



Bible Study: 25 February 2014
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Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace

All of us here today are no strangers to pilgrimages- we have either undertaken one, we know somebody who has, or we continue to read or hear about pilgrimages and pilgrim centres around the world.

In India, the country I am from, pilgrimages are an intrinsic part of life and all the religions of the land have revered locations and times in the year when pilgrims and the pilgrimages they are on capture the national imagination.

In English literature, perhaps no other work reminds us of and is at the same time a celebration of the human involvement in a pilgrimage as Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* written in the 14th century. The tales are presented as part of a story-telling contest by a group of pilgrims as they travel together on a journey from Southwark to the shrine of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury cathedral and provides a fascinating insight into human character and behavior, society and its customs and norms as well as the church of the time.

We all know what a pilgrimage is, this journey or search of moral or spiritual significance either to an actual physical site or shrine associated with an important aspect of our faith or this metaphorical journey into ourselves as we strive to know our God better or seek to get closer to him. Sometimes we consciously prepare for it by wearing a certain type or colour of clothing, or by abstaining from something we enjoy for the duration of our pilgrimage. Sometimes we make our pilgrimages just as we are- joyfully and inspired or tired and hurt by our life experiences in the faith and knowledge that God understands and accepts us for who we are.

In preparing for my reflection this morning, it was interesting to put side by side the theme for the Busan Assembly- "God of Life, lead us to Justice and Peace" and our examination of pilgrimage in the phrase "the WCC's Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace."

Much has been said, discussed and written on the Busan theme. Perhaps in Bible studies such as these we need to continue to reflect on all those discussions and on whether our present pilgrimage of justice and peace is borne out of a better understanding of the manner of God's leading or whether our pilgrimage of justice and peace is also a humble acknowledgement that we have not fully understood or even accepted the implications of what it means to ask God to lead.

To help us in our meditation on our pilgrimage of justice and peace, I have chosen for this morning's reading Matthew 16: 13- 23- Peter's Confession of Jesus as the Christ at Caesarea Philippi and Jesus's prediction of his death and resurrection.

Matthew 16: 13-23 (NRSV)

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. ²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

This morning, as we reflect on Jesus’ question to his disciples in Caesarea Philippi, and his knowledge of his impending death and resurrection, let us also examine how this incident speaks to us especially when we gather to discuss our Christian response to a pilgrimage of justice and peace.

Caesarea Philippi was the name of a city on the southern slope of Mount Hermon and was a place surrounded by abundant woods and numerous streams and waterfalls. This beautiful region has inspired the poetry of Psalm 42: 6-7 (...and my God, my soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan, and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts, all your waves and your billows have gone over me).

Caesarea Philippi was also an area where legends of Greek gods had gathered since the time Alexander the Great had conquered the region. The centrepiece of this ancient worship site is a huge cliff and cave which contains the remains of numerous altars, caves, temples and courtyards. This cave, from which gushed out water, was dedicated by the Greeks to their god Pan. In Roman times, Herod the Great erected a white marble statue in honour of Augustus, near the existing altar of Pan. After his death, his son, Philip the Tetrarch beautified the city, named it Caesarea and added his name Philip to it. So in Jesus’ time it was known as Caesarea Philippi. This then was a place that was important for religious reasons because pilgrims would flock to it.

Commercially, the area was strategically important especially because of the highways passing through the region to Damascus, Antioch and other Syrian cities, from the port of Caesarea, and from Jerusalem. Whenever outsiders invaded Israel, they came through this region and from the time of the Babylonian invasion, followed by the Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians and Romans, all had left their mark on Caesarea Philippi by erecting monuments and temples in the names of famous people or gods.

Since Caesarea Philippi was quite close to Galilee, Nazareth and Capernaum, Jesus often visited the area during his lifetime (Matthew 16:13-23, Mark 8:27-33), though there is no record of him entering the city. Some have suggested that Mount Hermon towering over Caesarea Philippi was the “high mountain” of the transfiguration of Jesus mentioned in Mark

9:2. One significant feature of the mountain is that it was once one of the four main sources feeding the river Jordan. The mountain's cave is the Jordan's easternmost source. Because of its connection to the Jordan, the mountain and the cave had profound religious significance for the Jewish people. *Hermon* is Hebrew for "the mountain set apart." It was regarded as a very holy mountain.

It was here in this region important for economic and religious reasons where Jesus asked his disciples the question, "Who do you say that I am?"

1. When Jesus and his disciples visited the area of Caesarea Philippi which had the appearance of a pilgrim town surrounded by religious implications and cross-cultural interaction, they were literally standing in an area against the background of world religions littered with Syrian and Greek temples, a place which reminded them of the history of Israel, the home of Caesar worship. It was in a place of religious plurality that Jesus was asking a pertinent and personal question about his identity. Did the gospel writers purposely put this saying of Jesus in a place such as Caesarea Philippi? After all, Jesus was not critical of temples and monuments displaying human efforts for salvation taught by other religions or religious stalwarts including Moses and Elijah of the Old Testament.

Jesus' question and Peter's response signify Christ's claim on all worshippers of God. In this place where many pilgrims sought divinity, Peter confessed Jesus to be the Messiah. At Caesarea Philippi where both Jesus and Peter were confronted with all the religious claims of history in all of their glory and majesty, Jesus claims for himself the messiahship. It is befitting that in such a place, where emperor worship was proclaimed, Jesus claimed his messiahship.

Our personal pilgrimages and our collective pilgrimage as staff members of the WCC have placed us in this moment in our lives in the city of Geneva, and for some of us, at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey. As pilgrims we are surrounded by wealth, healthy and comfortable living, world class standards be it in transportation, food, accommodation or medical care. As part of our pilgrimage we live and work in a city which plays a pivotal role in the promotion of human rights, international peace talks, high level conferences on the world's economy to name a few because of so many international organizations that are located here. We enjoy the freedom to worship not just within our own denominations but also alongside people and places of worship of numerous other faiths.

Yet Jesus' questions continue to challenge us- In the city you live in today, who do people say I am? In the quality of life you experience every day, who do you say I am? Our pilgrimage of justice and peace cannot brush these two questions aside. Indeed, our pilgrimage must be shaped by our honest answers to these two questions for then only I believe will we understand true justice and true peace.

2. Jesus and his disciples would have been conscious of the scenic beauty of the place and the developments of the city. Was he also conscious of pollution or deforestation during his time? As a teacher, did he find this beautiful place of peace and serenity surrounded with greenery, suitable to understanding the inherent meaning of messiahship? Central to Jesus' mission and messiahship was the idea of "... the coming of a Messiah, who in the 'last day' of history will establish his kingdom (Joel 3:1; Isa 2:2, 59:21; Ezek 36:24, etc.) by calling all

the dispersed and afflicted people of God into *one place*, reconciled to God and becoming one body united around him.”¹ What does this mean for us as pilgrims of peace and justice?

As Christians, we are being called to participate through Jesus in God’s mission in seeking unity not uniformity, breaking human-made barriers that are oppressive and life-negating. Amidst the oppressive structures that threaten human life and dignity and our environment and ecosystems, Christians must lend their voices and efforts to bring about justice and peace and the integration of the whole of creation. As members of Christ’s body we must also participate and strive towards a system based on the biblical model of the “economy of the enough” (2 Cor. 8: 15- The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little do not have too little; Ex. 16: 18- But when they measured it with Omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.).

3. At Caesarea Philippi Jesus taught the disciples that it is not by force symbolized by the temples and statues but by suffering, non-violence, and kenosis (emptying oneself, Phil.2:1-11, Mark.10:45) that one can accomplish the will of God. Peter’s acknowledgement of Jesus’ messiahship leads, strangely enough to the next step where Jesus then begins to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer, be killed and be raised on the third day.

The earthly journey that Jesus was on and the travel he makes with his disciples is one that does not exclude pain, suffering and sacrifice. Our pilgrimage of justice and peace cannot ignore this important fact. In many ways perhaps this is the reason for our pilgrimage. We cannot ignore or gloss over the cost of our pilgrimage on our families, our spouses, our colleagues and on ourselves.

God through Jesus identifies with the most vulnerable in society. Through the Incarnation, God became a part of his own creation, open to being hurt and bruised by his own creation, suffering insults and humiliation and enduring suffering in love. We need to be vulnerable in our pilgrimage of justice and peace. Here we need to be aware of the distinction between choosing to be vulnerable and being vulnerable. If we are not among the vulnerable we have the option to choose vulnerability out of love and solidarity with those who are vulnerable and suffering.²

Our pilgrimage must involve our own self-emptying. Only then can we identify with God’s vulnerability in service to all humankind, particularly those who are despised, humiliated, oppressed and discriminated and those living on the margins of the society. This concern is well echoed in the Common Call of Edinburgh 2010 which states:

Disturbed by the asymmetries and imbalances of power that divide and trouble us in church and world, we are called to repentance, to critical reflection on systems of power, and to accountable use of power structure. We are called to find practical ways to live as members of One Body in full

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□ World Council of Churches’ Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation’ (2005), 28. Published in Jacques Mathey (ed.), *You are the Light of the World’: Statements on Mission by the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publication, 2005), 90-126.

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□ Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim, Edinburgh 2010, vol. II, *Witnessing to Christ Today* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2010), 123.

awareness that God resists the proud, Christ welcomes and empowers the poor and afflicted, and the power of the Holy Spirit is manifested in our vulnerability.³

This morning, as we meditate on Jesus' words and the location he spoke these words in, let us remind ourselves that Jesus not only confirmed his Lordship over all creation, but that he challenges us to rise above human-made barriers, and face head-on the challenge of not just pointing out what is wrong but take an active role in doing something concrete about righting those wrongs. The incident at Caesarea Philippi reminds us that in seeking to establish the Kingdom of God as part of our pilgrimage, we must acknowledge and do something about the social, economic, gender and religious discriminations that still abound worldwide today.

Where will our pilgrimage end is a question we must also consider. The journey is as important as its end and as pilgrims are we willing and brave to come face to face with our God who through questions, situations, crises and opportunities continues to make us rethink what we have always thought justice and peace to be.

Jesus' questions at Caesarea Philippi opens a window for us to think about what this pilgrimage of justice and peace must mean for us – would this be a pilgrimage where we set our minds on what God's will is for justice and peace on earth; or through our actions do we instead become a stumbling block?

This morning may we pledge ourselves to a pilgrimage that is a pilgrimage of God's justice and peace to the glory of the Triune God.

Questions for Discussions

1. How do Jesus's questions ("Who do people say the Son of Man is?" and "But who do you say I am?") challenge and prepare us as pilgrims of justice and peace?
2. How does Jesus' messiahship define our road/route on our pilgrimage?
3. What destination do we envision as an end to our pilgrimage of justice and peace?