

Global Day of Prayer to End Famine

Main messages, with bible verses and reflections:

I. Food is more than a human right; it is a divine gift that cannot be impeded

*'The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;' Psalm 24: 1*

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (Matthew 5: 44, 45)

Give us this day our daily bread. Matthew 6:11

*Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."
Luke 22:19*

All creation belongs to our Lord, and the very life we have, the surroundings we live in and the food that we receive and have access to is a divine gift (Psalm 24: 1). The circumstances that we face with regard to the weather and the environment, that makes it possible for us to cultivate food and flourish, does not make us better or more entitled people to receive this grace. The Lord Jesus Christ clearly tells us that God makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:45b). Though God's love for the world and all his creatures is unconditional, it is the quality of our relationship with the 'other' that qualifies us as 'children of God.'

Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, so that we may be children of our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:44). If that is the case, how much more should we pray for our sisters and brothers who are suffering from famine and experiencing fragile situations that make them hungry and vulnerable?

When Jesus taught us to pray, he taught us to depend on God for our daily food and sustenance. When he wanted us to remember him, and celebrate his life and, to internalize his teaching and the spirit of God, he asks us to bless, break and share bread and wine.

So food is a gift that reminds us that God is with us, always accompanying us. A gift of God that contributes both to our physical and spiritual sustenance, assisting us to reflect the love and grace of God. A gift that has to be shared unconditionally.

We have to pray and do all that we can to ensure that the more than 20 million people who are at risk of starvation are moved away from the precipice of famine!

For nothing should separate the children of God from the love of God. Not hardship, or distress; not drought or famine; not persecution, or greed; not injustice, or violence (Romans 8:36 paraphrased).

We have to pray for and accompany our sisters and brothers today, that they can live their lives, without hunger, with dignity, in all its fullness, experiencing the grace and love of God.

II. Hunger crises are preventable, if we reflect, act, and move together

'If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead'. James 2:15-17

Each day, too many women and men across the world struggle to feed their children a nutritious meal. In a world where we produce enough food to feed everyone and which produces 17% more food per person today than 30 years ago, 795 million people – one in nine – still go to bed on an empty stomach each night. Many more people – one in three – suffer from some form of malnutrition. But the current crisis adds to this burden on the world, as we are experiencing the worst hunger crisis in modern history, one that the United Nations is calling “the largest humanitarian crisis since 1945”. More than 20 million people are at risk of starvation. Millions more are suffering from drought and food shortages. The long-term impact of starvation on the children, and on pregnant mothers is devastating and will limit the potential of future generations. Too many individuals in the world live in situations where there is violence and insecurity, or don't have the circumstances or sufficient land to grow, or income to purchase, enough food. Climate change is also rapidly pushing the world's poorest people – those least responsible for it – to the limits of subsistence. The insecurity, inequity and systemic injustices of societies perpetuate hunger and suffering.

The bible verse clearly tells us that we cannot limit our response to this crisis to words. Concrete actions should follow our prayers. If not, our faith is but empty rhetoric and will not bring life; rather it will hasten hopelessness and death.

As people of faith, we have to work with communities, governments, partners and all people of goodwill, to respond to the immediate crisis and ensure that emergency food and assistance reaches the needy, leaving no one behind. But we have to walk with the communities, on the long journey of recovery and rehabilitation and rejuvenation. For this, we also need to work with all concerned to address the root causes of the famine and vulnerability. The bible also addresses the root causes of poverty very explicitly. Prophet Amos (Amos 8: 4-6) refers to the unscrupulous traders waiting for the passing of the sabbatical year- when the remission of all debts was granted according to the Jewish law (v.5). (Deuteronomy 15:1). Ironically, in open mockery of the divine statutes, they were waiting to use the occasion which was supposed to bring respite to the poor, to manipulate their measures and balances to give people less merchandise than what they paid for (v.5). Their greed to acquire more profits was contributing to the economic ruin of impoverished people. When the poor lost their lands and livelihood, (v.4) and the debts were outstanding, the poor families and their children were sold into slavery, for material benefit of the rich.

The search for the root causes might lead us to address the competition for shrinking resources and the tensions and unrest taking the shape of inter religious, inter tribal / clan conflicts. It could lead us to deal with the dispossession of people from their land and water resources. It could expose the struggle for power among the very leaders whose mandate it is to protect and serve their people. It could point us to the sinister and far reaching networks that benefit from corruption in the trade of the natural resources of the land and the unrestricted trade in arms that add fuel to the fire of conflicts. It could take us to the impact of unfair trade practices and market manipulations compounded by massive shortfalls in the public sector investments and the lack of basic social safety nets. It could point us to the impact of climate change.

Addressing the root causes and speaking truth to power, is an integral step in promoting stability and peace.

We need to pray for the strengthening of the prophetic voice of the churches, and their work of accompanying individuals and communities with their preferential attention and ministry to the marginalised and the poor.

III. Churches have a prophetic role in calling to mobilize their members, the wider society, and governments, and making a difference during this unprecedented period of suffering

*He (Jesus) told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."
Matthew 13:33*

*'Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,
but those who are kind to the needy honour him.' Proverbs 14:31*

*'How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or
sister in need and yet refuses help?' 1 John 3:17*

In the Lord's prayer, we invoke the Kingdom of God, here and now- 'Thy kingdom come!' We pray for the establishment of the reign of God with the values of justice, peace and love, having a visible impact on the world and the course it takes. A widely held perspective among Christians is that the establishment of the Kingdom has already started but awaits full disclosure at a future point. The values of the reign of God, coexists with that of the world. One of the many illustrations that the Lord Jesus Christ used for the kingdom of heaven is comparing it to a small quantity of yeast that works through dough, transforming it, in an unassuming manner, from the inside, to something nourishing and digestible. (The three measures he describes is a large quantity- 22.7 kg {50 pounds}, sufficient for a feast.) Origen in the 3rd century and Eusebius in the 4th century described the Kingdom of God / Heaven as being represented by the faithful who are transformed by the love of God and in the pursuit of Christian teachings.

Then it begs the question- 2000 years after the Lord Jesus Christ began his ministry and with more than a third of the world's population called Christian- why is the dough still relatively flat? Why do we still experience such famines, and starvation, which are significantly precipitated by human commissions and omissions?

Part of the question is answered by our Lord Jesus Christ that good and evil will coexist, even during the establishment of the reign of God. (Matthew 5: 44-45; Matthew 13:24-43). But we have to ask ourselves the hard question if we, as Christians are sincerely following the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are broken and far from perfect. Our churches and institutions need to be continually revived and to be responding to the needs of the communities we serve and the society in which we live.

If we do not respond to the needs of people who are suffering and do not share our talents and resources to concretely support them, the love of God is not in us, and we are not part of the reign of God. If we are participating in the oppression of others, we are insulting God, our maker.

But we have excellent examples of good work amongst churches and the faithful that are taking place in our communities, serving the neediest, in all the regions affected by or vulnerable to famines. Our faith communities are present even in the most remote locations, as a living testament, a reflection of God in the communities. We have many good examples and mentors to follow. Let us do a better job in scaling up our responses and truly being the yeast, salt, and light of the world.

We need to pray for the strengthening and adequate sourcing of resources for the on-going work of the churches in the affected areas. We also need to appeal to God for the revival among churches and faith communities to respond to this crisis and for the diaconal work of church communities as a whole.

IV. We are commanded to see the divine in those who are suffering and appreciate their resilience, opinions, and solutions and to respect their dignity

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” Matthew 25:35

“So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Genesis 1:27

The Lord Jesus Christ came not to be served, but to serve, and he urges us to do the same. We can live in the image of God by loving and serving humankind. The Gospel imperative of our attitude to comprehensively serve the other, (diakonia) is guided by biblical and ethical perspectives, determined by the Gospel imperatives of:-

- Loving others as oneself (John 13:34-35)
- Acknowledging the divinity and the dignity of the other and the sanctity of serving the marginalized (Matthew 25:31-40)
- And in seeing the whole community as part of one body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12)

We are not only called to respond to the needs of our sisters and brothers in dire situations in a compassionate, timely and sufficient manner. We are also commanded to see the divine in those who are suffering and appreciate their resilience, opinions, and solutions and to respect their dignity as we respond. We approach serving others with humility, willing to be transformed ourselves, in the process. The willingness to suffer

alongside with those we serve and to give oneself to the other entirely; and not using the opportunity to serve as an occasion for domination, privilege, and rank are essential characteristics of Christian diakonia.

V. Let us join in prayer, particularly for the children and families in immediate need, as well as those who make sacrifices in helping to respond to the crisis, sometimes at great personal risk

*I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy,
and executes justice for the poor.
Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name;
the upright shall live in your presence. Psalm 140: 12, 13*

*When the poor and needy seek water,
and there is none,
and their tongue is parched with thirst,
I the Lord will answer them,
I the God of Israel will not forsake them. Isaiah 41:17*

Psalm 140 is a prayer for deliverance from enemies and from tough and violent circumstances. The vulnerability, violation and false accusations faced by the Psalmist, David, 3000 years ago is not unlike the suffering our Lord Jesus Christ experienced more than 2000 years ago. Unfortunately, the suffering is also akin to the painful experiences of communities in Somalia, South Sudan, North East Nigeria and Yemen. The concluding verses highlight God's preferential option for the poor and suffering and denote both God's favour to them and their duty to God.

Isaiah also describes the innocent suffering of the needy and the poor; and the hope for God's intervention and deliverance.

Famine affects everyone, but children under five years of age are most vulnerable to its long-term impact. In South Sudan, Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen, millions of children are feeling the effects of food shortages. Already, almost 1.4 million are suffering from severe, acute malnutrition, the deadliest form of malnutrition. If left untreated, more than one-third of these children will die from starvation and disease. Those who survive will likely endure lifelong negative effects such as stunted growth and poor brain development. Prevention and treatment are critical for these children's lives and their futures. Our prayers and support for children should continue to be directed to those currently at risk of suffering and in need of protection who must receive the nutritional support they need to survive and thrive.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that at least 79 humanitarians have been killed in South Sudan since the conflict began in 2013, including at least 12 killed this year. Humanitarian organisations and local faith communities are on the frontlines of the crisis. Many humanitarian workers enter some of the world's most dangerous places, putting their lives on the line to bring life-saving food and aid. Faith communities are caring and sheltering displaced people, children and the most vulnerable. Our prayers are required for peace and for safe working conditions of humanitarian workers and communities on the frontlines that their lives are protected and access to humanitarian assistance is secured.

VI. Let us pray for justice and peace, and for an end to the violence that hurts both current and future generations

"...beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more..." Micah 4:3, Isaiah 4:41

'...I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety....

On that day I will answer, says the Lord,

I will answer the heavens

and they shall answer the earth;

and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil,

and they shall answer Jezreel; Hosea 2: 18b, 21,22

Happier were those pierced by the sword

than those pierced by hunger,

whose life drains away, deprived

of the produce of the field. Lamentations 4:9

The prophets Micah and Isaiah predict the day when the reign of God will be established, where there will be peace, and nations will give up their warring ways and will invest in development and in agriculture. Real peace and development are only achieved when communities can live, mobilising their resources, benefitting from the fruits of their labour, in their own environment, living without domination and fear.

The passage from Lamentations compares those whose lives are threatened by violence and those who are threatened by hunger, and comments that dying of hunger is more miserable. Imagine the suffering of the millions of people who are under the threat of both violence and starvation!

Conflict is the common denominator across all four countries currently facing the risk of famine. Nine of the ten worst food crises today are in countries experiencing conflict. It is clear there is a direct link between conflict and food security. Families and children flee violence in search of safety, leaving their homes and livelihoods behind. Children caught up in conflict and famine face higher risk of early marriage, exploitation and domestic abuse because of the stresses on communities and families. To prevent future famines and hunger crises, we must end violence in our world.

We need to pray for peace and durable solutions that will end conflict and violence. Real peace and development are only achieved when communities can live, mobilizing their resources, benefitting from the fruits of their labour, in their own environment, living without domination and fear.