

Text Study from World Council of Churches
Overcoming Racism and Xenophobia

Week one (January 24)

Psalm 24

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it,

² for he has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers.

³ Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?

⁴ Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false and do not swear deceitfully.

⁵ They will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from the God of their salvation.

⁶ Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

⁷ Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in!

⁸ Who is the King of glory?
The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle.

⁹ Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in!

¹⁰ Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory.

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him.

Reflection

The creation story of A.chiks, an indigenous community in Meghalaya, India shows us the interdependence and participatory roles in co-creating the earth and its inhabitants.

'In the beginning there was no land and darkness was everywhere over the vast watery plain. Having a plan to give birth to the Earth, Tarara-Rabuga, Dakgipa-Rupugipa, Stura-Pantura, Bisikrom-Bidatara, Dingipa-Ba.bra, Pattigipa-Ra.rongipa (the names of supreme being with a variety of attributes and functions given to the being), commissioned a lesser female spirit called Nostu-Nopantu to carry out this plan. As there was no place even to set her foot on, Nostu-Nopantu rested herself upon a spider's web which was stretched over the waters. To start with, Tarara- Rabuga, Dakgipa-Rupugipa, gave a handful of sand to Nostu-Nopantu, but when she began to do her assignment, it was found that sand particles would not stick together. Therefore, she sent Ang.kerong (a big crab) underneath the water to fetch some amount of clay so as to fasten the sand-particles together into a shape. However, disappointingly, Ang.kerong returned because the water was too deep for him. Then Nostu-Nopantu sent Chipong-Nokma Balpong- Gitel (a small crab), but he was also frightened by the depth of the water and had to return without fulfilling his work. Finally, Chiching-

Balching (a dung beetle) was sent, who could with much effort, return with a lump a clay; and with the aid of which Nostu-Nopantu fashioned the earth. The earth that Nostu-Nopantu gave birth was called the "Mane-Pilte" (Mane means 'the mother earth' and Pilte 'the mother of homeland')...

Of all the animals of the land created by Dakgipa-Rugipa, hulock-ape and jungle-fowl were created first, and their mission on earth was to utter loud cries and prevent Mother Earth from falling asleep and neglecting her function of productivity. In the water, the first aquatic animal created was a frog, whose special function was to proclaim the advent of rain to all living creatures by his loud croak... Dakgipa-Rugipa, then, felt the necessity of putting human beings on this Earth. So, she called all her other lesser spirits and declared her intention to create the human beings and placing them on the Earth. Dakgipa-Rugipa, then, created man and woman in her dwelling place, which was seven layers underneath the Earth and the sea, and gave them Chichri-Chijanggi (water of life)... which can be interpreted as a degree of "spirituality". Human beings are to share their spirituality with other creatures to give them sustenance on earth.¹

The account of Psalm 24 directs us to the creator who owns and values its creation. The subsequent verses describe the liturgy with a call and response among worshippers. It shows us the symbiotic relationship between the creator and the worshippers. We are called to care for and honour God's creation. It calls for a communal response. Just as Miriam's song was a communal song, a response to Miriam's call to join her in dancing and singing. In indigenous traditions, not only people but the whole world belongs to the creator and therefore honour each other. The text and the story remind us of our interconnectedness with the nature and the spirit of God dwells and directs us to do just- good.

Week Two (January 31)

Revelation 5: 9-10

¹ Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals, ² and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” ³ And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁴ And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁵ Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

⁶ Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. ⁸ When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ They sing a new song:

“You are worthy to take the scroll and to break its seals,

for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;

¹⁰ you have made them a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.”

Reflection

In the midst of the pandemic, a young woman from Indonesia, living in Europe, entered into a supermarket to buy groceries. She encountered a man, who began pointing his finger at her and shouting “Corona!”, “Corona!” In other instances, people from Northeast India, who share features with East Asians were spat at, refused accommodation and ridiculed in New Delhi during the lock-down. In the United States of America, in recent times, there have been several instances of anti-Asian racial violence, including mass shootings.

COVID-19 exacerbated racism in general and racism against Asians in particular. In many ways, the virus exposed prejudices and became a metaphor for xenophobia. Unsurprisingly, the first response to the virus was to close borders and keep those who were ‘*different*’ outside. Just as there was a fear of the virus infecting the human body, there was also the fear of the social body being infected by those who looked different and whose culture was different. The pandemic brought to the surface already existing prejudices and allowed the opportunity to convert them into practice, both individually and institutionally.

The Biblical text, from Revelation 5, speaks to us about the lamb who is able to open the seal. The book of Revelation is often called apocalyptic literature; the term refers to drawing back the veil to expose what is happening. The book of Revelation is a text that seeks to uncover what is really happening. Written in the context of the Roman Empire, this book reveals its brutality.

In chapter five, we find that the author is mourning that there is none to open the seal except for the slain Lamb. In stark contrast to imperial thinking that valorizes power and violence, we find that only the powerless lamb can open the seal. The Lamb symbolizes vulnerability, even more so a lamb that has been slain. Yet it is this symbol of utter vulnerability that is able to open the seal.

Even more so, the Lamb is able to bring together the various tribes and nations. Vs 9 indicates to us that it was because the Lamb was slain that it was able to bring people together. We must not read this as violence is necessary for the making of peace; instead, the text indicates that peace and reconciliation will not come from power, it will not come from violence; rather, it comes from powerlessness.

In our struggle against racism, particularly remembering racism against Asians, the text speaks to us, saying that we cannot do this through power. We cannot bomb countries into democracy. Instead, it comes from powerlessness; it comes from people's movements working in the regular everyday practice of overcoming prejudice, in movements rooted in the experiences of those who suffer the effects of racism that are working to change policies and structures. The church is called to join such movements and work with them towards changing our society.

Week Three (February 7)

Philippians 2:1-7

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped,

⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human,

Reflection

In our text we are made aware that the issue of discrimination and racism has to do with 'me' and the 'other' or 'we' and the 'others'. It is the difficulty or challenge in seeing things through the lenses of the 'other'. We see the 'other' as so different from us and discrimination and racism is the result usually when we treat others as inferior to us.

This is because we view the 'other' from our own eyes. But Galatians 3:28 says, '*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*' Even when the 'other' is different in terms of language, it does not change the fact that humanity together is still perceived as one body (Act 2:6). Romans 10:12 makes it clear that there is no difference between the callers who call in different ways from different contexts, with different symbols, with different colors and cultures to God, in prayer.

We therefore need total re-wiring of our minds, attitudes, actions, mannerisms, utterances, relationships and transactions with the 'other' who is not 'our type' or 'our comfortable colour or race' or 'creed'. We need to treat them with decorum by considering them above our own self interest as Christ did for humanity in laying down his life for all without discrimination or exception.

Week Four (February 14 [Ash Wednesday])

Colossians 3: 11-14 & Ephesians 2: 11-13

¹¹ In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved and free, but Christ is all and in all! ¹² Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

¹¹ So then, remember that at one time you gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision"—a circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—¹² remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Reflection

We live in a world where the colour of our skin and our gender continues to divide us in spite of our best efforts to overcome racism and promote unity. This division is seen in our communities, in our politics, and even in our churches. But what does the Bible have to say about racial justice and the way we should respond to this division?

In Galatians 3:26-29 Paul emphasizes the unity we find in Christ, regardless of any difference in race or ethnicity. By recognizing this unity, we can begin to experience true racial justice: a world where all people can come together in harmony and respect to denounce the social evils which exist.

I was born and raised in Guyana, where the politics of race and class were quite glaring to begin with, the Presbyterian Church had come to an agreement of a split based on racial divide rooted in the dirty legacies of slavery. I wish things had been different, for a people who continue to suffer at elements of neo-colonialism and fascism. While governments and socio-political advocates continue to wage war, the church has mostly been silent.

Silence to injustice has permeated our churches, our communities and even nurtured systemic gender structures. Such cultural norms and policies still mostly keep women and children under the influence of passive social sin, particularly what in South Korea can be understood as the transmission of "*yugyo*" and "*nunchi*"; meaning the ritual honouring the heritage of a "*Confucian Sense*" of patriarchy in a highly competitive society. Therefore, females who are racially other are at a double risk, firstly, for their visible racial difference, as well as being ignored or sidelined because of their gender. Sometimes, this translates to being ignored when complaints are filed about discrimination, or hearing concerns minimized as overreaction. Moreover, on occasion, the stares receive suggest that '*outsiders*' are not welcomed.

Christianity calls us to a higher standard, for even in a world filled with division, we have the opportunity to model what true unity looks like and take action to promote

justice. K. C. Abrahams expressed this concept well in these words, “there is no hungry African, Indian or Chinese; there are only hungry/ suffering people longing for emancipation and redemption.” By embracing this vision of true justice, we can create a world where everyone can live in peace and harmony.

May we all be bold in our faith, understanding that we are all children of God, and be willing to work together to bring about the peace and unity that the world so desperately needs.