



a partnership
of churches
in mission

Rise to life!

Sundays
with **CWM**

Devotional Book 2022
4th Quarter (October- December)



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Vision & Mission Statements

Our Vision

“Life-flourishing Communities, living out God's promise of a New Heaven and a New Earth.”

This vision articulates CWM's conviction that the life-giving alternative that characterised the mission of Jesus is the basis of our hope. In naming life-flourishing communities as our vision, CWM sees the unfolding of a restored and renewed creation, an experience of a different world in our lifetime, where human dignity is protected, poverty eradicated, climate catastrophe abated, ideologies of supremacy demolished and peace reigns. The vision statement captures the essence of subversive imagination of a different world, where the Earth and all that is in it serve and sustain all of God's creation; and where the people of God envision this new life for

Our Mission

“Called in Christ to radical and prophetic discipleship, working in partnership with churches and the ecumenical community to resist life-denying systems, affirm peace, do justice and enable life-flourishing communities.”

In our theology statement we declare that “We seek, as an organisation and as a partnership of churches, a life rooted in obedience to God's mission focused on:

Rising with the risen Jesus whose resurrection is insurrection and proclamation that Babylon is as fallen as the tomb is empty; and

Responding in radical discipleship where we live out the New Heaven and New Earth in the midst of a violent, abused and grieving world as signs of transforming love.”

In this mission statement, the emphasis is on naming this “violent, abused and grieving world” that ought to be replaced with life-flourishing communities, based on justice and peace. The means to that end is a clear sense of call to partnership with churches and the ecumenical community in which radical and prophetic discipleship is expressed in transformative and loving action to resist, affirm, support and enable life-flourishing alternatives.

The Council for World Mission (CWM) is a worldwide partnership of 32 churches, committed to sharing their resources of people, skills, insights and money to carry our God's mission.

CARIBBEAN

GCU Guyana Congregational Union
UCJCI United Church in Jamaica
and the Cayman Islands

EUROPE

CF Congregational Federation
PCW Presbyterian Church of Wales
PKN Protestantse Kerk in Nederland
URC United Reformed Church
UWI Union of Welsh Independents

AFRICA

CCM Churches of Christ in Malawi
FJKM Church of Jesus Christ
in Madagascar
UCZ United Church of Zambia
UCCSA United Congregational Church
of Southern Africa
UPCSA Uniting Presbyterian Church
in Southern Africa

PACIFIC

CCCAS Congregational Christian Church
in American Samoa
CCCS Congregational Christian Church
in Samoa
CUNZ Congregational Union of New Zealand
EKT Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu
EPM Etaretia Porotetani Maohi
KUC Kiribati Uniting Church
NCC Nauru Congregational Church
PCANZ Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand
UCPNG United Church in Papua New Guinea
UCSI United Church in the Solomon Islands

EAST ASIA

GPM Gereja Presbyterian Malaysia
HKCCCC Hong Kong Council of the
Church of Christ in China
PCK Presbyterian Church of Korea
PCM Presbyterian Church of Myanmar
PCS Presbyterian Church in Singapore
PCT Presbyterian Church in Taiwan

SOUTH ASIA

CNI Church of North India
COB Church of Bangladesh
CSI Church of South India
PCI Presbyterian Church of India

Foreword

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ Jesus,

Greetings of Peace and Joy from the Council for World Mission (CWM) in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we enter the new year, we are still grappling with various challenges and uncertainties caused by the ongoing Covid-19 global pandemic. The Pandemic also unveiled various social, political, and economic inequalities, and we continue to struggle with the structures that create these inequalities.

Nevertheless, it is my prayer that this year be kind to us, allowing us to meet one another and worship together. As people of God and as we walk by faith, we continue to hope that the power of God's resurrection will provide us strength to overcome all these challenges.

I am pleased to present to you the '*Sundays with CWM*,' a weekly devotional booklet intended to assist you as a resource to use during your personal, family or congregational gatherings to worship God. In the context of CWM celebrating 40 years of Training in Mission (TIM) programme, this year's devotional booklet is a compilation of meditations written by the former TIM participants, most of whom are upcoming young leaders of our member churches.

As the former TIM participants, the contributors in this booklet share their faith, various missional experiences, and aspirations. I believe these meditations will help rekindle our faith and trust in the Lord. They provide us new insights and prayers for our weekly worship gatherings as we move towards transforming our families and congregations into life flourishing communities as part of the theme of our strategic framework, '*Rise to Life: Confessing witness to life-flourishing communities*.'

Keeping the ongoing pandemic and the challenges of printing and distributing the booklets in mind, we proceed with the e-booklets instead of the printed version. I would like to thank all the contributors of weekly devotions as well as our CWM staff for their commitment and hard work in bringing these devotional booklets available to all of us.

Wish you all a blessed and joy-filled year 2022.



Rev. Dr Jooseop Keum
General Secretary



October



Reflection

Total Loyalty to God: The Trinitarian way of Life

Psalm 137 is a call for total faith in YHWH. It portrays the Psalmist's complete commitment and faith in God. A God whose identity is closely associated with Jerusalem, the land. The Psalmist's seems to understand the relationship between God, land, and humans as indivisible. They are interconnected and yet they maintain their distinctiveness. It is important for us to look at the context of the Psalm, to enable us to hear what the Psalmist is really saying.

The historical setting of Ps 137 is the Babylonian exile and the psalm should be understood in light of its historical context. It is important to understand what was at stake for the exiled people of Judah. Deportation by the Babylonians was cruel: Judah lost not only their homeland but also the temple, where their God had revealed himself. Therefore, the very existence of the people of Judah and their faith in YHWH were jeopardized.

The maltreatment of the people by the Babylonians, including a command to sing songs and psalms about their homeland is a reminder of their slavery situation. How can they sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Is it not enough that they suffer, and still asking to sing about Jerusalem? To sing the Lord's song in Babylon is to remind them that they have been deserted by their God.

The refusal to comply with the command may reflect two things. One, is the unwillingness to give in to the demands of slavery, an act of rebellion against a suppressive force that hinders them from living life to the full in freedom. This act of rebellion connotes a strong longing for justice. Today, millions are enslaved around the world, politically, economically, socially, and spiritually. The main aim of the suppressor is to gain exploit others for to gain profit. This enslaving is not confined to humans only, but to everything including mother Earth. We have to move away from the dualistic understanding of things, because that is the root philosophy that puts people and creation into categories and compartments. In such dualistic philosophy, hierarchical structures are put in place, and those at the top matters the most. They are the dominant, powerful and rich few who suppresses and exploits the majority. Secondly, willingness to sacrifice for the sake of maintaining their trinitarian understanding of life. The Psalmist's dedication and devotion takes the form of a solemn vow invoking upon himself the penalty of total or partial paralysis, in which case he would lose control of the most important organs of a musician - his hands and tongue. The Psalmist refuses to use the talents to entertain and satisfy the mocking attitudes of the suppressors.

The message of Psalm 137 to the believers of God is that when the present world system may pressurize them to mock God and ultimately abandon their faith, they should continue to honour God and persevere in trusting him. Even though it may seem that they live in exile far removed from God, literally or figuratively, in those situations, the believers should refuse to participate with the ungodly in the mockery of God. Instead, they should stand firm in their faith and remain loyal and devoted to God. No matter how difficult the present circumstances may be, be reminded that God suffers with us, because our struggles and pain are God's struggles and pain. God, creation, and us humans are interrelated. Our loyalty to God therefore, is manifested in our love, respect, and loyalty to the 'other' and creation.

Rev. Dr. Tafue M Lusama,
Pacific Theological College

Reflection

Poem: I wonder what life could be without Moana

*A beautiful Moana (Ocean) is what I was blessed with by God.
It is a symbol of life and hope in connection with humankind.
It is an Moana full of mysterious creatures that the sea will never know.
It is a reflection of our own lives,
where we begin to appear, return, stranded and be found again.
It is where I gained all that I need for survival.
I wonder what life could be without moana*

*The vast Moana is an open gate for
Travellers around the globe
to experience and explore the beauty of the world
My people journeyed across the islands
Fishermen fish for food and survival
Merchants export across the countries
Expensive stones are being mined and sold
Oils are being extracted and exported
Swimmers and surfers enjoyed my hospitality
Divers are attracted to see the secrets of the Moana
I wonder what life could be without Moana*

*Men and women
singing and dancing joyfully
to the beat of the fatele
Rejoicing and shouting for the catches of the day
A blessing from above.
I cannot bear to let go of you Moana
My entire life depends on you Moana
I wonder what life could be without Moana.*


*In times of trouble and frustration,
I turned to Moana for peace.
Though you are both wild and calm,
Dangerous and beautiful
BUT you've captured my heart.
For you is where I belong.*


*I will tell the fish of all my problems
I will stand still at the beach
Staring at the waves
Splashing at my toes
Washing away the pain and agony
Leaving me with faith and hope for a brighter tomorrow
I wonder what life could be
without Moana.*

*People of sky and earth
Hear my plea
Hear my cry
I am trapped in barbed wire full of garbage
I am suffocated in plastic bags
It's time for a rebirth
It's time to say no to deep sea mining
For you are once and will always be my tuakoi (neighbour)
I rise up to say
You my Moana, my life and livelihood
For nothing can separate me from my Moana
I wonder what life could be without Moana loa (open ocean).*

Maina Talia,
Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu

Prayer

 Te Atua (God) give us the courage and wisdom to protect and honour Moana as part of your creation;

 God, we ask that you PRAY for us to do what is ought to be done on earth!
Amen.

Reflection

To Build and to Plant

“**T**he days are coming,” says the Lord, “when I will plant the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the offspring of people and of animals ... I will watch over them to build and to plant.”



To speak of the offspring of people and animals is a sign of growth and prosperity. To speak of building and planting indicates confidence in the future. This is a word of hope - in the face of impending disaster.

In its context within the book of Jeremiah, this passage sits immediately before chapter 32 which describes Jerusalem being besieged by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. This is prior to the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile. Doom awaits - but the prophet speaks words of hope. To paint a picture of peace and prosperity at such a time was a stark contrast to the lived reality.

Jeremiah is a complex prophet. He is sometimes described as a prophet of doom because he did prophesy disaster. But equally he described eloquent visions of hope, such as this one.

In times of crisis and despair, we need voices of hope. We need people who will say, “This crisis you are in, this difficult time will not last. Let’s look to the future with hope. Let’s not give in to despair but believe that better days will come.

This can apply when we are going through a personal crisis or struggle. We need a hand on our shoulder, an understanding friend who can journey alongside us, who believes in us and is an encouragement in our darker days.

And it can also apply on a broader scale. The people of Ukraine, Palestine and Myanmar; of climate-threatened nations in the Pacific – need to hear voices of support and encouragement from other nations, saying “We believe you have a future. We will stand with you and speak up for you in your struggle for justice.” Words of support reduce the fear that comes with isolation and give encouragement to keep hope alive.

We may not consider ourselves to be anointed prophets like Jeremiah who was commissioned to be a prophet to the nations, to build and to plant (Chapter 1:5,10). But we can all be active encouragers for family, friends and colleagues in times of trouble; and we can be advocates for justice supporting the causes of people and nations caught up in strife. Will you build hope and plant seeds of encouragement?

Rev. Phil King,

Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand

Prayer

Gracious God, we give thanks for the people in our lives who have encouraged us in our times of need. Help us to use both our words and actions so that seeds of hope may take root and flourish in the hearts of those whose hope is fading.

Reflection

God loves imperfection

I will be honest with you. I am a perfectionist. I want to do things in a perfect way, for instance when writing. I once wrote a Psalm for The Psalm Project, an initiative of a friend of mine to recompose the Genevan Psalms. After the booklet going with the CD was published, I discovered that I had made a grammatical error in the lyrics. I could hardly forgive myself. In my religious upbringing I somehow got the image of God as someone being very critical of all my thoughts and actions. I did my best to be obedient to the demands of this God. But I also experienced that I couldn't live up to the image of a perfect Christian, which often gave me feelings of failure and guilt.

In the parable Jesus is telling in the reading of today, a whole different image of God emerges. Here is a Pharisee, praying in the Temple, boasting about himself as being morally perfect and superior in comparison to other people. He actually doesn't need God. There is a tax collector, hiding in the shadows, also praying, but in the opposite way, full of remorse. Then, in Eugene Peterson's translation of *The Message*, Jesus comments: "This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."

In Richard Rohr's *Daily Meditation*, which I was reading yesterday, he is also reflecting on this parable. He writes that in this parable Jesus invites us to struggle with the contrast between a spirituality of perfection and of imperfection. And that Jesus, with his nondual way of thinking, turns it upside down. Being righteous has nothing to do with meritocracy, where the good ones win and the bad ones lose. He ends his reflection by saying: "I'm convinced that Jesus' good news is that God's choice is always for the excluded one. Jesus learned this from his Jewish tradition: God always chooses the rejected son, the barren woman, the people enslaved in Egypt or exiled in Babylon. It's not a winner's script in the Bible, it's a loser's script. It's a loser's script where, ironically, everybody wins."

Egbert van der Stouw,
Protestantse Kerk in Nederland

Prayer

Dear God, full of mercy and grace, thank you for your endless compassion with losers. Thank you for revealing yourself in Jesus Christ, who embodies this compassion. Thank you for your Holy Spirit, who teaches us to be compassionate with others. Glory be your name. Amen.

November



Reflection

Of Troublemakers and Water carriers

I found it truly inspiring to share in the TIM worship on the 24th of September.

Following a year of all kinds of online gatherings and exchange, this service concluded the 40th anniversary celebrations. Forty years of Training in Mission and some 241 participants from 6 continents, from all walks of life and from at least two generations! But whether we were part of that experimental 'Gang of Ten' in the early 1980s, when partnership in mission had only just been exposed as 'empty slogan' as long as mission structures did not change, or we were millennials redefining mission at a time of climate change and refugee crises, we recognised one another as we smiled at each other across our screens, shared experiences and sung and prayed together. In TIM something had happened to all of us, a fire was lit, as Lim Sok Yee from Gereja Presbyterian Malaysia said, and we had glimpsed something of the importance of saying 'yes' to God, and 'no' to all that separates people from God, one another and creation.

Becoming 'troublemakers' is how Christopher from Guyana described his TIM experience. Learning to say no to oppressive structures as much as oppressive theologies. And somehow finding the courage – together, as persons connected in a global fellowship – to not only realising that change is needed, but to actually starting to make that change happen.

Is that a realistic understanding of the impact of Training in Mission? Are the changes that we talked about in our classes and placements not just illusions, hopes way beyond our grasp? Are love and justice really do-able?

Two things have become clear over the years. First, in a world where apathy in the face of the multitude of global problems is rife, a Training in Mission year empowers the participants to indeed get up and start acting. It is the intense interaction, the learning from one another and the pooling of insights and resources that can enable, and has enabled, courageous responses in the face of a world that's burning.

Second, the story of the wedding in Kana in John 2 helps us to keep our role in perspective. As a mentor once reminded me, we are not called upon to change the water into wine. We just need to be there to carry the vessels with the water to Jesus. It's He who works the miracles; we 'simply' try to hear his voice calling us to a specific place and a specific task and so get to share in his mission of redemption and recreation of God's beloved world.

It is, I believe, the experience of having been empowered for action in TIM, and the awareness that we don't have to be miracle workers but just watercarriers, that made us recognise each other across our screens on September 24th. And so we smiled, and waved, and sang and prayed. Let's go and continue to be troublemakers and water carriers into the next forty years!

Ms. Jet den Hollander,
Protestantse Kerk in Nederland

Prayer

God,
empower us
time and again
to join
that large band of pilgrims
that is following the man of Galilee
towards the beckoning future
of a world
where justice and peace embrace each other,
daring to look at ourselves,
our world
and our relationships
in the mirror of that new world
and addressing the gap
between vision and reality
with all the love, passion, patience and wisdom
which You have placed at our disposal.

Scripture

Malachi 4: 1 – 2

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Reflection

The Rising of the Sun

On December 31, 1999, many tourists flocked to Fiji to see the first sun rise of the new millennium. My island, Kioa, is situated to the far North-Eastern part of Fiji. The nearby resorts on the island of Taveuni and Vanua Levu were fully booked. In the morning of January 1, 2000, it rained cats and dogs. The sky was darkened with clouds and the first millennium sun most people flocked to Fiji to see was nowhere to be seen.

The Malachi reading of today posits a similar guise, one where a rising sun is promised ensuing the great judgement. My questions are, do we really need to go to the extent of receiving judgement before we see the rising of the sun? Does punishment precede reconciliation or evil righteousness? How far should we go down life's road before we realise it is the wrong direction.

The promise of the rising of the sun in Malachi has to do with the corruption of sacrifices in the temple. The message is not a generalized one but one directed at those at the helm of Israel's worship life. Certainly, there is an element of disconnection between the temple altar and the reality of Israel's daily living. Why? Because worship should revolve around what people do every day. Worship cannot be spiritual if it negates the tangibility of life. Nor can worship be holy if it engages only the realm of its own order, trembling on the multitudes who are only there as numbers in the act of worship. No wonder Malachi has a secondary vision of the rising of the sun of righteousness. Primary in his vision is the destruction of order – the order in the temple, society, nation, and world order.

The sun only rises if it falls. The temple language would have suggested a preservation of the sun, so it would not fall. Newness should have been maintained. A new day should be the last. There should not be any other day but today. The order of the temple must be maintained in order that society is kept within the peripheries of newness, warmth by the ever-shining sun.

What I am saying is that we, users and keepers of the temple, we who go forth from the temple, must keep the sun shining. We should not become deciders of where the sunrays should shine and where it shouldn't. We must not corrupt the elements of our sacrifices. That is how the sun sets and the language of judgement enters order. A good example is the ecological catastrophe of never knowing when to say enough until creation pronounce judgement on us. Yet, we still centre worship around the safeguarding of our theological and spiritual egos. To speak of creation is just a pass, like the worshippers who are just numbers in what we do.

May the sun rise this time and remain in the sky forever. We, who witness this rising then become keepers of the sun.

Prayer

Rev. Nikotemo Sopepa,

CWM Pacific

Every new day is a blessing from you. We know Lord how precious it is to see the rising of the sun every morning. We want to feel its warmth and life-giving heat every time. May the sun of righteousness sun and never set. May that keep the world warm and living. May your righteousness O Lord, keep this world alive. You, O Sun of Righteousness, hear our prayer. Amen.

Reflection

God of certainty

We live in a world where suffering from poverty, violence of war, effects of climate change and many other issues have taken toll of our lives. These may not be situations that we expect but we are thankful for the Psalmist who had reminded us that our lives do not dwell outside the perimeter of God's knowledge and presence. Psalms 46 is powerful and vividly reminds us about three significant lessons.

The Psalmist reaffirms God's protection and care over her people. It reminds us that no matter how difficult our situations maybe in life, God is our place of protection and care. "God as our refuge, strength and help" are words of confidence and surety. It tells us about the Psalmist's life experience with God that in the midst of his or her vulnerability, despair and hopelessness, God is always available to hear and talk with us. When trouble comes, God is always near, always present and able to be found.

The Psalmist also reaffirms that in every situation in life, God is in control. The Psalmist provides a vivid picture of a world that is overcome by disaster. He or she describes the earth shaking and waters rising, which disturbs and challenges the stability of the environment and the people that dwells in it. However, the Psalmist reminds us that when situations are beyond our human control, God has the power to speak and redirect everything. God's presence and power are our hope.

The Psalmist also reminds us that when our faith is shaken due to the chaotic circumstances we face in life and fear is our natural response, we must "be still and know God". We must not be afraid but rather pause or stop and remind ourselves that God is with us. We must not only believe in God's protection and presence but also know that God will definitely help and strengthen us in every situation we face.

Rev. Geraldine Varea,
Pacific Theological College

Prayer

We thank you O Lord for your promise to be present with us. We thank you for your power that when trials find us, you will never leave us nor forsake us. God of strength and power, please make your comforting presence and your sustaining power real to us now. When fear curb our lives, may you show us you are near and strong for us in different ways. Help us not to lose our faith in you when situations are beyond our human control, but rather remind us to be still and know that you are God. May our lives be also a refuge, strength and help to those around us.

Reflection

Living in Anticipation

When was the last time that you were filled with so much anticipation that you actually thought you might burst before the anticipated event arrived? Maybe it was a time when you were expecting a visit from an old friend or a present from someone special. Or maybe it was a time when you were so very proud of your keen selection of the perfect gift for that very special person and you wanted the time to arrive when you would present the gift. These experiences often describe time as slowing or standing almost still – far from the reality of time continuing forward.

The story of Mary and Elizabeth is a story of hope and of joy -- of ancient longings for redemption and security finally fulfilled; of a future that can be faced with confidence and with excitement. Those two impossibly pregnant women--the barren wife of an aging priest, and an unknown virgin with neither royal blood nor an important family--began a song of praise that has continued through twenty centuries: "My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary sings, "and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour."

And both the world out there and our own souls desperately need this pure word of joy and of hope. For in the midst of all the Christmas spirit around us, we know there is also a lot of pain. We all know how Advent can be an especially difficult time, and an especially empty time, and an excruciatingly painful time, for so very many people -- people out there, and people in here. That grim fact gets clearer every day. I hope the context of time and waiting leads you into a different place. And perhaps, as happened to Mary and Elizabeth, some new life will begin to grow within us, new life that can begin once more to transform us; and, through us, to renew our world.

Christmas is waiting, and listening and as happened to Mary and Elizabeth, some new life will begin to grow within us, new life that can begin once more to transform us; and, through us, to renew our world.

Rev. Dr Fei Taule'ale'ausumai,
Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand

Prayer

We pray for the world as it continues to come to terms with living in a pandemic. A world in which women and young girls live in terror in Afghanistan and many other parts of the world. A world where we can only pray and hope for justice and peace. Surround us with your love and may your realm upon this earth come beginning with me. Amen.



December

Reflection

Hope

Paul's letter to the Romans was a letter written not only to the church at the heart of the Roman Empire, but also to a church under the close surveillance of the Roman political elites. In this place the non-Romans have no place in the social and political affairs of the Roman bureaucracy. However, they have everything to do with the economy of Rome. They all serve the Roman economy. The Jews also falls among these non-Romans, except those who have won status by service under the Pax-Romana gets to enjoy some sort of equal citizenry with the Romans, but not equal.

Now within the Jews faith, the non-Jews were treated like non-Romans in Rome, they were called gentiles and were excluded from the circles of Jewish worship. Now that many Jews have become Christians, they maintained the excluding of non-Jewish Christians treating them as second-class citizens of the new faith. Already marginalized by the Romans politically, they are now further marginalized religiously by the Jewish-Christians. This would contribute further to their being excluded from social circles of the Roman Empire.

These were the recipients of Paul's letter to the Romans, the Christians who are divided among Jewish-Christians and non-Jewish Christians. You can imagine the agony and struggle the non-Jewish Christians go through. Already they are slaves, nobodies in their homeland, and now entering a space where they believe their hopes can be lifted, they find the same treatment. Poor souls!

Where could they go to keep their hopes alive? Where can their hopes be realised? In this season of Advent, many around the world are like the non-Jewish Christians of Paul's time. They do not feel one, or two, but many layers of marginalization. And sometimes the marginalization comes from places and people they put their trust to make their hopes come true.

As we await the coming of the baby of Bethlehem, who learned in this life that as a Messiah and Son of God he needs to let go of all prejudices, died to bring people together. For it is in him that all could find a common ground to lay down their hopes and see them come to life, to fruition.

Come, Lord Jesus, Come. You, our HOPE.

Fuata Vare Singh,
CWM Pacific

Prayer

May the hope of the world be realised in you Lord Jesus. May you also become the hope that many need. May we, make your hope a reality to those we serve. May our presence become a beacon of hope. In your name, Amen.

Reflection

Songs of Resistance

The text is commonly known as Mary's Song of Praise or the Magnificat, from Latin for 'magnify'. And rightly so, too, from a casual glance and literary reading of the text. Mary magnifies the Lord, proclaiming God's greatness and rejoicing in God as Savior. She begins with God's actions in her own life, for in choosing her to be the mother of the messiah, the Mighty One has indeed "done great things for" her. We remember that Elizabeth has just welcomed and honored her, saying, "blessed is she who believed." Now Mary recognizes with awe that not only Elizabeth, but all generations will call her blessed. And so should she be!

However, I would like to take an alternative reading of the text. In this reflection, I would like to see the text as Mary's Song of Resistance. A very young teenage girl, quite unknown to most people. A female, quite on the wrong side of the tracks in her social-cultural-religious world, and knows all too well the terrible consequences of being with child outside of marriage. In this context she sings her song! But take it home beyond Mary. You are poor and you wonder, "Why? Why are we poor?" "Maybe that is just the way things are," you think. Or maybe you hear, "The poor are poor because they did something bad at some point in their life — they deserve to be poor in this life, and if they suffer and persevere in their poverty bravely and gladly, they can be born into a better situation in the next life." Or maybe you just think, "We are poor because it is just the way the world is, or we are not smart enough to be wealthy."

Human journey is storied with songs of resistance: Lamentations' 'By the rivers of Babylon' sung into prominence by Boney M; Bob Marley and the Wailers "Redemption Song" and "Songs of Freedom"; "Nuclear Waste" by Herbs; songs of freedom by the Black Brothers of West Papua, and so many more! Throughout the ages, God's people have faced oppression. And in the face of that oppression, God's people have sung God's songs of resistance.

Regrettably however, God's people have also been oppressors. We have enslaved others — and each other. We have stolen from, oppressed, and slain others — and each other. Hundreds of millions of women, girls, children, the elderly, young people and people with disabilities are victims of new forms of slavery and oppression of our time. And when we have done so, the oppressed, the enslaved, the persecuted have sung God's songs of resistance against us. The Black Spirituals such as "Go Down Moses", or "Free Nelson Mandela" by Jerry Dammers and R Dakar, and songs of resistance and ending Gender-Based Violence such "Zero Tolerance" by Ender and "Wake Up Woman" by Velvet are just four of thousands of examples.

Mary's Song of Resistance announces that Christ has come to challenge the structures of sin, death, the devil, and all forms of oppression. Christ has come in the strength of the Lord to do what the Lord has always done: lift up the lowly, free the enslaved, feed the hungry, and give justice to the widow, the orphan, the sojourner and to extend safety, wholeness and hope to all vulnerable people everywhere.

Rev. Dr. Cliff Bird,

United Church in the Solomon Islands

Prayer

Almighty God, who created us in your image, grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression. Help us to employ our freedom in maintaining justice in our communities, to the glory of your holy Name, through Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God. Amen.

Reflection

Redeemed Masculinity

Joseph is an odd character in the infancy narratives. When our Christmas celebrations are focused on the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary and the birth of God's son, it is a difficult task to "fit" Joseph into our advent spirituality and Christmas pageant. As a result, we fail to find any theological significance for the story of a surrogate father in the divine drama of the incarnation of the saviour of the world. This advent season invites and challenges us to revisit the Joseph story and unearth the "gospel" hidden in the story of this silenced and ignored man. Let us try to listen to the story of Joseph and recover and reclaim that "gospel."

The Bible testifies that Joseph was a righteous man. The few episodes where we meet Joseph in the gospels explain why he was considered a righteous man. Joseph belonged to an extremely patriarchal and moralistic society. According to the social customs and religious morality of his times, getting pregnant before marriage was not only a punishable immoral activity but also an insult to the honour of the man. The angelic annunciation would have shattered the dreams of any man whose understanding of masculinity was founded on male privilege, power, and domination. But the encounter with the angel enabled Joseph to realize the impact of toxic masculinity in his life and he decided to redeem and humanize his masculinity. His conscious efforts to redeem his masculinity made Joseph a righteous person.




Redeemed masculinity enabled Joseph to love and accept Mary and Jesus as his family. He stood with them in all their experiences of rejection, vulnerability, and exile. Having been liberated from the "macho types" of "real men," Joseph faded himself into the margins and thereby transformed their family into a fellowship of equals and friends. Joseph failed as a "man," and thus, he redeemed and humanized his masculinity. Perhaps, it is the redeemed masculinity of Joseph that inspired Jesus to call God, our father.

In this advent season, let us reflect upon our male privilege and examine how toxic masculinity continues to dehumanize us and those around us. Let us discern the annunciations of our times that proclaim the resolve of women to destabilize our patriarchal systems and traditions and rededicate ourselves to redeem and humanize our masculinity.

George Zachariah,

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Prayer

-  Let us pray for the victims of toxic masculinity and patriarchy.
-  Let us pray for the angelic annunciations happening in our midst, witnessing the attempts to contest toxic masculinity and patriarchy.
-  Let us pray for boys and men for discernment and courage so that they may be able to redeem and humanize their masculinity.

25 December

Christmas Day

Scripture
Philippians 2: 10 - 11

Reflection

A Letter from Mary

Let us celebrate the coming of God's Son:

SENT TO SHOW GOD'S LOVE

SENT WITH THE POWER OF THE POWERLESS

TO THE OVERLOOKED, UNLOVED AND UNWANTED

Let us rise to God's advent challenge:

OUR LABOUR IS NOT IN VAIN

GOD SPELLS DANGER FOR EMPERORS AND KINGS

CHRIST STRETCHES OUT FROM THE MANGER NOT THE THRONE

Reading: Philippians 2: 10-11

A letter from Mary to her mum:

Dear mum: It's a Boy!

But you knew that!

The birth was tough

The journey worse!

And your grandson: Jesus ... He is beautiful

The angel told me God's power would rest on me

But I am exhausted and yet filled with wonder!

I suppose every parent thinks the birth of their child

Is a miracle ... but it's true!

Joseph has been really good, bless him

And Jesus is sleeping now.

I may be the Lord's servant

But I am also his mum, and he had better do as he is told!

We don't know when we can come home

There are rumours that Herod is sending out soldiers.

I can't tell you where we are going

But the love that surrounds us here, surrounds you too.

We will set out in that hope.

Love Mary xxx

Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley,

CWM

Prayer

Praise be to God for the courage of Mary

Praise be the God for the coming of Christ.

May we be true to the example of Mary

May we be part of giving God life.



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