



Pentecost 2017
Christ has set us free...

This year the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa (DRC) celebrates Reformation 500 together with Protestants worldwide. For this reason, the theme of our Pentecost series for 2017 has been chosen to tie up with the central message of sixteenth-century Reformation: By grace Christ has set us free from sin and guilt. To the reformers, it was clear that this freedom of sin does not happen because of our own power or initiative. It is God who gives us this freedom through Christ. We have been set free so that we can accept this gift in gratitude and embrace the victorious life.

The victorious life of free people is a life stemming from the Pentecost! Through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit we can follow Jesus Christ as free people and as witnesses to the kingdom of God that has come to us. People of the Pentecost are called upon to attest in freedom to the transformational power of Christ's Spirit that was poured out on his church, so that the church of Christ can be an example of the radical freedom brought about by her Lord.

As we celebrate the Reformation, we pause during our traditional Pentecost services to reflect upon how also reformed congregations and churches in South Africa are called to freedom. The Holy Spirit equips us to bear witness to Christ's mission to bring freedom to the world. In this commemoration year, we want to remind each other of Christ's gift of freedom and we want to encourage each other, as believers and as church, to persevere in the faith every day. Because we have indeed been freed, we can live differently. As disciples of Christ we hear the truth of God's word and we want to be obedient messengers bringing the good news of healing and freedom through Christ to this broken world.

This series emphasises the conviction that the freedom of Christ brings life and meaning exactly to vulnerable and broken contexts where the freedom of people and communities is threatened. With the aim of the Reformation 500 commemoration in mind, our Pentecost 2017 series wants to testify,

through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit, that Christ has set us free from any binding powers. And we want to appeal to one another in the Name of the Triune God to practise Christian freedom.

This series links up with twelve themes identified by the Reformation 500 Task Team (DRC Family) for monthly pamphlets to be distributed by the Christian Literature Fund during the course of this year. The series explores the implications of Christ's freedom for both humanity and nature. Hope, life, confession, care, priesthood, creation and the singing of a new song are some of the themes that are explored. From the overarching theme "Christ has set us free..." flows the sub-themes that aim to help the children of the Reformation during the season of Pentecost to reflect on what our tradition recognises and teaches about Christ.

The ten reflections for the series, together with the individual authors, are as follows:

Reflection 1: Galatians 5:13-26 (Ntozakhe Simon Cezula)

Feast of the Ascension: We have been set free by God who gives hope

Reflection 2: Matthew 1:18-25 (Helené Fouché)

Christ has set us free for this life

Reflection 3. Romans 9:30 to 10:21 (Henco van der Westhuizen)

Christ has set us free so that we can confess

Reflection 4: Luke 1:39-56 (Lee-Ann Simon)

Christ has set us free to have a different outlook through faith

Reflection 5: Romans 12:1-21 (Akash Sirpal)

Christ has set us free, therefore we care

Reflection 6: 1 Peter 2:9-10 (Mariëte Frantz)

Christ has set us free, therefore we are his priests

Reflection 7: 1 Corinthians 1:17-31 and 9:16-27 (Myrtle Neewat-Joubert)

Christ has set us free to go about things differently

Reflection 8: Galatians 2:1-10 and 2:21 (Joseph Pali)

Christ has set us free to live bravely in public life

Reflection 9: Romans 8:19-21 (Christina Landman)

Christ has set us free to look after God's creation

Reflection 10: Psalm 137:1-4 and Revelation 5:9-10 (Derik Myburgh)

Pentecost Sunday: Christ has set us free to sing a new song

We are grateful to our co-workers who made this Pentecost resource available. There are ten authors: Ntozakhe Simond Cezula, Helené Fouché, Henco van der Westhuizen, Lee-Ann Simon, Akash Sirpal, Mariëte Frantz, Myrtle Neewat-Joubert, Joseph Pali, Christina Landman and Derik Myburgh. Many thanks to Amanda Carstens from Christian Literature Fund who prepared the manuscript for electronic use. A sincere word of appreciation to everyone.

It is our prayer that Pentecost 2017 will be a blessing to your congregations. May the Holy Spirit help us to live according to the wonderful freedom we received as a gift from Christ, so that the world can believe that Christ is alive.

Eddie Orsmond and Donald Gantana, on behalf of the United Ministry for Service and Witness together with the Season of Human Dignity.

Day 1: Feast of the Ascension: We have been set free by God who gives hope

Galatians 5:13-26

Ntozakhe Simon Cezula

1. Freedom to love one another

Galatians 5:13 is the focus text for this reflection: 'For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, *but through love serve one another*' (English Standard Version, emphasis mine).

It is claimed that Christianity is the dominant religion in South Africa, with almost 80% of the population professing to be Christian. However, at present, South Africa wrestles with differentiating between freedom of speech as enshrined in our Constitution, on the one hand, and hate speech, which attacks a person or group on the basis of attributes such as gender, ethnic origin, religion, race, disability and sexual orientation, on the other hand. The government has drafted a *Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill* to be tabled in Parliament soon. In the midst of all this, practising and active Christians celebrate the ascension of Jesus Christ, an event signalling the completion of Christ's earthly mission of setting us free (Galatians 5:1). What does freedom mean for us as Christians within this context? Although we may not find direct parallels with our own circumstances, Galatians 5:13-26 might empower us to deal with them.

2. An alternative way

In Galatians 5 Paul rejects circumcision as a condition for gentiles to be in Christ (verse 1 to 12) and also gives guidelines to live out freedom in Christ (verse 13 to 26). The first part of the chapter is about the relationship with God and the latter about the relationship with one another. In technical terms, we can say the former is theological and the latter is ethical in intent. The former should lead to the latter. The kind of relationship we have with God should determine the kind of relationship we have with one another. By freeing us from the law, Jesus freed us from the yoke of slavery and we should avoid returning to it (verse 1). Paul says here that freedom should not be used as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love we should serve one another. The works of the flesh lead to sexual impurity, idolatry, conflict and a lack of restraint (verse 19 to 21).

There must have been quite a bit of tension and animosity among the Galatian believers. After addressing the issue of circumcision that must have divided the Galatians, Paul concludes by cursing those who unsettle the Galatians (verse 12). In the following ethical section, Paul warns the Galatians that, if they bite and devour one another, they must watch out that they are not consumed by one another (verse 15). He teaches them that love fulfils the law (verse 14). In verse 19 to 20, he mentions 15 examples of works of the flesh, eight of them being conflictual in nature. The emphasis on examples of a conflictual nature suggests that the Galatians were particularly susceptible to sins involving personal relationships. He concludes the section by warning against being conceited, provoking one another and envying one another (verse 26). This reinforces the intuition of unhealthy tensions among the Galatian congregations. Paul strongly encourages them to live the freedom they have gained in accordance with their faith. Charles B. Cousar (1982: 125) summarises Paul's teaching in verses 22 to 23: 'freedom has to do with overcoming community strife, with nurturing gifts of patience, gentleness, and self-control, and with bearing one another's burdens.' This is an alternative way to dissension.

3. Challenged by the word of God

Twenty-two years after South Africa embarked on the journey of national reconciliation, the government considers a hate speech law. There are at least two questions in this regard. The first question is whether polarisation in South Africa is such that it needs to be controlled by law. The second question concerns some people's fear that this law might infringe on freedom of speech and religion. Whatever the answers, it seems we have a hate speech problem in South Africa. Having said this, there are two more things worth touching upon briefly. The first is a quote by one of the participants in the hate speech discourse, regarding the use of the word *kaffir*, saying that, by definition, he as a Christian and thus a non-Muslim, could also be called a *kaffir*. Whatever his intentions were, judging by the public response, he did not make things any better. He is mentioned here because he identified himself as a Christian.

The second is a response to the planned hate speech law by an organisation called *Freedom of Religion South Africa* (FOR SA), which claims to be a 'voice for the Christians in South Africa'. It claims that freedom of speech and religion will be restrained. A certain preacher who delivered a homophobic sermon serves as an example of a person who would be threatened by this law. Again, this organisation is mentioned here because of its self-identification as a voice for Christians in South Africa.

The arguments of the above two references are not the issue for this reflection, but these references serve as proof that Christians exercise their constitutional freedoms. In the light of all of this, the main question is what implications exercising freedom has for people who have been set free by God who gives hope.

4. Set free by Christ to serve one another

Paul says in verse 13 that the Galatians were called to freedom. They should not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh but, instead, they should serve one another through love. Christians should exercise their right to freedom and enjoy the benefits of being free. In the process, love towards others should be evident. God is pleased when we exercise love, but offended when we exercise hate. In other words, freedom that leads to hate is an opportunity for flesh. Freedom that attacks a person or group on the basis of attributes such as gender, ethnic origin, religion, race, disability and sexual orientation is an opportunity for the flesh. Being in Christ is a relational state, vertically and horizontally, even when we exercise our freedom. It is not enough to concentrate on one's good relationship with God if we neglect having good relationships with others. It might be worth repeating that 'freedom has to do with overcoming community strife, with nurturing gifts of patience, gentleness, and self-control, and with bearing one another's burdens'. Hate speech is against all these and is therefore an opportunity for the flesh. In this context, flesh is service to what is not in the interests of God.

5. We invite one another to go along

As the salt and light of the earth (Matthew 5:13 and 14), let us remember that: 'the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life' (Galatians 6:8).

When we celebrate Ascension, let us invite one another to hear the Word for the healing of our society.

5. Prayer themes

Before we pray, let us tell each other about:

- incidents where we have been accused of hate speech (rightly or wrongly)
- incidents where we have been victims of hate speech.

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.

6. References

Cousar, Charles B. 1982. *Galatians: Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press.

Day 2: Christ has set us free for this life

Matthew 1:18-25

Helené Fouché

1. Introduction

We are often caught up in the dictates of established practices and preconceived ideas about the way in which we do certain things and which things we must not or will not do. With our lists of rules we often exclude people, or we deprive ourselves the privilege that Jesus' death on the cross accorded us, of living together with others as free people.

2. The family of Jesus

The Gospel of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus Christ who was born as the child of Mary and Joseph. The genealogy reminds us of the Jewish background of Jesus and of (especially) Joseph and Mary. Their Jewish background implied obedience to certain laws and customs.

Between the lines we read the story of a father that accepts a child that is not his. A father that experiences, as it were, how he is freed in this life of earthly practices, laws and assumptions so that he can hear what is God's will for him. When Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant, his first thoughts are probably that there is another man and he initially plans to break off the engagement.

Jewish law would have allowed Joseph to have Mary killed because of her premarital pregnancy. A marriage was like a property transaction; the father gave his daughter to another man as part of a transaction between them. Should a married or engaged woman have sexual intercourse with another man, property rights would be violated.

Joseph, however, obeys God's messenger who visits him in a dream. Against general expectations and contrary to Deuteronomistic laws, Joseph decides to honour his engagement to Mary and takes her home as his wife.

We still believe that, as prophesied, the birth of Jesus comes from God and that the Child has been born into the family of King David.

3. Acceptance in a totally new way!

Matthew 1:19 calls Joseph a 'righteous man'. It does not transpire from the story if Joseph tried to find out if Mary was indeed faithful to him. He accepts the message from God and undertakes to bring up the child that is not his own. Joseph's decision teaches us something about God's action in this world and tells us that Joseph accepted to be used by God. Joseph and Maria never speak in the story, only the angel of God speaks. The only action of Joseph and Mary is their obedience.

Joseph is obedient by giving Jesus his name. Through this action, he acknowledges Jesus as his son. He also accepts him into the family of David. Jesus means 'the Lord saves' and Immanuel means 'God is with us'. The meaning of the virginal birth and the mystery of Immanuel are both inherent in the fact that God is with us. And this is enough!

We never again hear about Joseph in the story of Jesus in the gospels. But we know that Joseph accepted Jesus unconditionally as his own.

4. Jesus is different

We find out, right from the start, that Jesus is different from his parents and family. Andrew Solomon (2012) reminds us in his book *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search of Identity* of children in our own time who are different from their parents: children with disabilities, children who are born as the result of a rape, children who commit crimes, children belonging to the LGBTI community. He describes the unhappiness of families who reject these children, while happiness, in a multitude of ways, awaits families who accept these 'strange' or 'exceptional' children.

In an interview, Solomon says that all children are to a greater or lesser extent different from their parents and that there is always a crossing of borders when any parent embraces a child.

To us as Christians, it is precisely the Incarnation (God that has become human in Jesus Christ) and the cross making it possible for us to accept what is 'different' in this life. It becomes possible for us to love strangers and to make them part of our family, because the Incarnation assures us that nothing and nobody is strange to God. We can even accept suffering, because the cross reminds us that no suffering is unknown to God.

5. Joseph, metaphor of obedience

In the story of Jesus' birth, the obedience of Joseph is an example of behaviour that is not restricted by commonly held beliefs. The strangeness between us and God is bridged when God becomes human in the person of Christ. God invites us strangers into his family through the act of obedience of Christ.

The birth of Christ (his coming to earth) and his death on the cross set us free. This is precisely what we want to celebrate in this year of commemorating the Reformation of the church. We must remind ourselves of this and remember that we were purchased into freedom so that we may live in freedom.

We are no longer slaves of the law nor are we slaves of any customs. Like Joseph (and Jesus, throughout his earthly ministry) we may live differently from what the world expects from us or prescribes to us. Joseph sets the example of how to invite strangers into our midst in obedience to the messenger of God.

Who was it that said: 'If you want to let a stranger in, become a parent'?

6. Prayer themes

You may want to listen to the *Lied van de Moeder – Pieta*, of Stef Bos, available on his album *In een ander licht*, during the reflection.

- Think of times that you felt 'out' and unwelcome. Maybe you have even feared for your life. Share this with God.
- Identify practices and assumptions in your framework of thoughts that make you feel caught or that make you push others out. Talk to God about this.
- Ask God that you may be sensitive towards people who feel rejected.
- Pray for children who have no home or refuge.
- Pray for people who are not free to worship God in their own country that they may still feel his presence.

7. References

Bos, Stef. 2009. *In een ander licht*. Produced by Niemandland.

Solomon, Andrew. 2012. *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search of Identity*. New York: Simon & Shuster.

Day 3: Christ has set us free so that we can confess

Romans 9:30 to 10:21

Henco van der Westhuizen

1. A letter about grace

Throughout the ages, Paul's letter to the Romans has been seen as one of his most important texts. It is in this letter that he describes his understanding of the gospel in detail. To Paul, the content of the gospel is Jesus Christ. To him, this Jesus is the Lord, our Lord through whom he received grace (Romans 1: 4 and 5). And he is not ashamed of this Jesus (Romans 1:16).

In the section of the letter from where we take our scripture reading, Paul asks what can be said about righteousness (Romans 9:30). And this he has set out in detail. Everyone has sinned; Jews and gentiles alike (Romans 3: 23 and 9). It is clear to him: 'There is no-one righteous, not even one' (Romans 3:10, New International Version). But, and this is who Jesus Christ is to him, 'where sin increased, grace increased all the more' (Romans 5:20). Sinners 'are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ' (Romans 3:24).

This is what this letter is all about: God justifies those who have faith in Jesus so as to be just and by his grace (Romans 3: 26 and 24).

2. Grace alone

In 1545, a year before his death, an edition of Martin Luther's works is published in Wittenberg. Luther writes a preface to one of the volumes in which he reflects on the beginning of his career:

I hated that phrase, 'the righteousness of God.' [...] Although I lived blamelessly as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God. [...] At last, God being merciful, by meditating day and night on the connection of the words 'the righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written: the righteous shall live by faith', I began to understand that 'righteousness of God' as that by which the righteous lives by the gift of God, namely by faith, and this sentence, 'the righteousness of God is revealed', to refer to a passive righteousness, by which a merciful God justifies us by faith. [...] From that moment, the whole face of scripture appeared to me in a different light!

It is these words from the letter of Paul that has allowed Luther to rediscover the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ: '[I]f you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved' (Romans 10:9-10). For it is through the 'one man, Jesus Christ' that we have 'gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand' (Romans 5: 17 and 2).

What Luther rediscovers in these words is Paul's hermeneutics, his foundation, his basis, that on which he builds his understanding of living by faith. What Luther rediscovers is a hermeneutics of grace!

This is exactly why Paul writes to the Romans that he prays the Israelites will be saved (Romans 10:1). Because he 'can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge' (Romans 10:2). They do not want to submit to the righteousness of God, but they seek to establish their own (Romans 10:3).

Paul explains that the non-Jews who 'did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is *by faith*', but those who pursued a '*law of righteousness*' did not get it (Romans 9:30 and 31, emphases mine). Why could they not attain righteousness? Because, says Paul, 'they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works' (Romans 9:32).

Their hermeneutics, their foundation, their basis, that on which they built their understanding of living by faith, was the law!

3. The law alone?

This year the Reformation is being commemorated worldwide. Prof. Dirkie Smit has recently written in *Die Burger* (14 January 2017) about it. To many the motto *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei* became a touchstone. The key is the last words: a reformed church keeps on reforming *according to the word of the Lord*!

Prof Smit writes that the Reformation was essentially about the aims of the gospel itself. These aims, he says, had to be continuously *discovered*, they had to be understood better and discerned more clearly. It is not as if the Church ever *knows*, the Church had to continue learning, had to listen anew, hear anew, understand better, and become aware more acutely. But, says Smith (in reference to Barth's insights), it can happen that others may overtake us by *doing* what we actually claim *we are* and *we do*.

And perhaps that is also what is happening today, in our times. Our hermeneutics, our foundation, our basis, that on which we build our understanding of living by faith, is it not also the law? Do we still pray like Paul that our love 'may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight' so that we, too, may be able 'to discern what is best' (Philippians 1:9 and 10)? Do we pray like him that Christ will dwell in our hearts through faith and that we will be 'rooted and established in love' (Ephesians 3:17)? That we will be capable of grasping together with all the saints 'how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ' (Ephesians 3:18)? That we, too, may know his love 'that surpasses knowledge' (Ephesians 3:19)?

In short, our hermeneutics, our foundation, our basis, that on which we build our understanding of living by faith, is it grace? Or did it happen that others overtook us by *doing* what we claim *we are* and *we do*?

4. Prayer themes

- Pray to the Lord that our love may abound more and more and that we will be rooted and established in love.
- Pray to the Lord that we will be capable of grasping together with the saints how wide and long and high and deep is Christ's love, that we may know his love that surpasses knowledge.
- Pray that the Lord may make our hermeneutics, our foundation, our basis, that on which we build our understanding of living by faith: grace!

5. References

Smit, Dirkie. 2017. Geestelike waardes: Gedenk en vier is geen speletjies nie. *Die Burger* (Cape Town). 14 January 2017.

Day 4: Christ has set us free to have a different outlook through faith

Luke 1:39-56

Lee-Ann Simon

1. The blessings and praise of Elizabeth and Mary - also for today?

Christians are still challenged daily by social problems in the lives of brothers and sisters from the Cape Flats and other communities. Every day is a struggle for survival. It calls for a change in perspective to start at the start. The start, in this case, is the glasses through which we look at families. Our communities are, after all, made up from different families. To some, it goes without saying that a family generally consists of a mother, father, brothers and sisters. The truth is that nuclear families are the exception, rather than the rule. In the greater part of society, it is single mothers who are responsible for raising children. In most poor communities, it is thus women who have paradoxically the greatest influence, but the least power.

2. Freed by Christ, but bound by poverty?

If Christ has set us free, why is the greater part of our society still fettered by poverty? Those who are affected most are women and children. Can we speak of freedom if our sisters and children are still bound and kept back by poverty, as well as economic and social injustice?

Another important question relates to the role the church plays in the life of those God sends across our path. Shouldn't the eyes of faith change our outlook on those on the margins of society? Shouldn't who and what we see through the eyes of faith move us to help the marginalised so that they can also experience God's freedom?

We cannot deny that people's circumstances (socio-political, economic, educational) often form the glasses through which the world is perceived. It is often sad, even tragic, that our perspective on life is passed on from generation to generation. Children find it difficult to look at life using a different frame of reference from the one in which they are brought up at home. The glasses of socialisation prevent us from seeing new possibilities or to understand other people's circumstances.

It is difficult to look differently at life when brothers and sisters in Christ are not also freed from earthly bonds and when it seems that not everyone shares in the grace of God some people have access to through material privileges.

3. God uses Elizabeth and Mary in his great plan

The story of Elizabeth and Mary makes us aware of dramatic differences between the two women's contexts, their families and phases of life. Elizabeth was a woman already advanced in age while Mary was a young woman who was engaged. As a consequence of her childlessness, Elizabeth was not respected while Mary, after the initial confusion, was called blessed because she was pregnant. However, God recognises both women and chooses them to be his servants.

The Gospel of Luke gives both women a clear voice, something exceptional for their time. Luke gives the reader a new perspective on the faith of the two women who were chosen by God to take part in the execution of God's 'different' plan for the world. Elizabeth and Mary are not bound by the social position that society assigned to women in living out their faith in God. God turns the values of that time 'inside out' and uses a 'different path' for his plan for the world. Elizabeth who knew disgrace because she had no children acquires status in society and is appreciated. Her worth has increased in

the eyes of society while Mary also discovers her self-worth. Mary understands what honour God shows her despite her humble position in society.

Luke 1 (verse 42 and 48) confirms Mary's understanding of her position when Elizabeth exclaims, 'Blessed are you among women,' and Mary responds in confirmation, 'From now on all generations will call me blessed.' It is only in the Gospel of Luke that 'Mary's song' is included.

Our scripture reading is also the only part in the four gospels where women get the chance to speak at length. Luke does not only honour Mary and Elizabeth of whom the circumstances change as a result of faith. The faith of these two women and their willingness to become instruments of change give them a voice. By doing this, God gives them their place in his great story.

4. Luke looks through the eyes of Christ at the role of women

Luke chooses to look differently at the role of women in society. Although ours is a society of about 2 000 years later, there are still too many women who do not have a sense of self-worth. This is why they find it difficult to find or to make their voices heard. They struggle measuring their self-worth against the values society or some influential individuals prescribe, rather than choosing to submit to God's grace.

Christ has already set us free by coming to earth and dying on the cross. But it is as if we are still moving backwards. We think like our grandmothers and mothers, because it is the only way we know. This is the 'revolving slate' (Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973) where one generation transfers their account (slate) to the next without really calculating the costs.

Let us embrace the grace and the freedom that come with faith and let us look at ourselves and others through Christ's eyes. We have all been made in God's image and are thus precious to him. Can we look at each other in this way?

5. Prayer themes

- Reflect in silence upon times when we judged others unworthy on the basis of their social status.
- Invite each other to reflect on times when we were part of negative conversations and when we did not, perhaps even despite disagreeing with the direction of the conversation, use the chance to help people to look at each other differently.
- Pray that Christ will give us the courage to stand up and make our voice be heard about his goodness, to help people who cross our path look at each other differently.
- Pray that we may always realise that God's grace is for everybody and that, when we receive it, we have the responsibility to spread it.

6. References

Boszormenyi-Nagy, I. & G. Spark. 1973. *Invisible Loyalties: Reciprocity in Intergenerational Family Therapy*. New York: Harper & Row.

Day 5: Christ has set us free, therefore we care

Romans 12:1-21

Akash Sirpal

1. From knowing to doing

How we should live is summed up in the words of a *sola* (a phrase using the Latin word for 'only') of the Reformation: 'Live for the glory of God alone.'

After devoting 11 chapters to deep theology about belief, the apostle Paul moves on to discuss behaviour or practice in Chapter 12. In effect he is saying: Considering what God has done, *this* is how we should live. The 'Therefore' in verse 1 thus links the doctrine Paul has covered in Chapter 1 to 11 with the discussion that follows about behaviour.

To Paul, only when we become doers of the Word, do we truly know the Word. This verse, Romans 12:1, is a call to action in response to God's mercy. Paul urges his readers to 'offer' (New International Version) or 'present' (English Standard Version) their bodies as living sacrifices. He does not use the word 'yield' or 'surrender' that could imply a measure of reluctance, but 'offer' and 'present' imply a glad, happy and willing giving of oneself. God asks that we offer or present ourselves as a sacrifice; it is an appeal to those who have been set free by grace to live under that grace by giving all that they are to God.

In what follows we will unpack some of the very practical verses in Romans 12 that help us to live out Christ's command to care for one another. Quotations will be taken from the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

2. Belonging to one another like members of one body (verse 5)

The Church is often described as a unity in diversity. It is also a unity of interconnectedness. We do not just belong to the same body. We belong to each other. If I hurt my right shoulder on the sports field, my left hand immediately and instinctively reaches for my right shoulder. It is as if my hand itself felt the pain. We, who are many, are one body in Christ. The different organisations known as the URCSA, the DRCA, the DRC and the RCA belong to one unified organisation, one holy church, and we belong to each other. That is why we should and must care for each other. In Galatians 6:10 Paul states this clearly: 'Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.'

In verse 6 of Romans 12, Paul tells his readers how the interconnectedness between believers is supposed to work. We have different gifts that depend on the grace given to us. My hand serves my shoulder differently from the way my feet serve my shoulder. The apostle Paul lists seven gifts in verse 6 to 8, namely, prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leadership and mercy.

To summarise, we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us. These gifts are ways of blessing others with the grace that God has bestowed on us. God may grace you with the ability to show mercy, to be generous, perhaps to encourage others, or you may receive a compassionate heart that identifies needs and moves toward those needs. The point being, grace sets us free to care for one another in unity.

3. Love and honour (verse 9 and 10)

Let love be sincere and genuine. It must be without hypocrisy as the hypocrite is concerned only about himself. Paul is calling for transformation, he calls for a renewing of our mind and warns against being 'conform to the pattern of this world' (Romans 12:2). Christ must be exalted, not the self. This ethic is emphasised in Matthew 6:2: 'So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men.' In 1 Corinthians 13:3 the apostle Paul highlights another perspective of giving: 'If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.'

Christ calls his disciples to be devoted to one another in brotherly love. This is a love with deep bonds and it comes from long familiarity. In times of crisis (illness, death or external threats), affections show a powerful side. That is the kind of love we should have for each other. The grace of God has set us free to care.

Honouring someone means showing with our words and actions that they are worthy of our service. Yet, we should beware of honouring only one kind of person, one race, one socio-economic class, one educational level, one sex or one age group. James (2:1-6) cautions against this in his letter:

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favouritism. [...] If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there,' or, 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

4. Practise hospitality (verse 13)

For the Israelites in the Old Testament, the duty to practise hospitality came right from the centre of who God is. God instructs his people in Leviticus 19:34 to treat 'the alien' living with them as one of them: 'Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.'

In the New Testament, the duty of hospitality is given also to the Christian community: 'Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling' we read in 1 Peter 4:9 and 'Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it' in Hebrews 13:2.

In Romans 12:13 the verb 'practise' implies a continuous action. It is not something to be done only during Advent or Easter or on 16 December. God's grace is his hospitality in welcoming sinners and we too should mirror that grace by practising hospitality.

5. Do not avenge (verse 19)

All of us have been wronged at some time or other. We may have never received an apology nor any kind of restitution. We may feel that justice has to be done, that people cannot get away with wrongdoing. Sometimes, we hold on to anger. We replay it over and over in our heads. God gives us as South Africans Romans 12:19 today to lift the burden from us. When we lay down the burden of vengeance, God will pick it up. Forgiveness has been described as 'setting a prisoner free and knowing that the prisoner was me'. This is a wonderful way to live. This is freedom and, in this freedom, there are great spaces for love.

The most important gift we can ever receive is God's Son, our Saviour. Through him comes forgiveness, restoration and the promise of eternal life that begins now and lasts forever. In response, the most important gift we can give to Jesus is our heart so that we can live for his glory. This we show by caring for others.

6. Prayer themes

- Lord, help us to offer ourselves to you and to live for your glory alone.
- Teach us what it means to be part of the body of Christ and to belong to each other.
- Help us to love others, to cling to goodness, to be devoted, to practise hospitality and to forgive.

Day 6: Christ has set us free, therefore we are his priests

1 Peter 2:9-10

Mariëte Frantz

1. Called out of darkness

We focus on 1 Peter 2:9-10 for the reflection:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy' (New International Version).

Sometimes one gets the feeling that we as reborn Christians are becoming more and more invisible in the living out of our faith in society. We have become mute and deaf and blind when it comes to social evils, corruption, racism, poverty, and the list can go on, in our communities. Our scripture reading reminds us all who we are in Jesus Christ, the One who lifted us up and gave us hope to live. We are also called to answer because we have been set free through the death of Christ on the cross.

2. A totally new identity

In our scripture reading, Peter describes the new identity of believers; Christians should understand the seriousness of these verses. These verses contain the order to declare God's praises, that is, we should spread his Word. Everything that Peter says here of the church, has also been said of Israel in the Old Testament. Christians are called by titles that, up to that point, had only been applicable to Israel as the people of God in the Old Testament. Christians are 'a chosen people', 'a royal priesthood', 'a holy nation', 'a people belonging to God' and 'the people of God'.

What a great privilege it is to be such a chosen people, a people that God called to belong to his priesthood not because of our deserving, but because we have received his mercy. Just as these descriptions once had to bring Israel a new understanding of themselves and keep alive an awareness of their calling, so they must make us as Christ's disciples aware of our uniqueness and calling as free people.

A person whose sinful bonds have been broken, who has been reborn and who has received the Holy Spirit is a free person. As 2 Corinthians 3:17 truthfully says: 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.' Thus, your sinful life no longer determines the direction of your life. The direction of your life is determined by the new relationship with Christ. To be in Christ gives Christians a unique identity. We are for ever linked to Christ when sinful bonds are broken.

This is why we cannot but gratefully take up the task and function of the Old Testament priests to declare God's mercy. Believers who follow Christ are called to take up the mission to tell the good news about Jesus alongside the disciples of the New Testament to the whole world.

3. Set free to officiate as priests

If we could, today, approach one of the sons of Aaron to ask him about his priesthood, he would probably refer, first, to his entitlement to it as someone born inside the family of priests and, second, to having been ordained in the service according to the commandments of Exodus 29. The

consecration was done by washing him with water, by sprinkling blood on him and by anointing him with oil.

In Christ we are also priests because, through him, we are born from God. We have also been washed and cleansed by the Word (1 Peter 1:22-23). We have been purified through the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:19) and we have received the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 1:12) of which the anointment with oil is a symbol. We came to Christ, 'the living Stone - rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him' (1 Peter 1:4). We are thus priests. Just like the sons of Aaron became priests because they belonged to God and was chosen for his priestly service we, as reborn Christians, belong to God who has chosen us in Christ through mercy.

4. We must remember what priesthood means

But let us remember that it is one thing to be called a priest but something entirely different to be carrying out one's priestly duties. Priesthood means service to God in society. Our priesthood is grounded in and directed to God. We are called to bring offerings to the Lord. We have to declare the praises of him who has called us out of darkness into his wonderful light and we must live out our priesthood. Declaring God's praises is manifested in words, but also in deeds.

As priests we have the task of intercession, just like the priests of the Levitical order interceded with God for the Israelites. Our scripture reading therefore reminds us of our responsibility to pray with a humble and sincere attitude for Christ's church, our communities, our government and leaders, our country and everyone who lives here.

But this task goes further than prayer. If we indeed want to obey God's call to compassionate justice we must be ready to reach out to those who have been pushed aside or rejected, who have been wronged in our communities, the woman who is abused by her husband, the hungry, those who are discriminated against, those who are ignored, drug addicts, those who have been knocked down, people without hope because of their circumstances or even because of the silence of Christians who are unengaged in their communities.

We are also challenged by the question if we as priests are prepared to address the sensitive questions in our churches, communities and society. As people who have been set free by Christ our priestly identity is characterised by compassion and by being involved where people are sad or are suffering, by spreading Jesus Christ's grace and love everywhere.

5. Prayer themes

- We pray for the need and social challenges in our communities.
- We pray that our church that serves our communities will receive wisdom.
- We pray for the government and leaders who make decisions for our country.

Day 7: Christ has set us free to go about things differently

1 Corinthians 1:17-31 and 9:16-27

Myrtle Neewat-Joubert

1. The church has challenges!

Paul has learnt about various problems in the congregation of Corinth and reacts in our scripture reading to the factions and dissent in the congregation itself.

2. Divisions in the congregation

A psychologist once made a study of two groups of toddlers. He let the children play with the same toys for days. Each group developed their own patterns of behaviour and customs regarding who played with which toys. When the behavioural patterns were established, the psychologist let a child eighteen months older than the rest of the group join it as leader of the group. The new leaders showed dominance and tried to take control of their groups, but failed most of the time. According to the psychologist, the group accepted the leader, but imposed their customs on the leader. One of the group leaders did, in the end, get control over the group, but only due to several group members' effort over several days to convince the others to allow this to happen.

The psychologist's experiment is reminiscent of the situation in Corinth. The Corinthians supported different leaders, resulting in the formation of different groups. Some were loyal to Paul, others to Peter and others yet to Apollos. It is this dissent among the Corinthians that makes Paul write to them.

Loyalty to leaders or codes of conduct should not divide Christians into factions. Christians are called to be loyal to Christ. *He* is the head of the church. Paul speaks directly and openly to the Corinthians about the divisions that happened in his absence. The Corinthians divided Christ, as it were, into pieces with their arguments. The arguments and ideologies of our day can make Christians fall into the same pitfalls as the Corinthians did.

3. Arrogance leads to foolishness

The congregation of Corinth was not perfect. Paul had to listen to a long list of complaints from and about this congregation. This congregation had a diverse constituency. There were learned and influential people in this big commercial centre of the Roman Empire; there were people with political power, people who practised idolatry and sexual immorality. There were also people from a humbler background like many of the members of the Corinthian congregation (1 Corinthians 1:26). The establishment of a church was indeed a reason to rejoice.

It is, however, sad that the Corinthians forgot about their humble background and became arrogant. The Corinthians glorified the wisdom of the world and those proclaiming it, but their arrogance brought division among them. According to the wisdom of the world, it was illogical and foolish to believe that Jesus Christ had died and risen again in order to buy eternal life for sinners. But, to Paul, it is foolishness to reject the offer of Jesus Christ. The message Paul emphasises is that the power of God is found exactly in the seemingly foolish admission of Christians that they believe in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:18 and 24).

The Corinthians also felt themselves to be intellectually and spiritually superior to others. They forgot their origin, as well as the reason why God had called them. Paul brings us insights that are just as

applicable today for groups, individuals and the church struggling with arguments and ideologies in our day. Paul wants to correct the ways of readers with his teachings and theological principles.

4. Paul proclaims God's wisdom and glory

God's wisdom is foolishness in the eyes of ordinary people. Paul heard that the people in Corinth were guilty of sexual immorality and did not heed fellow believers' admonishments. There were also incorrect views about marriage and the way Christians had to regard their bodies. They forgot that their way of living had to reflect their belief. Paul warns Christians that they should not give in to sinful thoughts or customs. Christians have to guard against becoming one with the world.

Paul emphasises that followers of Christ have to live according to the commandments of God in the Bible. God's grace is not dependent on human strength or wisdom. Therefore, people cannot boast about themselves, but only about God and his power. God took what was nothing, namely sinners, and made them his children.

Paul does not boast about his special way of proclaiming the gospel, but about the grace of God that qualified him to do this task. He sees it as the task God compelled him to do and which is the driving force of his life. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 Paul writes that he is free to do anything, but he emphasises in verse 24 to 27 the importance of discipline in the life of a Christian. Paul says that a Christian is free to make decisions that are not expressly commanded in the Bible, but that he does not use his freedom for his own gain. Christ has set us free to go about things differently.

5. A call to go about things differently

During Pentecost 2017, already 500 years after the Reformation changed the history of the church irrevocably, the church in South Africa is confronted with, among other issues, the draft of the *Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill*. Various churches object to the draft bill, as they believe the heart and attitude of people cannot be regulated by laws, but only by a lifestyle that is built on the Biblical guidelines of love and respect. In South Africa people also clash about the rights of individuals and groups, such as the right to freedom of speech, the right of the poor, women, children, people with different sexual orientations, and so on.

The Reformation made us aware of absolute truths and gave us the gift of ongoing reform. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he discusses specific situations and makes radical statements. With the celebrations of Reformation 500 we are cautioned to find balance between being fully Christian and fully human, while we hold on to our faith.

Question 60 of the Heidelberg Catechism (DRCSA, s.a.) accompanies us on this path:

How are you righteous before God?

Answer: Only by true faith in Jesus Christ.[1] Although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, have never kept any of them, [2] and am still inclined to all evil, [3] yet God, without any merit of my own, [4] out of mere grace, [5] imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ.[6] He grants these to me as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me, [7] if only I accept this gift with a believing heart.[8]

May God give us the grace to fight the good fight and to finish the race.

Let us sing together Luther's hymn that we associate with the Reformation: 'A mighty Fortress is our God'.

7. Prayer themes

- Pray that the Church of Christ will redefine herself to promote unity.
- Pray that Christians will act differently towards people who are different.

8. References

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Day 8: Christ has set us free to live bravely in public life

Galatians 2:1-10 and 2:21

Joseph Pali

1. Introduction

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations that test our faith. Often our response is either to stand firm and confront the situation or to retreat in an attempt to avoid hurt. But, as followers of Christ, we have been warned of pending and possible persecution, confrontation and suffering in the practice of the ministry of Christ (Matthew 10:17-18 and Mark 13:9).

Paul, in a letter to the Galatian churches, tells believers to embrace the truth of the gospel he preached to them. Some false preachers from Jerusalem had challenged the truth of Paul's gospel and the validity of his apostleship. From Galatians 2:1-10 and 2:21 we get a glimpse of Paul's response to this challenge.

2. A visit to Jerusalem

In Galatians we read about a visit of Paul to Jerusalem. From Galatians 1:18 and 2:1 we learn that it was Paul's second visit to Jerusalem since his conversion. The impetus for the visit was divine revelation: 'I went there because God revealed it to me that I should go' (Galatians 2:2, New Living Translation). It was probably also to engage in relief mission (Acts 11:27-30) and to talk to the other apostles, such as James, John and Peter, about the ministry to the Gentiles. It is clear that Paul's visit to Jerusalem was not because he was summoned there, but because of God's guidance.

Paul's visit to Jerusalem happened at a time when God was persuading the church and the apostles that both Jews and Gentiles are put in a right relationship with God through faith in Christ alone, not through the law (Acts 10:34-36 and Galatians 5:2-3). Paul, as chosen instrument of God, was entrusted to proclaim this gospel to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 9:15). It seems as if there was some reluctance in accepting this new vision of God's ministry; we read, for example, about the opposition to Paul in the letter to the Galatians, about Peter's vision (Acts 10:9-16) and Peter's confrontation with other Jewish Christians (Acts 11:2).

It is said that it is better if divine transformation engages the heart of an institution and starts with those in leadership. Therefore, it was proper for God to engage those in leadership within the headquarters of the church in Jerusalem. Hence, Paul's visit to Jerusalem was instrumental in achieving this divine plan.

3. Paul's companions

A visit to Jerusalem held a possible threat to Paul's person because of his previous persecution of Christians (Galatians 1:13). Paul took with him Barnabas, a Jewish Christian well known to the Galatians and who accompanied him on his first mission to the Gentiles (Acts 13-14), and Titus, an uncircumcised Greek Christian to whose conversion Paul was instrumental.

Paul is bold in taking a Gentile with him on his visit to the headquarters of the church in Jerusalem in order to engage with the apostles about bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. Moreover, taking along a Jewish Christian together with an uncircumcised Greek Christian was a demonstration of unity and proof of peaceful coexistence of Jew and Gentile in Christ. It underpinned Paul's role among both groups. But, most importantly, this was done to establish a fellowship with the apostles in Jerusalem and to appeal to Jewish Christians everywhere to accept Gentiles as their fellow brothers and sisters

in Christ. This was essential to Paul in order to prevent his ministry from being rendered fruitless and to overthrow the influence of his opponents.

4. False brothers

Paul knew he would encounter opposition in Jerusalem, but he believed he had received the Holy Spirit that he described in 2 Timothy 1:7 as a spirit not of 'fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline'. Therefore, Paul was bold and had no fear of his opponents, openly calling them false.

The core dispute between Paul and his opponents was about the truthfulness of the gospel Paul brought to the Gentiles and his authority as an apostle. Paul's message to the Gentiles rejected the need for the ritual circumcision according to Jewish law as legalism. To subject oneself to the Jewish law and ritual as part of the salvation process in Christ would, in fact, nullify one's benefits from Christ's death (Galatians 2:21). Our righteousness before God is a grace and obtained only through faith in Christ. To Paul, the accusations threatened the Christian freedom earned by the death of Christ and wanted to change people into slaves again (Galatians 2:4).

Lastly, Paul's authority as an apostle was regarded by some as being inferior to that of the other apostles. Paul explains in Galatians 1:11-12 that the gospel he preaches was revealed to him by Christ and was not subject to the authority of other apostles. During his visit to Jerusalem Paul's gospel was endorsed and supported by the other apostles. The actions of Paul's opponents, on the other hand, show that they had no interest in fellowship and unity inside the church. They emphasised distinction, status and tradition in addition to the gospel.

In our churches, we have advocates propagating directly or indirectly equality of tradition, church order and denomination in proclaiming the gospel. Sadly, the teachings of the Reformation have sometimes been interpreted as calling for differentiation and the exclusion of others. Because of this, few African Christians from reformed and non-reformed traditions could share their fellowship in Christ in the past.

5. Pillars of the church

Paul described the apostles James, John and Peter as reputable men and 'pillars of the church' (Galatians 2:9). He respected them as having been apostles before him while they gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship. There were thus an acceptance of partnership and an acknowledgement of diversity between Paul and the other apostles. Paul's main emphasis would be the ministry to the Gentiles while the other apostles would mainly focus on bringing the message to the Jews.

It is important to note, though, that the apostles asked Paul to remember the poor (Galatians 2:10). This, Paul was eager to do and he urged the churches in Macedonia and Achaea to support the poor in Jerusalem. Thus, in his mission, he cared for the poor and organised for the collection of alms.

6. Proclamation and action

Proclamation of the gospel should also be accompanied with concrete action to stop injustices in this world. Throughout history, there are examples where churches emphasised either the first aspect of ministry at the expense of the second, or the other way round. Many past Western missions in Africa emphasised personal faith and had too little concern for concrete action against injustices in society. This was un-African and, moreover, unbiblical. The consequence is that now, due to this negligence, societal challenges in Africa seem to overwhelm the impact of Christianity in Africa.

Africa needs more Christians who are bold and active agents of deep change and who are willing to oppose evil structures in society. This deep change has to start first with our churches and must then extend to the outside world.

7. Prayer themes

- Let us remember those ministers who suffered for the sake of spreading the gospel.
- Let us reflect on the societal challenges faced by the global world and, in particular, Africa as a continent and South Africa as a country.
- Triune God we really admire your being, your almighty power and your unending love for us as your servants and as part of your creation in this world, Amen.

Day 9: Christ has set us free to look after God's creation

Romans 8:19-21

Christina Landman

1. Introduction

Paul's letter to the Romans fills one with admiration. Yes, it has been written more than 1960 years ago, somewhere between 55 and 57 AC. And it still fills one with wonder. Of course Paul did not write his letter in chapters, but what we know today as Chapter 8 is really wonderful. Here Paul tells us how we can live as people who have been set free.

The Christians to whom Paul wrote in Rome encountered a lot of pressure from the authorities, a lot of temptation and were even persecuted. You could not make progress in your career if you would not offer to the Roman gods. You could lose your freedom and even your life.

Paul writes to these people over the wonder of life when you have been set free. From what does faith in Christ free us? Let us consider at least five things mentioned by Paul.

2. Set free to share in God's glory

In Romans 8:18, just before our scripture reading, Paul writes: 'I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us' (New International Version).

What does it mean to share in God's glory? I think it means growing towards a life of dignity and worth. In Paul's time, Christians' souls were bent and their bodies broken. Their lives were worthless and their broken bodies, robbed of all dignity, were shown in public.

To share in God's glory is to have worth and dignity. This must have been a tremendous message for the people of the time. It is still a tremendous message for us today. Never in the history of the world were there as much suffering among people. We can reach out to these people with the message: The journey with God is a journey to the glories of having worth.

3. Set free to live a new life

Our scripture reading, together with the preceding and following parts, smells new. It is like when you buy a new car. You cannot stop smelling the newness. This is how our faith in Christ is too. It convinces us that there is no end. Everything becomes new all the time.

We can get up every day in the faith that today will be new. That we will get chances to set things right. That we will get new solutions to old problems. That we will get hope for old hopelessness.

4. Set free to live without care and without fear

Throughout the letter to the Romans we are told that we have been freed; also from our cares and especially from our fears. The Roman Christians often feared for their lives. Paul did too. But Christ sets us free from fear, because God makes everything new. With God there is no decay. There is no loss. We can live, and die, without fear. God never abandons us. He won't abandon us in difficult times, not even in the grave.

5. Set free to give sense to our lives

The worth we have in Christ - the hope, the freedom and the newness we gain with it - this gives sense to our lives. And we can make sense from our lives. Because we are not only bodies that can be

pushed around and hurt. We are more than our bodies. We can reach out to one another. We can try to make things better. We can take part in the newness of life every day. We can believe that we are more than a mortal body.

6. Set free to look after God's creation

This is our real theme for the day: We have been set free to look after God's creation. What does Paul mean with 'the creation'? What is he referring to? He refers to the plants and animals. It is as simple as that. Let us focus on three things in our scripture reading:

The creation has been created by God. This is why it is called 'the creation'. It has been created. Not by us. We got it from God to look after. God has set us free, not to rule over the creation so that we can abuse and exploit it as we like. We must assist in freeing the creation. The creation must progress and not fall back into neglect, be overwhelmed by toxic gases and get so warm that the poles start melting. In nature the creation is renewed by itself and naturally; it can become new every day and produce new seeds and births. But people use up the creation so that it cannot renew itself as God intended it to do.

The creation has worth because it has been created by God. We must respect it and nurture it.

The creation has lost its purpose. God's purpose with the creation was that humans, animals and plants would live here together and provide for each other, so that God's glory could increase as we become part of it.

We have been set free to look after the creation and to no longer abuse it. Here 'set free' means that we have new insight and that God appointed us over the creation, not to use it up, but to recognise the worth God assigned to it.

The creation will be renewed completely. According to our scripture reading we believe that a time will come when Christ will reign over a new earth and there will be no more tears or loss. Until that time, we must live with the creation as people who have been set free: sharing in God's glory, together worthy in God, there to renew and be renewed by each other.

7. Prayer themes

- Lord, give us the strength and insight to renew one another and to renew the creation. Let us set one another free to new life, every day.
- Lord, help us to recognise other people's worth as well as our own. Free us to recognise the worth in others and in the creation. Help us to celebrate this.
- Lord, thank you that you gave us worth and gave sense to our lives. Let us strive together with the creation to fulfil the purpose you have for us.

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Day 10: Pentecost Sunday: Christ has set us free to sing a new song

Psalm 137:1-4 and Revelation 5:9-10

Derik Myburgh

1. To sing or not to sing

Throughout the Bible we find singing people. If the spoken word is not enough to tell about God, the next step is the song. Moses and the Israelites sang a song of praise after God had led them safely through the sea (Exodus 15:1-19). The song was then taken up by Miriam and the women, accompanied by tambourine and dance (Exodus 15:20-21). David is, among others, known for the Psalms in the Bible. Zechariah sings a song of praise with the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:68-79) and Mary's song praises the greatness of God (Luke 1:46-55). The book of Lamentations and some of the Psalms convey the poets' pain and sorrow about the circumstances in which they find themselves. They call upon God to change things and to be faithful to the covenant he made with Israel.

2. Defeated and dejected

Psalm 137 describes people who have lost all desire to sing. The psalmist describes the misery of the people of God who have been taken into captivity to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem. They have lost everything. They have been uprooted, everything that they had was taken from them and they are at the mercy of their captors. They now must endure the mockery of their captors demanding them to sing one of the songs of Zion.

Zion was the temple mount in Jerusalem so that it was more than just a place. Zion was the symbol of God's presence among his people. Here offerings were made and the high priest entered the inner sanctuary once a year to bring an offering on behalf of the Israelites. But the whole city was destroyed and plundered by the Babylonians. The temple treasures were removed, the buildings razed to the ground and the inhabitants exiled to Babylonia.

These were terrible times for the Israelites. The centre of their religion was no more. God probably too. There was no more firm ground. And to make matters worse, their captors demanded to hear a song of Zion. But Zion is no more. Zion belongs to the past. There is only chaos left and the exiles are dispirited; they have been stripped of their honour, their hope, their country. To sing the praise of Zion is impossible. It is better to hang the lyres in the trees.

The psalm does not give a solution for the crisis, but the last two verses look forward to the destruction of Babylon.

3. A new song

In Revelation 1:9 and on, we meet a young exile, John. As a political prisoner he was exiled to the island of Patmos to stop him from proclaiming the radical message that God is in control of the whole world. The emperor Domitian proclaimed himself god and tolerated no resistance. The church encountered severe oppression and was even persecuted in the time the book was written, about 95 AC.

In the first instance, Revelation was written as a book of comfort and encouragement to the faithful in this time of persecution. It is, however, also a voice of protest against the abuses of power by the Roman emperor, telling the faithful that Jesus has already conquered. Those in power do not have

the last word. Thus, in Revelation 1:8 we read: “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (New International Version).

The book is written in symbolic language and it is difficult to understand or visualise the images. Numbers, such as seven, four and multiples of 12, also play an important role. It belongs to the genre of apocalyptic literature, as is the case with the last part of the book Daniel and parts of Ezekiel and Zechariah.

In Revelation 4 John finds himself in the throne room of heaven. He sees a throne with someone sitting on it. The description makes use of visual imagery, but is mostly beyond our horizon of understanding. Around the throne there were 24 other thrones with 24 elders sitting on them. Traditionally they are viewed as representatives of the church, referring to the 12 tribes of Israel in the Old Testament and the 12 apostles in the New Testament. The four living things we read about later are interpreted as referring to the creation.

In Chapter 5, the one sitting on the throne has a scroll in his right hand, but no one in heaven or on earth is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll. This makes John weep, but one of the elders consoles him and tells him that the Lion of Judah, the descendant of David, has triumphed and will be able to break the seals. Then John sees a Lamb that has been slain with seven horns and seven eyes. This is symbolic of the omnipotence of the Lamb and of the Holy Spirit. The scroll is the symbol of God’s will. Only Jesus on the cross has fulfilled God’s will.

Then follows a new song by the elders and the living creatures: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth’ (Revelation 5:9-10). To this the whole of creation responded and praised ‘him who sits upon the throne and the Lamb’ (Revelation 5:13). The elders and the living creatures join in the worship.

4. An audition to a choir

Revelation 4 and 5 (prior reading by the congregation is recommended) also comfort us in our time of tensions and problems here and around the world. God has the last word. He is in control of all history and preserves his church. The power of the corrupt does not last forever. The empires of Babylonia and of Rome no longer exist. But God and his church still exist. The new song is still new and is still being sung.

And we, God’s people, are called upon to sing this new song. We passed the audition, even if we do not know all the notes. We have been set free by Jesus. We can take out the lyres, the guitars and the organs from their hiding places and sing along. The incomplete symphony resounds throughout the whole of creation and we are part of it. We are waiting for the day the symphony will be completed by the Lamb that has opened the scroll and fulfilled it.

5. Prayer themes

- Pray that believers will have the courage to live the new song of Revelation and to invite those who are still outside to join in.
- Pray that the message of Pentecost will remain a daily reality in 2017.