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Sermon Closing Prayer

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Micah 6

Let the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and redeemer.

I greet you in the most precious name of the Holy Trinity.

Let me also express my deepest sense of gratitude to the general secretary of the WCC, Rev. Dr Olav Tveit for giving me this honour to share the Word of God during this common prayer as we bring the central committee meeting to a close.

One of the salient features of the pilgrimage tradition is story telling. Pilgrims tend to share stories among themselves on their way. Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is a classic example. To begin with, as we continue to reflect on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, let me share a story with you, a real one. Here is my pilgrimage story:

Thirteen years ago, six of us started a non-religious NGO called "Theeram" (meaning "sea shore"). Theeram was established for taking care of the needs and concerns of the mentally challenged children and adults in Kerala, India. When we started it, we had twelve kids and six support staff. Today, it has become a large family with more than 250 children and 50 plus support staff. Apart from day care programmes, we also focused on public awareness building programmes, as the mentally challenged people are one of the most neglected sections of our society. As part of our conscientisation programme, eight years ago, we organized a journey called "Navayanam" (meaning "a new journey"). We trained 25 of our kids in singing, dancing and other art forms and organized an hour long cultural show. As part of this journey, we organized stage shows of our special kids in all districts of Kerala. When it came to Calicut, a northern city in Kerala, an old woman came to me with her son who had profound intellectual challenges. He was her **only** son. During her conversation, she told me that she tried to commit suicide four times in her life, but failed in all those attempts. She said she could not endure the pain of the ill treatment her only son was receiving from the society at large. Because of his unpredictable and at times violent nature, people used to abuse him, swear at him, stone him, spit at him and even manhandle him. "How long can a mother endure this agony?" she asked me. This was the reason she wanted to end her life. But each time she tried it, her son's picture would come to her mind and she would ask herself "if I go, what would be the fate of my son? When I am around at least I am there to love him and take care of him." This thought would bring her back to life. The words that she told me afterwards would **never** leave me. They still echo in my ears. She said, "Father, I say a prayer every morning and every evening which no woman or no mother can ever say. This is my daily prayer. God, please take my son's life before you take mine. Please let my son die first." Then she said, "I pray this prayer not because I do not love my son but precisely because I love my son more than anything else in this world." I did not know how to console her. I

hugged her and said “Mother, let God decide who should go first. But if you had to leave first, I can assure you that your son will not be an orphan and we will immediately adopt him.” This challenged us to start a residential care centre for mentally challenged children and adults.

Until that moment when this old woman challenged me through her sharing, our “Navayanam” journey for me was just a journey. But with that encounter, the journey became a sacred journey, a pilgrimage. It is the desperate cry for justice and peace like that of this mother in this story that makes our walk a sacred walk, a pilgrimage of justice and peace. A journey becomes a sacred walk, a pilgrimage, when faith is challenged at the margins of society. To put it differently, it is our engagement with the margins and with the justice concerns of the marginalized in our faith journey that will make it a pilgrimage of justice and peace.

This is what the biblical text from Micah 6:6-8 which was read to us, tells us. Let me read verse 8 once again:

“What does the Lord require of you but to **do justice**, and to love kindness, and to **walk** humbly with your God?”

Micah was the last of the four prophets of the 8th century BC. Like the other three, Amos, Hosea and Isaiah, Micah too was a champion of social justice. We also see some kind of a similarity between the then context of Micah and the contemporary one. In BC 732, Syria (Damascus) had fallen to the Assyrian army which was on a rampage. People had to go into exile. Look at our own contexts today including Syria from where thousands are fleeing every day. The situation of refugees and migrants has become a major concern today. The threat during Micah’s time was not just external and political but it was internal and ethical as well. Corruption, for instance, was rampant in both religious and public spheres. Immorality was at its worst. Even priests and prophets took bribes. Traders cheated. The rich robbed the poor. The life of women and children was made miserable. Take a look at our own contexts and see how corrupt and immoral some of our own churches, ecumenical organizations and society are today.

In chapter 6:1-5, we see God’s advocate, the prophet, arguing the case against Israel in a court room setting. The prophet narrates how the people have betrayed the covenant and walked in immoral ways. Their life was a walk in injustice and therefore not a sacred walk. In 6:6-8, which is considered to be an independent fragment, people ask the prophet how they could atone for their sinful life of injustice and immorality? They were willing to offer more sacrifices. Verse 8 is the answer of the prophet according to whom what God required from the people were not more sacrifices but a new way of walking with God, a new exodus, a new pilgrimage. God wanted from the people a new pilgrimage that was defined by a passionate commitment to prophetic justice and compassion. In other words, actual practice of justice in life, a genuine pursuit of kindness and a walk in humility are the hallmarks of a pilgrimage of justice and peace, according to Micah. This reminds us of James 1:27 where real life of devotion or genuine spirituality is identified with an ethos of justice and righteousness. Prophet Micah is here cautioning us about romanticized notions of walking with God, of pilgrimages that are merely ritualistic and not grounded in the ethos of justice, mercy and humility.

What is of utmost importance here is to note that these challenges were addressed to the then power centres, both religious and political; prophets, priests, rulers, the rich and the elite. Sometimes we tend to universalize the message of a particular text regardless of the specific audience of the text. The prophetic call here “to walk humbly with God” and to “do justice and love kindness” was addressed to the power hungry and the rich who were corrupt and exploitative. When we preach the same message today we must direct the message to those people and systems that are oppressive and hegemonic and **NOT** to the **victims** of such power structures.

For instance, I have heard several preachers exhorting the Dalits in India to follow the “servant” model of Jesus ministry. To me, this has always been an irony, a paradox! Dalits who have always been treated as “slave/servant” class/caste for centuries on account of the heinous system of caste, are being taught the “sacredness” of servanthood, that too by the so-called upper caste clergy. This is actually asking Dalits to

remain in slavery. The message of servanthood instead should be addressed to the so-called master class and caste or gender as a challenge of self-emptying. To walk humbly with God is a warning to the rich and the powerful, to shed their arrogance, pride and to transform their ways. Today, margins are challenging the centres of power, to listen to the prophetic message of the need to show humility by shedding and sharing power and resources with those who have been dispossessed of such resources. A pilgrimage therefore should be oriented towards the cries for justice that are heard at the fringes of our society.

According to prophet Micah, a sacred walk, walking with God, is about doing justice and loving kindness. Justice (**mispal**) is part of divine nature. God's justice is not politically neutral. *Mispal* is a verbal noun with praxiological and socio-political connotations. This justice of God is what should characterize our pilgrimage.

The best example of a pilgrimage of justice and peace is the journey that Jesus undertook towards Jerusalem, towards the Cross. This pilgrimage of Jesus took him to the temple, leading to the cleansing of the temple (as we read in Matt.21). This he did, by confronting the forces of corruption and exploitation. Combating marketization of the temple was an important element of Jesus' pilgrimage towards the Cross. Therefore, a pilgrimage of justice and peace that does not address issues of moral degeneration of our churches and ecumenical institutions, especially the sweeping influence of the ideology of mammon and the corporate logic in our ecclesial life, cannot be a sacred walk with God.

Today, the increasing levels of migration have radically altered the face of the global church. Large-scale migration today is one of the contemporary manifestations of pilgrimage of justice and peace. Refugees on the move are pilgrims in search of peace and justice. To turn a deaf ear to the cries of these refugees and migrants is to refuse to walk humbly with God.

Let's take a brief look at the "Holy Land" of today. Israel has announced plans to erect a new concrete wall, tens of meters deep underground and overground. This is expected to stretch along the 60 miles of the southern boarder around the Gaza strip. The Gaza tunnels were built to bring in necessities. This new wall is being built in addition to the already existing wall of separation. Along with Palestinian land, her water resources have also been occupied unjustly by Israel. In the occupied West Bank, Israel has established almost complete control of Palestinian water resources. In the midst of all these realities of systemic exploitation and occupation, thousands of Christians from all over the world make "pilgrimages" to the "Holy Land" without seeing and responding to, deliberately or out of ignorance, such human rights violations and systems of injustice. From my own state, Kerala in India, on average ten groups of "pilgrims" go on "pilgrimage to the holy land" every day! While Israel benefits economically out of these so-called pilgrimages, the pilgrims hardly think of the impact these pilgrimages are causing on the lives of the Palestinians. Worse still is the fact that most of the pilgrims come back home with their notions of biblical Zionism reinforced. In such contexts, we need to envision and embark on alternate forms of pilgrimages that would challenge such distorted notions of "holiness" that tend to perpetuate injustice and imperialism. Walking with God is about walking on the way of the Cross. It is about confronting structures of injustice and immorality both within and without ecclesial spaces.

It's significant that Nelson Mandela titled his autobiography "Long **Walk** to Freedom". It was one of the most revolutionary pilgrimages ever! One of the most spiritually profound sacred walks ever! It was truly a liberative pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

Pilgrimages of justice and peace are being embarked on in people's struggles for liberation, freedom, and dignity. We are challenged to accompany them in their pilgrimages of justice and peace.

Let us therefore recommit ourselves as we continue our ecumenical pilgrimage to walk the talk of justice and peace, to translate our rhetoric of justice and kindness into "doing justice and loving kindness", as prophet Micah challenges us, to incarnate and embody justice and peace in our lives and ministry.