

Introduction/Background

Peace is always a fragile process. Far from being synonymous with pacts and strategic agreements, it is rather a profound attitude that must be rooted in hearts and in long-lasting institutions. The restoration of peace in the Holy Land, as various efforts over the decades have already shown, is a very fragile process. The impact of wars, the aftermath of violence, the hatred and the bitterness engraved on souls, social injustices, the compromised future of two peoples and the broken message of three religions in addition to the harmful consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic only accentuate, day after day, this fragility.

The entire Middle East region seems to be at an impasse today and peace seems an impossible outcome. What to do? What is the purpose of the annual week of prayer for peace in Palestine and Israel promoted this year by the two ecumenical bodies, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC)? Is there any hope carried by our prayers?

In the extremely fragile situation in Palestine and Israel, we still believe in the power of prayer because only the Spirit of God can soften hearts and change attitudes. Prayer does not mean, however, resignation on the part of the people; rather it implies a creative solidarity combining a spiritual reference point and practical action. We need to restructure our response in a compassionate advocacy process undertaken in a spirit of goodwill and impartiality that transcends identity and religious affiliation.

In this era of extreme fragility, creative solidarity is a sign of hope that, through the power of prayer and common action, we can make the restoration of peace and justice in the Holy Land both possible and a lived reality for all people of the region.

Bible Reflection (Mark 2: 1 – 12)

¹ When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home.² So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. ³ Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴ And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." ⁶ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷ "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ⁸ At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'?" ¹⁰ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— ¹¹ "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." ¹² And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

It takes courage to act in an unprecedented manner. Before deciding to take such action, one is usually overwhelmed by a tsunami of conflicting thoughts. For example, there's doubt about the expected or unforeseen results of that action. Usually, there's also the fear of failure; what if things don't go as expected? And there is also the worry about being misunderstood or having one's action misrepresented. Echoing in the deep recesses of one's mind are the questions – Is my action valid? Is it sound? Is what I am about to do acceptable?

To have reached a point of acting in an unprecedented manner may be attributed to several factors. Unprecedented actions grow out of the soil of thinking creatively. It is not just embracing a willingness to think outside the proverbial 'box.' It is to imagine a reality where there is no box. Creative thinking and unprecedented acting are inseparably joined by the all-important question – what can we do that we have not done before?

However, in asking the question of what to do that's never been done also forces onto the table several other interrelated questions. How will it be done? When will it be undertaken? Why should a totally different approach be attempted? Where do we start? Who are our allies or even for that matter our opponents? Thinking creatively requires us to understand that successful implementation of the unprecedented requires a paradigm shift vis-à-vis those with whom one seeks to act. In other words, to do what has never been done before necessitates seeing others around you with new eyes, and to see things in ways that you've never seen them before.

In the Gospel reading above, we encounter several characters that help us to better understand this year's theme through the lens of this biblical narrative. The paralyzed man wishes to be healed and is operating based on the conviction that this desire can be met should he get the chance to meet Jesus. His desire and his conviction is equally matched by his four friends who are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that what is envisioned is realized. Perhaps they also possess the same desire to have an audience with Jesus. Maybe they are simply curious. There is, however, a seemingly insurmountable obstacle – a crowd. People are in the way.

For the paralyzed man, his disability puts him at the mercy of the community. However, even though he is on the margins of society he has four friends who are in solidarity with him. They share in his dilemma. Their carrying of his paralyzed body demonstrates their willingness to share in his fragility. They equally share the burden and his weight in the same way that they share his desire to be healed. It is this strong and uncompromising solidarity that spurs them to think creatively on how to overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacle before them.

Their solution was ingenious. It was creative. Since access could not be obtained through the normal route, it was decided to approach another way: through the roof. The story doesn't say with whom the idea originated. If there is any credit to be assigned it is given to all five of them for standing in solidarity and creatively implementing a course of action to get an agreed upon result. For that Jesus commends them. In verse 5 the text says that Jesus took notice of 'their faith,' not just that of the paralyzed man.

The paralyzed man received not just his physical healing. He was made whole, for Jesus also forgave him his sins. The man who in his fragility was lowered before Jesus, took up his mattress and walked out carrying that which once was used to carry him. His healing and restoration speak to us today of how the love of God, which in this story we see embodied in Christ, can work among us today if we focus on the needs of others in a spirit of compassionate solidarity. We should also take note of the warning in this story that it is possible for us all to harden our hearts against the transforming work of God that offers healing and wholeness to individuals and communities.

Let us pray for grace to resist that negative spirit so that, with hearts open to the grace of God and the needs of all our neighbours, we may become instruments of God's reconciling work for justice and peace for all. Then we too, like the friends of the paralyzed man, can become agents of "Creative Solidarity" in the midst of "Common Fragility".

That is our hearts' desire as we continue to pray for peace in Israel and Palestine.

WWPPI 2020 Prayers

God of all creation,
your love is infinite and embraces all people and all of creation.
We cannot fully comprehend the height, depth or width of your divine love.
Though it is beyond measure,
we give thanks that your love has captured our hearts enabling us to love all,
especially those with whom we disagree and who see us as their enemies.
Inspired by your love,
may we seek to be in solidarity with each other, sharing in a common humanity.
Possessed by your love,
may our hearts be opened and our fists unclenched;
lead us by the Holy Spirit to reach out across the barriers that divide us as neighbours.
Triune God, give to your people creative solidarity in common fragility.

Lord Jesus, born in the lands that we call holy,
we, your people - the Body of Christ - are your hands and feet.
As we today walk the streets as you once walked,
guide our feet so that we will go boldly into the places that are forgotten and overlooked;
open our eyes to see the pain of others who are struggling simply to survive;
use our hands to help rebuild those whose lives have been torn apart because of conflict and war;
use our voices to draw attention to acts of injustice inflicted upon the powerless by the powerful;
As we seek to be Christ's Body in a fragile and broken world,
give us courage as we live out the values of God's Kingdom.
Triune God, give to your people creative solidarity in common fragility.

Holy Spirit of truth,
we confess that in the pursuit for power and prestige, truth may be silenced;
we acknowledge too that in efforts to achieve peace, truth may be sidelined.
we admit that as alliances are formed, truth can be dismissed as being irrelevant;
we recognize too that in our haste to for speedy solutions, truth may be overlooked.
Yet, we know that truth is like a light perched atop a hill that cannot be hidden.
As we confess our mishandling of truth,
we repent and ask for your Spirit to enable us to speak the truth in love.
Make us to be witnesses of the truth of God's Word, alive and working in our daily lives.
Make us to be bearers of the truth of our people's suffering and struggles.
Make us to be advocates of the truth that the pursuit of peace need not be at the expense of justice for others.
Make us to truthful in all our speaking, living and dealings with each other.
Triune God, give to your people creative solidarity in common fragility.

God, who is Three in One and One in Three,
hear our prayers for peace in the lands of Israel and Palestine.
Give wisdom to all who work for and advocate for a just peace
that they will not grow weary in their efforts.
May all people of goodwill be so deeply stirred within themselves
that their desire for justice and peace in Israel and Palestine
will motivate them to continue believing while advocating with conviction.
May the cries for a just peace coming from your people in Israel and Palestine
resonate around the world, awakening people to prayer and solidarity.
Be with those in political leadership so that their motives will be wholesome and honourable;
that they will seek not to do what is popular and convenient,
but rather what is right and just.
Give creative insight to your people at this time
as we once again are united in prayers for a just peace in Israel and Palestine.
Lead us to recognize the commonness of our human fragility,
as we maintain a fervent and living hope in the power of the resurrected Christ,
in whose name we pray. Amen
Triune God, give to your people creative solidarity in common fragility.

WWPPI Action & Advocacy Suggestions Communications Guidelines

1. Action & Advocacy Suggestions

- a. Host a bible study and prayer meeting with members of your local faith community, utilizing the bible text and prayers provided in these materials.
- b. Watch/listen to the news from Israel and Palestine. Reflect on whether current developments in the Holy Land accord with your understanding of "the things that make for peace", and how creative solidarity in common fragility might result in different approaches. Discuss with your family and friends.
- c. If possible and appropriate, organize a community meal with members of local Jewish and Muslim communities, for the purpose of building relationships between the communities.
- d. Organize a common prayer event, where church leaders join in prayer - at the same time or in the same place - with other religious leaders.
- e. Reach out to the politicians representing your constituency at the national level. Engage them in correspondence/discussion on the importance of a just peace in the Holy Land, for both Palestinians and Israelis, but also for the communities of your own country.

2. Communication Guidelines

- a. Focus on storytelling and lift up and convey the authentic experiences, stories, insights, and values of people and communities within the churches that might otherwise not be heard, even if they are critical of our habitual or accepted practices or challenge principalities and powers.
- b. Make the work visible in social media and work with local media to share the best practice. Try to focus on strong, spiritual and short messages.
- c. If you use social media, share your experiences and perspectives with the hashtag #HolyLandPeace