

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2013
What does God require of us?

(Based on Micah 6:6-8)

FULL THEOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION¹

Reproduced from the international resource

To mark its centenary, the Student Christian Movement of India (SCMI) was invited to prepare the resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2013 and they involved the All India Catholic University Federation and the National Council of Churches in India. In the preparatory process while reflecting on the significance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, it was decided that in a context of great injustice to Dalits in India and in the Church, the search for visible unity cannot be disassociated from the dismantling of casteism and in lifting up contributions to unity by the poorest of the poor.

The Dalits in the Indian context are the communities which are considered 'out-castes'. They are the people worst affected by the caste-system, which is a rigid form of social stratification based on notions of ritual purity and pollution. Under the caste-system, the castes are considered to be 'higher' or 'lower'. The Dalit communities are considered to be the most polluted and polluting and thus placed outside the caste-system and were previously even called 'untouchable'. Because of casteism the Dalits are socially marginalized, politically under-represented, economically exploited and culturally subjugated. Almost 80% of Indian Christians have a Dalit background.

Despite outstanding progress in the twentieth century, the churches in India remain divided along the doctrinal divisions inherited from Europe and elsewhere. Christian disunity in India within churches and between them is further accentuated by the caste system. Casteism, like apartheid, racism and nationalism poses severe challenges for the unity of Christians in India and therefore, for the moral and ecclesial witness of the Church as the one body of Christ. As a church-dividing issue, casteism is consequently an acute doctrinal issue. It is in this context that this year's WPCU invites us to explore the well known biblical text Micah 6:6-8 focusing upon the question 'what does God require of us' as the main theme. The Dalit experience serves as the crucible from within which theological reflections on the biblical theme emerge.

Micah was one of the twelve minor prophets of the Old Testament who prophesied from approximately 737-690 BC in [Judah](#). He came from Moresheth, in southwest of Jerusalem, and prophesied during the reigns of [Jotham](#), [Ahaz](#), and [Hezekiah](#) of Judah (Micah 1:1). He lived in the same political, economic, moral, and religious conditions as his contemporary Isaiah and with him witnessed the destruction of Samaria, and the invasion of the Southern Kingdom by the King of Assyria in the year 701 BC. His grief as he wept over the plight of his people informs the tone of his book, and he turns his anger upon the leaders (2:1-5) and priests who had betrayed his people.

The Book of Micah belongs to the literary tradition of Prophecy. At the heart of its message is the oracle of judgment. The book unfolds in three sections demonstrating a journey

¹ An abbreviated version of this introduction is included in the main British and Irish resource

from judgment in general (ch.1-3), to the proclamation of salvation (ch. 4-5), to the word of judgment and the celebration of salvation (ch.6-7). In the first part, Micah harshly criticizes those in authority, both political and religious, for abusing their power and stealing from the poor: They “tear the skin off my people” (3:2), and “give judgment for a bribe” (3:11). In the second part of the book Micah exhorts the people to walk in pilgrimage “up to the mountain of the Lord... that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his path” (4:2). God’s judgment is revealed in the third part to be accompanied by a call to await in hope for salvation, with faith in God who “pardons iniquities and passes over transgression” (7:18). This hope focuses upon the Messiah, who will be “peace” (5:4), and who will come forth from Bethlehem (5:1) bringing salvation “to the ends of the earth” (5:4). Micah ultimately calls upon all nations of the world to walk in this pilgrimage, to share in the justice and peace which is their salvation.

Micah’s strong call to justice and peace is concentrated in chapters 6:1 – 7:7, part of which forms the theme of this year’s Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (WPCU). He sets justice and peace within the history of the relationship between God and humanity but insists that this history necessitates and demands a strong ethical element. Like other prophets who lived in the period of the Israel monarchy, Micah reminds the people that God has saved them from slavery in Egypt and called them through the covenant to live in a society built on dignity, equality and justice. Thus, true faith in God is inseparable from personal holiness and the search for social justice. More than just worship, sacrifices and burnt offerings (6:7), God’s salvation from slavery and daily humiliation rather demands that we should “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God” (cf. 6:8).

In many ways, the situation facing the people of God in the time of Micah can be compared to the situation of the Dalit community in India. Dalits also face oppression and injustice from those who wish to deny them their rights and dignity. Micah compared the greed of those who exploited the poor to those who “eat the flesh of my people, flay the skin off them, break their bones in pieces” (3:3). Micah’s rejection of rituals and sacrifices which were impoverished by a lack of concern for justice, speaks of God’s expectation that justice ought to be at the core of our religion and rituals. His message is prophetic in a context where discrimination against the Dalits is legitimized on the basis of religion and notions of ritual purity and pollution. Faith gains or loses its meaning in relation to justice. In the contemporary Dalit situation Micah’s insistence on the moral element of our faith requires us to ask ourselves what God truly requires of us; mere sacrifices, or to walk with God in justice and peace.

The path of Christian discipleship involves walking the path of justice, mercy and humility. The metaphor of ‘walking’ has been chosen to link together the 8 days of prayer because, as an active, intentional and ongoing act, the metaphor of walking communicates the dynamism which characterizes Christian discipleship. Further, the theme of the 10th assembly of the WCC to be held in Busan, Korea² - ‘God of life lead us to Justice and Peace’ resonates with the image of the Trinitarian God who accompanies humanity and walks into human history while inviting all people to walk in partnership.

² 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Busan, South Korea, 30 October to 8 November 2013

The 8 subthemes for the week, related to different modes of walking, enable us to focus on various dimensions of an authentic Christian discipleship which walks the path of righteousness that leads to life (Prov 12:28a).

Day 1: walking in conversation. We reflect on the importance of the practices of dialogue and conversation, as a means of overcoming barriers. Both in ecumenism, and in the struggles for liberation of people across the globe, the skills of speaking and listening are recognised as essential. In such authentic conversation we can come to recognise Christ more clearly.

Day 2: walking with the broken body of Christ³. Recognising the solidarity between Christ crucified, and the “broken peoples” of the world, such as the Dalits, we seek as Christians together to learn to be more deeply a part of this solidarity ourselves. In particular, the relation of eucharist and justice is opened up, and Christians invited to discover practical ways of eucharistic living in the world.

Day 3: walking towards freedom. Today we are invited to celebrate the efforts of communities that are oppressed, like the Dalits in India, across our world, as they protest against all that enslaves human beings. As Christians committed to greater unity, we learn that the removal of all that separates people from one another is an essential part of fullness of life, freedom in the Spirit.

Day 4: walking as children of the earth. Awareness of our place in God’s creation draws us together, as we realise our interdependence upon one another and the earth. Contemplating the urgent calls to environmental care, and to proper sharing and justice with regard to the fruits of the earth, Christians are called into lives of active witness, in the spirit of the year of Jubilee.

Day 5: walking as the friends of Jesus. Today we reflect on the biblical images of human friendship and love as models for God’s love for every human being. Understanding ourselves as beloved friends of God has consequences for relationships within the community of Jesus. Within the Church, all barriers of exclusion are inconsistent within a community in which all are equally the beloved friends of Jesus.

Day 6: walking beyond barriers. Walking with God means walking beyond barriers that divide and damage the children of God. The biblical readings on this day look at various ways in which human barriers are overcome, culminating in St Paul’s teaching that “As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Day 7: walking in solidarity. To walk humbly with God means walking in solidarity with all who struggle for justice and peace. Walking in solidarity has implications not just for individual believers, but for the very nature and mission of the whole Christian community. The Church is called and empowered to share the suffering of all by advocacy and care for the poor, the needy and the marginalised. Such is implicit in our prayer for Christian unity this week.

³ ‘Walking with brokenness’ in the British and Irish resource

Day 8: *walking in celebration*. The biblical texts on this day speak about celebration, not in the sense of celebrating a successful completion, but celebration as a sign of hope in God and in God's justice. Similarly, the celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is our sign of hope that our unity will be achieved according to God's time and God's means.

What God requires of us today is to walk the path of justice, mercy and humility. This path of discipleship involves walking the narrow path of God's reign and not the highway of today's empires. Walking this path of righteousness involves the hardships of struggle, the isolation which accompanies protest and the risk associated with resisting "the powers and principalities" (Ep 6:12), especially when those who speak out for justice are treated as trouble makers and disrupters of peace. In this context we need to understand that peace and unity are complete only if founded on justice.

Given the focus of the WPCU on the Dalit communities in India, this walk of discipleship is metaphorically speaking 'a walk which is accompanied by the beat of the Dalit drum'. Several Dalit communities have been associated with professional ritual drumming in Indian villages. Dalit drumming not only invokes the presence of the divine but also enables the safe passage of the community during times of transition by warding off what is considered to be evil. Today Dalit drumming has been recovered as a celebration of Dalit culture and identity. Therefore, when we speak of 'a walk of discipleship accompanied by the Dalit drum' we are referring to a form of discipleship which is constantly reminded of God's abiding presence with the most marginalized. It also recalls a form of discipleship which recognizes the resilient strength of the Dalits in confronting evil and contributing to the well-being of the wider community. We are reminded of a form of discipleship which affirms Dalit culture and identity as being unexpected spaces of the experience of Christ's presence (cf. Mt 25:40). Such discipleship will lead to true solidarity as well as forms of Christian unity which are free from unjust discrimination and exclusion.

One of the professions associated with certain Dalit communities in India is 'sewing sandals'. As one of the means of survival for Dalit communities it symbolizes their experience of forging together a meaningful existence of resilience and hope in degrading and dehumanizing conditions. It is the hope of the daily reflections that the gifts of the Dalit experience of survival amidst struggle may become for us the sandals which we put on as we seek to walk the path of righteousness in our own contexts by doing what God requires of us. 'Any semblance of a caste-based prejudice in relations between Christians,' says the late Pope John Paul II⁴, 'is a countersign to authentic human solidarity, a threat to genuine spirituality and a serious hindrance to the Church's mission of evangelization'. May our God of justice, unity and peace enable us to be authentic signs of human solidarity by strengthening us to do what God requires of us.

⁴ Papal address to Bishops of Madras-Mylapore, Madurai and Pondicherry-Cuddalore, 17 November 2003.