission ‘noted that in January this year, the country had witnessed a heightened focus and debate on racism arising from social media remarks exchanged by individuals’. In a period of 45 days (from 5 January to 18 February 2016) the commission received over 200 racism-related complaints through all its provincial offices. One sometimes wonders why a country whose population is estimated to be approximately 80% Christian would struggle to get over a dehumanising worldview like racism. Racism disrespects different racial groups.

We need to be in a right relationship with God for our society to be renewed. Therefore, we need to respect our fellow human beings because disrespecting others may posture us in a wrong relationship with God. Despising others is despising Jesus’ mission and God’s plan. In this world the temptation to disregard others’ abilities, qualities, achievements and needs and thus their human dignity, is very high. The fate of the Pharisees in Luke 7:30 should warn us, lest we find ourselves in a wrong relationship with God.

May the Holy Spirit strengthen our vocation as Christians in this time of the Pentecost.

#### **5. Themes for prayer**

Ask the Lord who broke barriers between the Jews and gentiles, between the rich and the poor, the slave and the master, between the healthy and the sick, between men and women to help us, as his church, to be active participants in his mission.

May we be reminded all the time that our identity is derived from Jesus Christ our Lord so that we do not participate in disrespect to others.

### **Day 4: Listening: prayer as dialogue with God**

## Mark 9:14-29

**1. Only by prayer**

‘After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”’ (Mark 9: 28-29, NIV)

The event of the exorcism is an opportunity for Jesus to show power that far exceeds that of the disciples, even as they had received authority over demons earlier, according to Mark 6:7. While the disciples are here unable to cast out this specific demon, it seems to be no effort for Jesus. Another opportunity given by the event is for Jesus to comment on the lack of faith of his followers. This happens immediately after Jesus’ transfiguration, a preparation for Jesus’ resurrection and witness to God’s glorious power.

Jesus’ complaint at the disciples’ lack of faith makes the importance of faith very clear. Many have come to love the father’s desperate cry: ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ and this becomes a model for all followers of Christ. Following the suspense of the story, it seems as if the boy had died as soon as the demon exited his body. The question then arises: Did the demon win? But Jesus demonstrates true power when he takes the boy’s hand and lifts him up. The boy lives! Evil is destroyed! Jesus ends this event with the words of our focus text, that the disciples need to pray. Some translations add fasting to this prayer. Jesus demonstrates prayer consistently throughout his earthly ministry.

**2. What is the message herein for us?**

Jesus declares that it is only through prayer that one may receive the power from God necessary to drive out evil. Prayer is really the conversation we have with God, through praise, thanksgiving, intercession, petitioning, listening. Prayer is never a monologue, the praying person talking to oneself; but rather dialogue, as God talks back to us. The only way we may hear God’s voice in prayer, is to listen attentively, focused on what God wants to say.

In listening first, to all the clues, the detail of God’s revealed Self, one is able to see what needs to be seen, to say what needs to be said, to be silent - more than anything - where silence is due. Think about Elijah. It is in Elijah’s encounter with God that the importance of silence is emphasised, for it is in the sheer silence that God is truly heard, understood and followed (1 Kings 19:11-13). The mystery of this silent communication from the one who creates the roar of thunder and shakes the foundations of earth, is baffling, to say the least.

It has to be said that one can know God only to one's human ability – in this fact lies both frustration and relief. It holds frustration in that whatever we learn about God through listening in prayer, has to be far smaller than God, for our abilities are far smaller, at any given time, than God. The relief lies in the opportunity made available to use one's ability, through grace, to learn and develop the art of listening, so as to know God.

Denise Ackermann wrote her own beatitudes in her book *Surprised by the man on the borrowed donkey: Ordinary blessings*. One of the beatitudes is: *'Blessed are those who listen with discernment, for they will hear "the sound of sheer silence."'*

### **3. It is all about liberation**

This text is all about liberation from evil. The disciples wanted to play a role in liberating the boy from the claw of the enslaving spirit, but they lacked understanding of what this liberation truly meant. Jesus' answer to their limitations is simple: Pray and fast. Listen to how God reveals who he truly is, so that you may know who you are, what your own gifts are and what your role is in the liberating act that gives people the dignity they need.

In South Africa, we struggle with the concept of reconciling liberation. We do not have to search far and long to see the signs of this struggle. We see it every time we talk about the Dutch Reformed Church family being one with one another as we are one in Christ who liberates. We see it in the existence of different socio-economic classes within our congregations. We see it in our politics, really everywhere we look.

### **4. Listen with a spiritual earpiece**

Then it becomes clear that no privileged person can be liberated without the 'not-so-privileged' being liberated; no rich can be liberated without the poor, no glutton without the one who starves, no violator without the violated and vice versa. There are stories to be heard, truly heard with an ear beyond the physical. We need to listen with a spiritual earpiece, amplifying the cry for help as well as celebration in the other, to the constant reminder in the background of human dignity for all. The only way these contradictions can be lived is through the grace of Christ, the one who showed compassion and love as the only way to receive this grace. The only way to recognise this grace is through constant prayer, listening to the Father's instruction in Jesus Christ, through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit.

**5. Themes for prayer**

Pray to be able to listen:

As a disciple of Christ, to God's instruction, in dialogue with God;

As a church, across boundaries, to one another as bearers of the image of God;

As a country, across barriers of race and language, to the stories of every person's life, so that all may have human dignity.

## **Day 5: Listen carefully so that people can trust Jesus**

Mark 5:21-43

### **1. Jesus is aware of a touch**

“But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.’ While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. ‘Your daughter is dead,’ they said. ‘Why bother the teacher anymore?’ Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, ‘Don’t be afraid; just believe.’ (Mark 5:32-36, NIV).

### **2. A story within a story**

The story is like a sandwich. It starts with a petition that Jesus should come to a sick girl, the daughter of Jairus, a Jewish leader. It ends with the astonishing miracle that Jesus raises the dead. In the first part it is reported that she was only sick. The last report was that nothing could help any more. She died. Fear and doubt are part of this story.

Between the two "slices" of the sandwich we find another story. It is a strange one. A woman with a chronic disease that would make anyone who touches her ritually unclean and thus socially excluded, realises Jesus’ healing power is her only hope. Jesus healed her without laying a hand on her. In reality the opposite was true. It was the woman who laid a hand on Jesus. Again, fear and uncertainty dominated this woman’s actions. However, Jesus immediately makes it clear that he is not some miracle worker. It is through faith that she trusted him as the One with power over disease, and Jesus assured her of permanent cure. There is a close connection between the power that comes from Jesus and the person who trusts him.

With this story within a story, Mark once again puts a magnifying glass on Jesus; Who is he? What does he do? Typically, Mark emphasises the authority of Jesus. The purpose of the gospel is that people will recognize that Jesus is the Son of God (Mark 1: 1). The centurion's confession at the end of the Gospel (Mark 15:39) makes it clear. God is pleased with this Son of Him (Mark 1:11).

### **3. The focus on Jesus’ absolute divine authority**

To ensure that people will recognize Jesus as the Son of God, Mark emphasises the attributes of God in Jesus’ character and ministry. Throughout the Gospel we hear stories of Jesus' absolute divine authority. He has the power to forgive, to save, and to heal people's illness. He has power over the forces of nature and finally to conquer death. In this way Mark related to his readers his witness that

Jesus Himself is God. Jesus is aware of everything. He knows that someone touched him. He has the authority to heal people. He has the power to raise someone from the dead.

This authoritative Christ, the One with power over disease and death, takes time out on his journey towards urgent business and stops to attend to someone in need. It is God in Jesus who turns around and pays attention to people who are most desperate. Jesus was her only hope. Likewise, Jesus is the only hope for Jairus and his family in their desperate situation. It seemed as though all was lost for Jairus' daughter when Jesus tarried. However, because he is the Son of God, it was not a lost case. Jesus alone has power over life and death.

Like the woman who trusted him, He called the Jewish leader of the synagogue to keep on believing, even if it all seemed hopeless. Every reader of this story should hear the call to trust Christ, the authoritative Son of God.

#### **4. Be prepared that God might cross your path**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that we must allow ourselves to be interrupted by God, who will thwart our plans and frustrate our ways time and again, even daily, by sending people across our path with their demands and requests. We are not forced to attend to these people on our journey. However, it might mean that we have passed the cross as God's sign indicating the way to do God's will, not our own.

Cynical readers could even accuse the woman of causing the death of the young girl. Did she not interrupt Jesus' journey on his way to the sick child? If she were not so selfish, Jesus could possibly have arrived at the child in time. However, this is a cynical interpretation of the story and was probably not the intention of Mark.

Jesus epitomizes in this story someone who is willing to be interrupted. A dying child called for his attention. Yet Jesus took time to listen to the entire history of the woman with a chronic illness: "Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth" (Mark 5:33, NIV).

The woman could not openly ask Jesus for his help because of the nature of her illness. Her life was filled with fear. Who would take time to listen to her? Jesus was in a hurry - so she may have thought. Yet, Jesus paused and gave her the opportunity to tell her story. Can you imagine how Jairus experienced the delay caused by this interaction between the woman and Jesus?

God often interrupts our journey through people on our path. The compassion of Christ revealed in this story challenges us to open our eyes and ears. Everyone has a story. Sometimes there are success stories. However, we have to admit that there are more often stories of struggle, defeats, fear, being pushed to the margins of society, excluded from groups, as well as feelings of worthlessness. There are also many stories of unspeakable pain.

This is where the Lord's people, his church, are called to take time to listen, to stand still, to let urgent matters wait so that broken people can be heard. So many people wish to get closer to Jesus to be cured of illness and challenges that occupied and took control of their lives. We confess that Jesus alone can do it. However, Jesus often does it by using us, his people.

Just as Jesus listened to the woman, he also heard the despair of the people bringing the worst possible news about Jairus' daughter. Jesus is always prepared to listen, even if people laugh at him.

#### **4. Listening is faith in action**

Tom Wright rightly says that "Just as Jesus wasn't coming to be a one-man liberation movement in the traditional revolutionary sense, so he wasn't coming to be a one-man emergency medical centre. He was indeed starting a revolution, and he was indeed bringing God's healing power, but his aim went deeper; these things were signs of the real revolution, the real healing, that God was to accomplish through his death and resurrection. Signposts are important, but they aren't the destination" (From: Mark for everyone).

Ultimately it is not about following Jesus' example based on the compassion of Jesus. Jesus refuses to cut the tie between faith and these events. Through this story Jesus challenges this woman, Jairus, the messengers, his disciples and every reader. The challenge is this: Is Jesus, who is the Lord over sin, sickness, death, and all powers, the object of our faith? And if we listen intently as a church, acknowledging the dignity of every human being - like Jesus - the ultimate goal is simply to help everyone to come to this point where they will confess that He is the son of God.

#### **5. Themes for prayer**

Pray for those who feel they cannot share their pain, because it is socially unacceptable.

Pray that faith communities will be safe spaces where people will have the courage to tell their stories.

Pray that when we care about and listen to people, they will eventually come to faith in the Son of God, because they have not only experienced the power of His care, but also the power of his resurrection.

## Day 6: Love

Luke 7:36-50

### 1. The unwelcome guest

The narrative is well known. Jesus accepted an invitation to dine with a Pharisee at his house. According to the culture of the time, only men were present. The guests lie down propped on their left elbows and ate with their right hands.

During the meal a woman appeared unexpectedly and stood behind Jesus. She was crying, and her tears fell on Jesus' feet. She then dried his feet with her hair, and poured perfume on his feet. We know nothing about her. Neither Matthew nor Mark mentions her name. According to the Johannine narrative, the woman was Mary sister of Lazarus. Luke only mentions that she was a sinner. Many commentators through the ages assumed that she was a prostitute, but Luke does not mention that. The Pharisees considered any person not adhering totally to the Mosaic Law a sinner.

We can imagine the consternation that followed! A sinful woman upset the formal dinner, firstly with her presence, and secondly with her emotional outburst. She is totally out of hand! Does she not know her place? And Jesus the young rabbi is quite OK with it! Maybe the rumour is true after all. He is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. (Luke 7:34)

The Pharisee, Simon, was of the opinion that Jesus should have known what kind of woman she was. When a sinner touches a prophet, the prophet also becomes unclean. The truth is: Jesus knew only too well who and what the woman was, just as he knew only too well who and what Simon was. Just as he knows only too well who and what you and I are.

Jesus then told a parable that reminds us somewhat of the parable the prophet Nathan told David after his sin with Bathsheba. The narrative leads the hearer to the answer expected by the narrator. This answer exposes the hidden sins in the life of the hearer. Two people owed money. One owed 500 denarii, while the other owed 50 denarii. A denarius was a coin equal to a day's wages. (Matt 20:2) The one man owed almost two years' wages, while the other owed about 2 months' wages. The lender cancelled the debts of both men. "Now which of them will love him more?" (Luke 7:42, NIV) asked Jesus. Simon replied that he **supposed** it would be the one who had the bigger debt cancelled. Simon did not want to risk giving a straight answer. He stood completely exposed before Jesus.

## **2. Do you see this woman?**

Yes, the Pharisee did see this woman. He saw a sinner, he saw a completely unacceptable person, he saw somebody outside the Jewish Torah community. He saw a category. He did not see a human being.

Jesus also saw this woman. He saw a sinner in need of salvation. He saw someone loved boundlessly by God. He saw a person created in the image of God. He saw the human dignity of the woman before him. He saw a person overflowing with love because he respected her dignity. Therefore, he can say to her, "Your faith has saved you" (Luke 7:50, NIV). You are a new person. You are becoming the person you are in Christ in principle already. The relationship between you and God has been restored by Jesus. Your past has been cancelled. Go home in the peace of God.

Simon did not get such a positive answer. Jesus pointed out to him that he neglected the basic rules of hospitality and good manners. He did not provide water to wash Jesus' feet. He did not welcome him with a brotherly kiss as was the custom, and he did not anoint his head. He did not express any love towards Jesus. In fact, he condemned Jesus already in his mind. "But he who has been forgiven little, loves little," Jesus added (Luke 7:47, NIV).

We notice three aspects of love in this passage. Firstly, we see the love of the Triune God for all people. Unconditional, inclusive, inviting, forgiving. "Ho! Everyone who thirsts. Come to the waters; And you who have no money. Come, buy and eat" (Is 55:1, NKJV). Secondly we see the response to this unconditional love: Reciprocal love urging us to commit everything we are and have to God. "Take my life and let it be, consecrated, God, to thee." In the third place we see the unfortunate choice of Simon. A love of the self-excluding Jesus. Self-justification allowing the neighbour no place. Me, myself and I, a life focussed only on the self.

## **3. And what now?**

The narrative of Jesus and the unwelcome guest calls on us to make a choice. The first aspect of love is a given. God loves all people. The question is: How do we answer to the reality of God's love? Like the woman? Or like Simon the Pharisee?

What does it mean to live from God's love? What do we learn from this woman? We notice some signs of total surrender and commitment. She did not care about making a fool of herself. God's love in her life overflowed. She could not restrain it. It ruled her life totally.

Love, God's love, reminds me of perfume. As long as the bottle remains in the cupboard, it does not achieve its object. Only when a lady wears the perfume, the aroma spreads. It cannot be contained. I remember a student friend of mine saying when we walked past a group of girls on the way to lectures, "It is almost like we're walking in an orchard".

How does this become practical? Who is my neighbour, or to put in a different way, whose neighbour am I? The short answer is every person crossing my way. White or black, gay or straight, old or young, rich or poor, pretty or ugly. Every colleague at work, every learner in my class, every client or customer, every patient, every taxi driver, every car guard, every beggar, every student with a black, purple, white or red face. Just as the wearer of perfume cannot choose who will smell it, we cannot choose who will experience God's love through us. And it all starts with good, old-fashioned respect.

See the dignity of others. Treat the others in the same way as we want to be treated. That includes people who have no dignity left other than in God's eyes, people like the cerebral palsied, psychiatric patients, senile geriatrics and serious criminals. Kees Waaijman, a writer on Christian Spirituality, reminds us of the intrinsic dignity of all such people. "At such a time only the gaze of God's unconditional goodness can be strong and durable enough for us to continue to see the dignity of the human person." Only through our commitment to God, and living in the Spirit, can we be strong enough to be a true neighbour for the other.

#### **4. Themes for prayer**

For students, that they will accept each other in love;

For people still caught up in their prejudices to the extent that they do not see God's love;

That we will have the courage to be true neighbours for others;

That we will be channels of God's peace and love (St Francis of Assisi).

## **Day 7: Love heals and brings hope - love reinstates us in our office**

John 21:8-19

### **1. Introductory comments**

The events of which we read in John 21 have already been put in motion in Chapter 18 verse 15 to 25 where Peter denied being a follower of Jesus three times during Jesus' questioning by the High Priest. On the Sunday morning of Jesus' resurrection an angel told the women: 'He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, "He is going ahead of you into Galilee"' (Mark 16:6-7, NIV). When Peter and another disciple heard about this, they ran to the grave. The other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the grave ahead of him. Peter entered the grave when he got there. As Jesus bided his time to come to Galilee, Peter decided to go fishing again. He and six other disciples went out to sea. They returned tired and disappointed, but Someone was waiting for them ashore. They did not immediately recognise this Person who would later have a deep discussion about love with Peter.

### **2. The surprising characteristics of this love**

- **Jesus' love is pastoral in intent.**

In repeating his question three times, Jesus alludes to Peter's previous denial of him. The questions test, in the first place, the quality of Peter's love. Jesus asks if Peter loves him "more than these", meaning the other disciples. The grammar of the sentence would make a reference to the things, the boat, the sea and the fishing nets, possible. The question pulls Peter into the liberating space of Jesus' forgiving love. As already before his death, it was true of the risen Christ that "[h]aving loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love" (John 13:1, NIV). In this Scripture reading, Peter receives pastoral love; the fire that has been made, the bread and fish that have been prepared and the invitation to come and eat all testify to Jesus' love for his disciples. During the meal, Jesus gives love to someone who has previously denied him. Jesus asks that this gift of love be returned by Peter. A little earlier, after telling the disciples what to do to fill their net, he also asked them something in return: 'Bring some of the fish you have just caught' (John 21:10, NIV).

And how does Peter react to this forgiving love? He calls out: 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you' (John 21:17, NIV). With his threefold confession, he lets go of his rashness, because he realises that Jesus sees through him. Does Jesus pay back Peter in the same currency, does he deny Peter, does he push him away? No, on the contrary, Jesus draws Peter close and puts his arms around him, pastorally. Jesus looks at Peter and sees more than just transgressions. He sees the potential for Peter to be a leader and a rock on which Christ's church can be built.

Karl Barth prepared a sermon on how the disciples must have felt after the weekend of the crucifixion, when they came to realise that they had let Jesus down on critical points and had misunderstood his actions. He describes them as follows: ‘Like a flock of hens on the perch after a thunderstorm they were sitting there -- or in more elegant terms: like a little group of children who have just lost their father and mother - or like a troop of soldiers in flight after a defeat. The most terrible thing has taken place: the other side had won. Jesus was no longer there.’ And then Jesus is there, ashore. He appears to those mourning him to show them that he is alive. Because he has promised: I will go ahead of you into Galilee.

- **Jesus love is missional in intent.**

The threefold question diverts Peter’s focus from his doubt and his fisherman’s existence. The lynchpin of the story, however, is not the questions Peter is asked, but the meeting with the risen Christ. When Peter meets Jesus he was sent to the world with an evangelical mission. Peter, who shares in the truth of the resurrection, will now also live out the faith of the resurrection. He becomes a partner in God’s mission in Jesus Christ.

The questions and answers must be read in connection with the meal. In the Scripture reading the interaction between Jesus and Peter starts with the words: ‘When they had finished eating...’ (21:15, NIV). Bethel Müller understands the questions as a call to a missional directedness. The invitation to the meal and the in-depth conversation shed light on the contrasts of doubt and hope, lack and abundance, as well as darkness and light. What would Peter’s answer to Jesus’ questions be?

Müller reckons that the Lord sometimes also hears a no coming from church councils and convocations, from synodical ministries, pastors and church members. They answer: No, Lord, our evangelism does not focus on the homeless, the bereft, and the lost, on women or children whose equality is taken away! No, Lord, our love cannot cross borders, we do not really feed your flock as Pentecost people should and our apostolate falls far short from that of the first Pentecost congregation.

The Lutheran theologian, Helmut Thielicke, says in a sermon on love that, when we love Jesus, something happens that has parallel consequences on a human level. The love of and for Christ motivates me to make the other person’s cares my own, and what makes the other happy, will also make me happy. Inevitably, the things close to the other person’s heart, that to which the person wants to give everything, will also touch me. But Jesus’ love must first be transferred to us; we must be, as it were, infected by it. In this way a stream will flow from the Source of all love and

forgiveness - the Saviour's gifts to all people - to you, and over you to your neighbour. This stream is made possible through the Spirit of Pentecost (John 7:38-39).

- **Jesus' love restores broken friendships**

In his gospel John, emphasises the connection between love and friendship. In Chapter 15 Jesus calls his disciples his friends (verses 13, 14 & 15). Peter has also been part of this circle of friends who protected each other's human dignity and where the goodness of their true friend Jesus Christ was the measure for the relationships they had among them. Did Peter's denial of Jesus harm the friendship? Did Peter possibly consider returning to the fisherman's boats and with that withdraw from this circle of friends? That was certainly a possibility! The threefold question to Peter 'hurts' him (John 21:17) and he admits that Jesus knows everything, also of his desire to be part of the intimate circle of friends. Friends eat together. This is why Jesus first prepared a meal for Peter. Around the fire the bread and fish that are shared affirmed Peter as a friend of Jesus.

- **Jesus' love builds a society where there is human dignity.**

Jesus' words are like the Word (*Dabar*) that creates the universe in Genesis 1. Jesus has come as the voice and the image of the Creator-Father and he constantly creates a habitable society, a society over which many become lyrical, because Jesus gives life in all its fullness (John 10:10). Arnold van Ruler writes somewhere about the creative power in pure love. Such love gives meaning to people's lives and make them feel precious. The church is called to obediently join the creating God in establishing a society where human dignity prevails. Through this creative love hired hands who do not care about the sheep are transformed into concerned shepherds - spiritual shepherds, political shepherds, business shepherds, educational shepherds, etc. These transformed shepherds feed and protect the sheep in their care.

### **3. Walk in love**

Against the back drop of the caring approaches of the transformed shepherds, Jürgen Moltmann's views might give us direction for the practical life: 'The social institutions, roles and functions are means on the way to this self-expending. They have therefore to be shaped creatively by love, in order that men may live together in them more justly, more humanely, more peacefully, and in mutual recognition of their human dignity and freedom... for love looks to the as yet unrealized possibilities of the other, and thus grants him freedom and allows him a future in recognition of his possibilities.'

The Belhar Confession also aims for a society in which there will be human dignity, where true peace will reign among people, where the church will give shelter to the poor and the oppressed,

where bread will be given to the hungry, help to orphans and widows, where the church is taught to do good to others and to seek what is right, where there will be comfort and where justice will roll on like waves of water and righteousness like a perennial stream.

This flame of love is kept burning by the Pentecost Spirit (See the fruit of Galatians 5:22).

#### **4. Themes for prayer**

Give thanks and praise to the Lord for another Pentecost.

Pray that the power of the Spirit will come over us.

Pray that the Pentecost Spirit will make all believers sensitive to the restoration of human dignity.

Pray that believers in healthy friendships will listen to each other.

Pray that church councils will be attuned to establishing missional congregations.

## **Day 8: Embracing care**

Matthew 8:1-4, Mark 1:40-45 & Luke 5:12-14

### **1. The man with leprosy**

‘When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, “See that you don’t tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”’ (Matt 8:1-4, NIV)

### **2. The story in context**

To the Jewish people in Jesus’ time it was unthinkable that someone with leprosy, like the person in the story, would come among so-called healthy people. Even more so, that such a person would accost any of the teachers in public in this way.

Because of perceptions about purity and a fear for this contagious disease, people with leprosy had to withdraw themselves from daily social contact with others. People with leprosy were, in fact, driven from their towns until they were healed or died. People who had been diagnosed with leprosy could only be welcomed back into their communities once they were examined by a priest and declared healthy, or clean (ritually pure).

Because they were regarded as unclean, people with leprosy had to spend their days on the outskirts of towns with others who were, like them, also regarded as unclean and unwelcome. Outside the town walls they were cut off from family and everything that once characterised their lives. As cultic unclean, people were also cut off from their community of worship. Thus, people living with leprosy were excluded from cultic participation and rituals that could, in reality, have strengthened their hope and their belief in the meaning of life.

The man with leprosy in this account must have heard about Jesus from someone outside the town and what he heard must have given him enough courage to brave the world of the ‘clean and healthy’ - the world that had rejected him - once more. He was prepared to face the risk of another cultic rejection, to be humiliated and shamed once again, to be cast out.

It is not clear how he was allowed to come so close to Jesus. It is possible that people were just too afraid of contracting his disease so that they would simply not dare to remove him physically. Because, evidently, a clean, healthy person does not touch a leper. No, a virtuous person does not get

involved with people who are dirty, bad and cultic unclean. You stay as far away as possible, let alone touching them, that is an absolute taboo. However, this is exactly what Jesus does: Jesus touches him in his unhealthy and unclean state.

### **3. Finer perspectives of the story**

The man with leprosy, an outcast with no place in the community of the 'clean and healthy', cut off and alone, far away from family and other believers, acknowledges Jesus as the exalted Lord, the one who has the power over sickness and health. Jesus is the one who heals him and who makes him clean. It is interesting to note that this man who is regarded as unclean, does not first ask to be made clean; the first thing he does is to kneel before Jesus to worship him. The outcast further does not ask whether Jesus can heal him, but he says: I know you can heal me if it is your will. Is it your will? It is this man's desire to be clean again so that he can be reaccepted into society and into cultic life - and to be receiving affirmation as a human being.

Jesus reacts; before answering the man, he touches the leper - the untouchable. In this way Jesus demonstrates that no law, cultic ritual or human conviction can nullify God's will. No-one falls outside God's loving and compassionate heart: he embraces, he includes.

When Jesus says: 'I am willing' (Matt 8:3), he affirms his calling and identity as the one who cleanses and sets free. He reveals God's heart in these words. With the simple act of embracing or touching, the unclean person living with leprosy is made new and clean.

Jesus then sends the man to show himself to the priest and to bring the required offering 'as a testimony to them' (Matt 8:4, NIV). This would confirm the miracle as well as give credibility to the man.

### **4. How does this affect us today?**

Is it not true, today, that there are also people we would like to send somewhere else, because we find their presence distasteful and challenging? Out of sight, out of mind, not true? Think of those living with HIV/Aids, the homeless, the addicted, people with other sexual preferences, people who think or live differently, people of other races or cultural and economic backgrounds. People with whom we would rather not associate ourselves, but that we would rather push aside and hide away. However, this is in shrill contrast with the universal need of us humans to be accepted, to be included, to receive affirmation and to feel there is value in our life and being.

Jesus challenges practices of exclusion, exploitation and rejection. Jesus opposes an approach to life and any argument against the virtue of Christian hospitality. The man in this account has the need to be cleansed by Christ. To him, it is about acceptance, inclusion and recognition of his human dignity. Jesus understands this. So, he stretches out his hand to this man before he says the word. This is how Jesus confirms God's acceptance of everyone who is in need and who is oppressed - every person who is unclean and longs to be cleansed. Jesus' touch and embrace confirm God's acceptance of this man in his current state; his touch cleanses, heals and restores.

Is it not for this very reason the Lord Jesus calls his church? The church of the Lord Jesus is after all in a special way part of the ministry and the affirmation of people's dignity before God. Together with Christ, the church must therefore stand by people in need (Belhar Confession). How can it be otherwise? Are we not called precisely to be like Christ in every aspect?

The church has a calling to be hospitable, caring and accepting - like Christ was. The compassion of touching and embracing is not in the first place about physical healing, but it is rather about the relief of the pain of rejection and the restoration of people's dignity. Where God's heart is shown and lived, people are liberated so that they can live as a credible testimony of the embracing love and grace of God.

### **5. Themes for prayer**

Reflect about who the people might be with whom we are not eager to get involved, or with whose circumstances we do not want to be confronted.

Pray for our attitudes to people and for those we cause pain through our behaviour.

Pray for wisdom, to find ways to walk in God's embracing love inside our communities.

Pray that we will affirm other people's dignity, that we will include them and will bring them liberation.

Pray for the Lord's guidance so that the congregation will be able to recognise situations and will see precisely who needs this embracing love.

Pray that this congregation will have the courage to follow the example of Christ and that this congregation will embrace them and to affirm these people's human dignity in God tangibly.

## **Day 9: Embracing – for the sake of life, restoration and healing of people.**

Matthew 9:18-26

### **1. To live with purpose**

There is a story of a first century rabbi who travelled to Jerusalem. He had to pass through a Roman blockade on his way. At the blockade a Roman soldier asked the rabbi a question: “Who are you, and what are you doing here?” The rabbi did not respond immediately. The soldier repeated his question. This time the rabbi responded with a counter question: “How much are you being paid for what you are doing here?” After a moment’s hesitation, the soldier answered the rabbi: “100 denarii”. The rabbi spoke again: “I shall give you double that amount if you would come to my home every morning to wake me up and to ask me that same question.”

For people of faith the answer to the great questions of life often start with the reminder of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the moment of remembering, the body of Christ is being broken again to heal our broken lives. In the moment of truth, the blood of Jesus flows anew, in order to restore our brokenness. That is in a figurative sense the moment when the resurrection of Jesus brings new life and the relationship between God and humanity is strengthened. Everywhere Jesus went, He brought life, even from the dead. Jesus described his ministry in John 10:10 in these words: “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” (NKJV)

For Jesus ministry was about life – the restoration and healing of people. The essence of new life is the restoration of our relationship with God. Jesus restored our human dignity according to God’s original purpose. Jesus freed us from sin and opened the way to a bold relationship with God. Jesus gave us abundant life. This is who Jesus is!

### **2. Matthew 9:18-26 speaks in similar terms about Jesus’ ministry**

Jesus is in conversation with some followers of John the Baptist. They probe Jesus about the conduct of his disciples. Why is it that they do not participate in the religious rituals of the Jews? In this instance they refer to the practice of fasting as an important ritual for the restoration and strengthening of their relationship with God.

Jesus was aware of the motives behind their questioning. Jesus employed different images and symbols to open up their minds for the new life He brought about. Jesus did something purposeful at a wedding, He spoke about the patching of old clothing and of wine bags with new wine. In the middle of one of Jesus’ image sermons, a leader of the synagogue approached Jesus and was surprisingly

drawn into Jesus' sermon. He knelt down before Jesus saying (verse 18): "My daughter has just died, but come and lay Your hand on her and she will live) (NKJV).

The leader did not ask rabbi Jesus for a religious ritual or even for a theological explanation of what death is. He did not even ask for a prayer as a word of comfort. No, this leader, an intelligent man who should have known better, asked Jesus to bring life; to bring his daughter back to life!

On the way to the leader's house something unexpectedly happened. A woman suffering from bleeding approached Jesus quietly and shamefully to touch his cloak. This disease caused her to be ritually unclean and socially rejected. Just there Jesus proved that He was the God of second chances. The woman was healed instantly.

We wonder what went through this woman's mind. Did she really hope, trust and believe that Jesus could heal her, or was she just so desperate after twelve difficult years to take a chance on a new life? She came from behind, reached out and touched Jesus' cloak with a trembling hand. Possibly all the human emotions of hesitation and hope, fear and expectation, flowed through her. Maybe the quiet question on her lips was, am I now OK? Will my life be better from now on?

### **3. Jesus creates new life.**

We don't know what was on her mind, but we know Jesus' answer: "Take heart, daughter, your faith has healed you." (Mt 9:22 NIV) Jesus did not reject her. He did not chase her away. He healed the socially unacceptable woman and proceeded to the leader's house. On arrival He walked into a funeral ceremony of death and mourning. The whole atmosphere was one of the emptiness of death. There were people present, and music, but there was no life.

A group of strangers were also present in the house to mourn the death of the leader's daughter. They were in stark contrast to the leader who did a remarkable thing. He ran to Jesus in the middle of the funeral procedures of his child. He turned his back on the memory of death to embrace Life. The leader shows the same openness and acceptance towards Jesus' healing touch as the woman who suffered from constant bleeding.

Jesus did what He does best, He brings life. Jesus shows the same attitude towards the ruler as He showed towards the sick woman's boldness. He told the crowds to leave with these words, "Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep." (Matt 9:24, NIV)

Jesus actually preached about a life of resurrection, and as usual, people did not understand Him. They even laughed at Him, because according to their understanding life does not return once it has been extinguished.

However, there is life where Jesus is! Human expectations, certainties, knowledge and faith, everything is transformed to surprise and wonderment. The crowd expected a diagnosis of death, but Jesus gave a prognosis of life!

#### **4. I can know who I am and what I am doing here**

We live in a world full of pain and suffering. It is a world full of women who are sick, who are in pain, who are rejected and despised. A world full of sick and dying girls, full of desperate parents searching and begging for answers. We see the hurt of humanity in the hungry eyes on street corners. We see it in rocks being thrown at municipal offices and classrooms, in upturned refuse bins in front of hospitals and screaming graffiti on walls.

I am a child of God. I have been called to be Jesus' hands and feet on earth. I am being called daily and challenged to continue Jesus' ministry, to bring life by restoring relationships, by giving hope and sharing love.

If you want to follow Jesus and walk in His footsteps, you have to ask yourself this question: Who are the marginalised people of our time? Who are considered to be "unclean"? Poor people? Women? Aids victims? Gays?

Who are the people so easily excluded by us, just like the woman in the narrative in Jesus' time? Who are the ones calling on Jesus, searching for life, like the ruler in the narrative?

This is where we as believers are called to embrace people, also the marginalised and the suffering.

#### **5. Prayer themes**

Hear how God calls you to witness about Jesus in this world.

Commit yourselves to tell people that Jesus changes desperate circumstances - That Jesus brings life.

Live the truth that Jesus shows compassion by drawing near to and including marginalised people.

Pray that God will unite the congregation and whole church through this devotion,

Be prepared and available to spread the news about Jesus in the bigger environment.

## **Day 10: Pentecost: The Spirit of Christ transforms us into a new, dignified community**

Acts 2:1-11

### **1. Luke writes about everything Jesus did and taught**

In his gospel, Luke says, he wrote about everything Jesus did and taught from the beginning (Acts 1:1). God made Jesus from Nazareth known to the people through the wonders and signs God performed through him (Acts 2:22). God decided and planned Jesus' delivery to sinful men who 'put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him' (Acts 2:23-24).

### **2. Luke writes in detail about the Spirit of Christ**

In his second book, Luke writes about the Spirit of Christ. And he gives a detailed account!

The Greek verb that Luke uses in Acts 2:1 to speak about the special day of Pentecost that has come, means to suggest that a time determined by God, has now reached fulfilment. On this day, on the fiftieth day after the Passover, he says, all of them were together in one place. Those present are listed in detail. There were religious Jews from all over the world in Jerusalem.

'Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting' (Acts 2:2, NIV). Luke emphasises repeatedly that what happens here has been brought about by the Lord. The sound came from *heaven*, and it filled the whole room. He uses the image of a violent wind. Perhaps because the Spirit is often imagined to be like this elsewhere. Perhaps because the Spirit blows where it wants like a violent wind.

'They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them' (Acts 2:3, NIV) and with this verse Luke also wants to indicate that it was the Lord himself who acted here. N.T. Wright comments that Luke intended to describe something new, something that launched a great movement, as a fleet of ships is launched by the strong wind that drives them out to sea or a forest fire is started by a few small flames. He intends to explain how it was that a small group of frightened, puzzled and largely uneducated men and women could so quickly become a force to be reckoned with right across the known world.

All of them, writes Luke, were filled with the Holy Spirit. They started speaking in other languages as the Holy Spirit made it possible for them to do. Luke again emphasises that what happens here, has been brought about by the Lord. It is the Spirit that fills them that enables them to speak in all

these languages. It is the Spirit that gives them this ability and that leads them. And it is not only some of them. *All* of them spoke in other languages.

And this is what the Spirit does: The Spirit regards them! The Spirit values these people. The Spirit uses the people! The Spirit makes them all heard!

### **3. The crowd reacts to the Spirit's power**

We read in Acts 2:6 that a crowd of excited people crowded together when they heard the noise. Who these people were who came to listen to the speaking in tongues are spelt out: 'Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs' (Acts 2:9-11, NIV). These people heard the believers speak in their own languages. Bewildered and amazed they asked how it was possible to hear them speak like this in their native languages.

And this is the wonder of it all. In the midst of all the differences between all those present, they understood 'the wonders of God' (Acts 2:11). This is the wonder! They understood the great things God has done, without any removal of the differences between them.

This reminds of something Michael Welker wrote: 'Without dissolving the variety and complexity of their backgrounds, without setting aside their forms of expression and understanding as these forms are marked off in relation to other forms, an unbelievable commonality of experience and of understanding occurs. And this difference between the experience of plural inaccessibility to each other and of enduring foreignness, and unfamiliarity, on the one hand, and of utter commonality of the capacity to understand, on the other hand – this is what is truly spectacular and shocking about the Pentecost event.'

### **4. Against these questions, the wonder of Pentecost!**

The events of Pentecost pose very pertinent questions to our South-African society. It is a burning question why we do not hear one another in South Africa, why we do not understand one another. Why do we often think that we do understand one another, when the reality tells a different story? What makes understanding difficult and how does it happen that we talk past one another?

Here in Acts 2 we hear about people who cannot understand one another, who find it difficult to understand one another and who often do not want to understand one another. And yet, they begin to

hear one another, they are heard by one another and they understand the great things God has done! This is the wonder! They understand the wonders of God without their differences being dissolved.

And perhaps it is worth spelling out: Through the Spirit people from Afrikaans, English, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Tswana, Shangaan, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, isiZulu, SiSwati, isiXhosa and isiNdebele groups become a new community, a community of Christ.

And perhaps it is this that the Lord wants to tell us who is part of this new community of Christ: That we will hear everyone in this country through the Spirit; that everyone will be heard; that, together, we will learn what the great things God has done means today, to us! Because the Spirit of Christ recreates a new, dignified community.

### **5. Themes for prayer**

Pray that the Lord will teach us through his Spirit that everybody must be heard.

Pray that the Lord will teach us through his Spirit to really hear what is being said.

Pray that the Lord will teach us through his Spirit to understand each other.