

BROKEN **F O R Y O U**

World Communion of Reformed Churches



Broken for You

A WCRC initiative for Lent 2015 on Human Trafficking

This is my body, which is broken for you, do this in remembrance of me ...
Luke 22:19

This project alerts us to the courage and dignity of women, men and children, all around us, whose bodies are daily broken in physical labour or sexual exploitation for the sake of their families and our economies

Background of the “Broken for You” initiative

The WCRC Justice networks met in Cuba in 2013 to discuss a programme and project to mark the 10 year anniversary of the Accra Confession. The participants saw in human trafficking an injustice that exposed the greater systematic economic injustice the Reformed family had confessed in Accra as sin. Human trafficking manifests the distorted and violating principles of our economies in which people are sacrificed for profit, and the intrinsic dignity of human beings is denied and derided. We think it offers a lens through which to look again at the Reformed critique of our economic systems and values which cost lives, shed blood and pollute the earth in order to bring profit to a tiny few.

In January 2014 a working group met in Buenos Aires, Argentina, to develop a project and a concept paper that support the initiative: “Broken for You.”

Why “Broken for You”?

We are familiar with these words of Jesus gathering us into our liturgical act of communion. They testify to his self-sacrifice for us all, and vividly remind us of his generosity and vulnerability. He gave himself freely to redeem others, even at the risk and loss of his own life. These words also speak of the injustice of Jesus’ predicament: The corrupt and cannibalistic political and religious system demanded that his life be forfeit for the challenge he posed to them by his witness to the God of Life.

This initiative gathers us into a missionary act of communion. As we are moved by hearing these words of Jesus in worship we hear them again and again in the world, in those who are the victims of human trafficking and the systems that bring it about. Human trafficking is an economic system that trades the lives and bodies of people. Women, men and children who often enter into domestic service, sex work, farm and factory work away from their homes and families, precisely for their homes and families. People made vulnerable by unjust situations and poverty may in their efforts to provide for their families be victimized by human trafficking. But human trafficking is also for “Us.” It is part and parcel of an economic system we all live by that expects labour to be as cheap as possible. The food many of us eat, the clothes we wear, the rare metals our technology relies upon are often the product of trafficked people and unjust economies.

The WCRC sees itself as a communion, so this initiative is an invitation into solidarity, we act in communion with each other as churches, in communion with those persons who have been trafficked in our communities and nations, and in communion with the God of Life who we testify to in Jesus as willing a world of justice and fullness.

Why Lent?

Lent focuses us on the temptations of profit and power. These are the potent elements to the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness. It is clear how our economies are given over to the worship of profit and power. Human trafficking is a clear manifestation of this. Lent will give us all a helpful theological and liturgical context for our work together. We can join with others in their campaigns against trafficking in our communities anticipating God's answer to death and self-sacrifice, which is life and resurrection. This WCRC initiative is powerful and prophetic and moves us at a profound time of year to realise Isaiah's challenge to us to see the true significance of our liturgical life, which is missionary action:

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many

generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. –Isaiah 58:1-12

We present to you these materials as a tool for you to use within your local church, or any other community you may think it will help to reflect and commit with so many people around the world struggling against human trafficking.

May our Lenten fast in 2015 be to struggle for justice and life with those who are trafficked in our communities and assert with them the dignity denied to them by the powers and economies of our day.

On behalf of the working group,
Rev. Dora Arce Valentín
Executive for Justice and Partnership

Working group members:

Grietje Couperus
Peter Cruchley-Jones
Joanna Hipp
Gabriela Mulder
Philip Vinod Peacock
Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth
Ryan Smith

Contributors include:

Rev. Bob Abrams
Shannon Beck
Pamela Burdine
Rev. Grietje Couperus
Rev. Dr. Peter Cruchley-Jones
Rev. Wayne A. Gnatuk
Yvonne Hileman
Courtney Hoekstra
Rev. Carl Horton
Susan Krehbiel
Sunelle Stander
Rev. Dr. Teresa Lockhart Eisenlohr
Rev. Mienda Uriarte
Teresa Waggener
Cynthia White
Aiko Widhidana
Bryce Wiebe
Rev. Elmarie Parker
Philip Vinod Peacock
Ryan Smith

Ash Wednesday, February 18

Evening Worship

The Living God welcomes us this evening. May this be a time for recognizing and celebrating the living and dynamic relationship existing between God and us.

“While God is always the enemy of evil, and although that evil is often attached to the nations in the OT, [God] is no less [evil’s] enemy when it appears in [God’s] own people.” –*Daniel C. Timmer*

GATHERING AROUND THE WORD

Prelude

Musician’s Name

Welcome

Pastor

Opening Prayer

Worship Leader

Let me pray for us:

O God of forgiveness, you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. You did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Create clean hearts in us, we pray. Cleanse us from our sin. Ignite our ashen souls with your forgiving grace. Renew us to join you in your work of bringing peace and justice to all parts of this world. Through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Please join me on the bolded parts of the Call to Worship.

Call to Worship

Psalm 147:1-6

Worship Leader

Praise the Lord!

How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!

The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel.

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.

Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit. The Lord sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground.

**Hymn of Adoration*

“Come Worship God”

Michael Perry, 1980 (11.10.11.10)

Let's talk together to our Lord as we seek help to live as his faithful followers in the world today.

God blesses those who realize their need for him, for the kingdom of heaven is given to them.

But we have been proud in spirit, inflated with pride in our own self-sufficiency. We have forgotten how needy we are.

God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

But we have not mourned over our personal, cultural or national sins. Instead we have insulated ourselves from those around us, from their pain, needs, loneliness, injustice and suffering. We have even hardened ourselves so that we are unaware that our own personal and national lives cause grief to the Lord.

God blesses those who are gentle and lowly, for the whole earth will be their inheritance.

But we have valued toughness over gentleness. We have too often chosen to be concerned with ourselves rather than with our brothers and sisters and neighbors next door or around the world. Like the prodigal son, we want to satisfy ourselves rather than our Father.

God blesses those who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for they will receive it in full.

But we have hungered after the pleasures, prestige, and possessions of this temporal world. Like Esau, we have despised our birthright by choosing to satisfy our immediate desires.

God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

But we have often presided as harsh judges over the lives of others. We have been quick to place blame on anything or anyone but ourselves. We have avoided obligations to care for or to help people suffering injustice in our own land or in other lands.

God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.

But we have defiled our hearts with idols of our own choosing, doubting that God will keep God's Word and God's promises. We continually compromise the truth by trying to find meaning and security in our jobs, our friends, our pleasures, our projects—but not in God.

God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.

But we are often at war with one another, personally and nationally. In a thousand little ways we demand to be catered to. We seldom esteem others as more important than ourselves. We often create strife by demanding our way rather than by walking in God's spirit.

God blesses those who are persecuted because they live for God, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

But we have too often retreated from the disapproval of others. We've sought to please the world rather than risk offending the status quo or rocking the boat of what is accepted by the majority. We regard rejection for righteousness as a burden to be borne, rather than an honor to be humbly received.

Lord, please show us your mercy.

**Lord, have mercy upon us in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

**Assurance of Pardon*

1 John 1:4-9

Sisters and Brothers, hear and receive the good news. First John tells it this way: "We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from Christ and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." In Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven. Share the light of forgiveness with those around you this week.

"I Will Sing of the Mercies"
James H. Fillmore & Marie J. Post

Choral Anthem

RECEIVING THE WORD

Young Disciples Time

Prayer for Illumination Through Song
"Change My Heart, O God"
Eddie Espinosa, 1982

Scripture

Jonah 3:1-4:11; Luke 18:9-14

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Message Series

Today's Message

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Sharing our Offering and Offertory

Please place prayers of gratitude or concern in the offering plate.
Consider offering a prayer in response to the prayer guide questions listed under
"Prayers of the People."

**Song of Gratitude and Prayer of Dedication*
"Doxology"

Prayers of the People with The Lord's Prayer in Unison

See [inside front cover of hymnal] for Lord's Prayer
In what ways have you experienced forgiveness? Offer thanks!
For what needs or concerns of the world might we pray?

We pray to you, O Lord, our God and Father, because we are encouraged by Jesus Christ, your Son and our brother, to do so. You have said through the mouth of the prophet: 'Seek the good of the city and pray for it to the Lord;' we therefore pray to you today for the cities and villages of our land and of every land, for your justice and righteousness, for your peace and good order to reign everywhere.

Have mercy, Lord, we pray.

We pray for those who govern. Teach them that you are the ruler of all and that they are only your instruments. Grant them wisdom for their difficult decisions, a sharp eye for what is essential, and courage to obey your commandments.

Have mercy, Lord, we pray.

We pray for all who, by your ordaining, are responsible for justice and peace. We pray for all who continue to seek salvation in violence. Show terrorists that no blessing rests in violence. Take the young among especially into your care and bring order into their confused thoughts. Bring murder and kidnapping and enslavement to an end.

Have mercy, Lord, we pray.

We pray for all who are no longer able to sleep in peace because they fear for their own life and for the lives of those near and dear to them; we pray for all who no

longer have hope in your kingdom and for all who are tormented by anxiety or despair. Hear their cries, O Lord; strengthen them with your gospel and sacrament, surround them with faithful companions, and deliver them from their torment.

Have mercy, Lord, we pray.

Lord, you have the whole wide world in your hands. May your kingdom come and your will be done to hasten that day where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away. Hear us now as we pray the prayer you taught us to pray...Our Father....Amen.

FOLLOWING JESUS INTO THE WORLD

**Song of Sending*

“Called as Partners in Christ’s Service”

Jane Parker Huber, 1981 (8.7.8.7.D)

**Invitation to Discipleship*

**Blessing*

** All who are able, please stand.*

Service crafted by Rev. Elmarie Parker, PCUSA

Prayers adapted from *The Worship Sourcebook*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. Grand Rapids: Michigan (USA).

Ash Wednesday Service

Traditionally, Ash Wednesday focuses on personal sin and confession. We would like to encourage you to add to this a focus on social sin and transgression. As the WCRC reflects on Human Trafficking through Lent, this Ash Wednesday service will help to set the context of Trafficking, not in personal sin, but in terms of economic sin, as people are exploited for their labour or bodies for the sake of profit. The Accra confession has testified to the sin that our systems are perpetuating, and how the people in poverty and the planet are the ones most exploited. This is not accidental, or incidental. It is a deliberate and systematic feature of how we organise our economies, and it is a product of how we have commodified people and the earth as being available for our benefit and convenience.

The lectionary gives us these readings:

Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Isaiah 58:1-12

If you choose this passage you might like to focus on the clear link between faithful worship and doing justice. The people of God cannot wash their hands of

injustice in the world as not their business and expect God to be satisfied with their worship.

You might like to wonder about some of these ideas and questions. Lent is a time of fast; if Isaiah were to preach in your church, what would he say about true fasting this Lent? Isaiah criticises the self-interested attitude of his contemporaries, how do we and who do we put first before ourselves? What might he point to as our gestures of contempt and evil words when it comes to treating downtrodden people, or the earth herself? Why does Isaiah suggest that doing justice will reveal God's love, life and will more clearly than just going to worship? How can we understand this and emulate it?

Human trafficking enslaves and enchains people all around the world. The self interest of our economies demands low costs in order to maximise profit, and Isaiah is looking for people to join with him in shouting as loud as they can that this system cannot go on like this. It exploits people, pollutes the earth and offends God.

Psalm 51:1-12

This gives an occasion for personal confession, to recognise that we are all individually complicit in these exploitative ways of life. It would be good to give time for people to face what their stories and attitudes are as we look to spending Lent articulating the alternative vision of Life God has to that offered by our systems and governments.

However, you might like to consider how some of these words could be used outside the church, on the street. Could these words of confession and change be said over a nearby bank or factory or police station? Could we even go as far as to ash these buildings as a sign of the mercy and change of heart and system we all need?

2 Corinthians 5:10b-6:10

Paul could be talking as if he were a trafficked person: 'we have been beaten, imprisoned and mobbed; we have been overworked and have gone without food and sleep' (2 Cor 6:5).

"I will pass out any minute if I have to continue harvesting in this heat," he thinks. The last time he ate was yesterday. Or the day before? With only three or four hours of sleep per night, the days intertwine in his memory. But the foreman is merciless; anyone who stops working, even if it's just for a minute, will be punished. "God, please, help me escape! I have to get home, somehow!" But before he can even make up a plan, he is sold and transported to work on yet another plantation, in yet another corner of this foreign country with its foreign language...

This is not the story of a black slave in the year 1785 on Saint-Domingue (former Haiti). This is happening in southern Spain, today.

www.europeandme.eu/16brain/882-human-trafficking-in-europe?showall=1

Paul feels the pressure of the Gospel to work hard and not complain. But for trafficked people it is the threat of violence that means many work without rest or respect. It may be one thing to say that such pain must be endured for the Gospel's sake, but it is plain wrong to say to a woman who has been trafficked for sex or a man for farm labour that they must simply endure the situation they have chosen for themselves. Many have had no choice but to accept apparently legitimate offers of work in the hope they can provide for their families only to discover themselves trapped in illegal and exploitative employment.

You might reflect and share how, as Paul wonders, shall we speak for Christ in such situations? How can we share with him the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21).

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Here Jesus challenges us with hypocrisy, making charity a way to show off. But this Lenten series is not about charity, it's about justice. It is important to focus on trafficked people as exploited people worthy of justice, not as unfortunate victims needing charity.

This passage asks to what we will give ourselves fully? We can pretend to be followers, we can make a show of generosity, but as the passage comes to an end it asks where our heart is invested? Is it in the financial and economic promises of the world around us or in the alternatives that heaven offers: The heaven Jesus speaks of as being like a vineyard in which all the workers receive a daily living wage? (Matt 20:1-16).

Can we explore honestly the power money has over us and articulate what greater power there is than money? What does the sovereignty of God mean in a system where profit is king and peoples' lives and bodies are simply commodities to be exploited? What shall we confess and commit ourselves to this Lent?

Thursday, February 19

Psalm 27; Psalm 147:2-20; Deuteronomy 7:6-11; Titus 1:1-16; John 1:29-34; Psalm 126; **Psalm 102**

The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1)

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. (Psalm 147:3)

Hear my prayer, Lord; let my cry for help come to you. Do not hide your face from me when I am in distress. Turn your ear to me; when I call, answer me quickly. (Psalm 102:1-2)

We believe that God has made a covenant with all of creation (Gen 9:8-12). God has brought into being an earth community based on the vision of justice and peace. The covenant is a gift of grace that is not for sale in the market place (Is 55:1). It is an economy of grace for the household of all of creation. Jesus shows that this is an inclusive covenant in which the poor and marginalized are preferential partners and calls us to put justice for the “least of these” (Mt 25:40) at the centre of the community of life. (Accra Confession # 20)

CRIES FROM THE “LEAST OF THESE”

Big numbers make the headlines. But what about the voices of the invisible? For nearly four years now a proxy war has raged in Syria. Theories abound regarding who is to blame. The question of whether or not there is an end in sight to the daily atrocities remains unanswered. In the midst of the chaos, hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced and now live under crushing economic uncertainty. And the children of these families suffer.

A ministry in Lebanon reaches out to Syrian children who have been discarded by their families or have fled situations of abuse. One young boy, like many displaced Syrian children his age, was forced by his father every day to sell roses or packets of tissues on the streets of Beirut. He never earned enough. One day he returned home to find two strange men in his home. As his family quietly left the room, it became clear that his father had sold him for the night to these strangers. He wasn't selling enough commodities, so he became a commodity for his family's survival.

While political leaders from the region and from the West debate what to do with the 'Syria-problem' (and the profits only increase for companies manufacturing the weapons and supplies used in this proxy war), an entire generation of children and young adults have been traumatized in mind, body, spirit and heart with wounds they will carry for the rest of their lives. Their cry reflects the ancient cry of the Psalmist: “Hear my prayer, Lord; let my cry for help come to you. Do not hide your face from me when I am in distress. Turn your ear to me; when I call, answer me quickly (Psalm 102:1-2).”

Pray for the ministries, their staff, and their funding networks who are seeking to be Christ's hands and feet for the sake of "...healing the brokenhearted and binding up their wounds (Psalm 147:3)." Pray for desperate parents forced to make decisions no parent should ever have to face. Pray for Christ's peace and justice to become tangible for the people of Syria.

Friday, February 20

Psalm 22; Psalm 148; Deuteronomy 7:12-16; **Titus 2:1-15**; John 1:35-42; Psalm 105; Psalm 130

11 For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. **12** It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, **13** while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, **14** who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2)

We live under the promise that Jesus Christ came so that all might have life in fullness (John 10:10). Guided and upheld by the Holy Spirit we open ourselves to the reality of our world. (Accra Confession # 17)

We believe that God calls us to hear the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation and to follow the public mission of Jesus Christ who came so that all may have life and have it in fullness (Jn 10:10). Jesus brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; he frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind (Luke 4:18); he supports and protects the downtrodden, the stranger, the orphans and the widows. (Accra Confession # 28)

A PROMISE FOR IRAQI WOMEN

Six years ago, three Iraqi Presbyterian women responded to a sense of call to go and visit women being held in jail until their trial and sentencing. Since then a quarterly visitation ministry has developed. Today, the guards rely solely on this ministry to fund the women's personal needs—hygiene items, towels, pillows, mattresses, blankets, diapers and formula, along with simply listening to their stories and offering a glimmer of hope for a better future. Normally family would provide for these needs, but because these women often come from other provinces in Iraq, they do not have family near-by. Or, their jailing has brought so much shame to their families that the women are abandoned.

All the jailed women are Muslim; their crimes vary from murder to prostitution, though lately it has seemed that most of the women have been jailed for prostitution. Many women give birth to their children while in the jail; the children then stay with them. Most of the women are uneducated—they cannot read or write. They mostly come from other provinces in Iraq so they can practice prostitution where they will not be known or noticed by family. Pimps will often take advantage of their young age and naïve attitude; they lure them with money and protection.

For each woman, the visiting team brings a hand embroidered towel with “God loves you,” written in Arabic. Though Islam has 99 names for God, not one of those names communicates this reality of being personally loved by God. For women who have been ostracized from their families, this word of hope is

proving to be revolutionary. On one visit, the Presbyterian women noticed a cross made out of empty cigarette boxes in one Muslim woman's cell. When they asked her about the cross, she replied, "You have spoken to us about how we can find hope in God's love for us through Jesus, the Crucified One. I need all the hope I can find, so I have made this cross to remind me where I can find hope."

The jailed women have now asked for help once they are released. The church women want to offer them job training, education and a safe place to live, but they have faced one difficult obstacle after another in their quest. They are wrestling with how to accompany these women into tangible expressions of the flame of hope that has been ignited in their spirits. To have an active part in helping these young women live into the fullness of life for which they were created, please join the Iraqi Presbyterian Church Women in these prayers:

1. That the government of their province will fund and build a women's-only shelter to house all the homeless and displaced single females. The church learned during their most recent visit that there is such a proposal by a certain women's rights organization, but the local government deferred the request, likely due to the current unstable situation in Iraq.
2. Pray that the Lord would give the church wisdom in knowing how to minister to these women, especially post-release. For security reasons both for the women and for the church, the women cannot stay at the church, but the church still wants to remain a positive influence within their lives; pray for clarity and direction.
3. Pray for doors to open for the team who ministers to these jailed women, that they would know how to best assist and accompany them. Practical training of any sort would be wonderful, especially in teaching the team how to deal with troubled young women who have been taken advantage of in the past.
4. And finally, pray that the Lord opens the door for this ministry to grow according to his will, and that the church would find sources of support that would consider partnering with this small but crucial ministry.

Saturday, February 21

Psalm 43; Psalm 149; Deuteronomy 7:17-26; Titus 3:1-15; John 1:43-51; **Psalm 31**; Psalm 143

Vindicate me, my God, and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation.
Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked. (Psalm 43:1)

Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and body with grief. My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak.... My times are in your hands; deliver me from the hands of my enemies, from those who pursue me. (Psalm 31:9-10, 15)

We reject any claim of economic, political and military empire which subverts God's sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God's just rule. (Accra Confession # 19)

THE CRY FOR FREEDOM

The demand for domestic workers is immense in Lebanon. They come from many African and Asian countries, lured by the promise of good work, a safe home, and pay enough to provide for their families in their countries-of-origin. While some workers are treated well by those who hire them, many others enter into virtual slavery. They are immediately imprisoned in the homes where they work, their identity papers are confiscated, and they often face physical, sexual and emotional abuse from their Madame or Master. These domestic workers have even fewer rights and protections under the law than refugees, so their options are very limited. They are also beyond the view of most international bodies, so intervention at this level cannot be counted upon.

This leaves them with the choice to endure or the choice of trying to run away. Even if they are able to run away, they are usually caught and imprisoned until they are deported. This can take several months to several years. One Lebanese woman saw this situation as an opportunity to help. On staff with a local ministry, she applied for funding from Western partners to support a training program for prison guards that educated them in humanitarian rights and worked to train them in the humane treatment of prisoners. These seminars were well received by internal security force personnel and contributed to a significant improvement in the treatment of all prisoners, including domestic workers awaiting deportation. In addition this woman developed educational programs broadcast over the radio throughout the region that helped those vulnerable to being trafficked learn how to protect themselves against traffickers. Sadly, the funding for both of these programs have been cut, removing key pillars of support for those crying out for freedom or in danger of being enslaved.

Consider praying Psalm 43:1 and Psalm 31:9-10, 15 for those caught up in modern-day slavery.

Sunday, February 22

Sermon: Can Rahab be your Faith Hero?

Hebrews 11:31; Joshua 2:1-21; 6:22-25

During my ordination interview a question was asked to all the candidates: Who is your favourite character in the bible? Or in other words who is your faith hero? There were many answers like Paul, Peter, David and the list goes on. So many characters were mentioned during this episode. But no mention about Rahab? The epistle writer of Hebrews includes Rahab in the list of faith heroes. How Rahab is included in the list of faith heroes is debated for a quite long period of time. Reformers of Church like Martin Luther and John Calvin struggled with the character Rahab being portrayed as faithful.

Rahab termed as a prostitute, a woman who is not faithful to any person. Later translators tried to translate her as an innkeeper. But we see the epistle writer of Hebrews writes Rahab as prostitute. Rahab is a person who welcomes any man and not committed to any. Prostitute is someone who knows that she cannot rely on the commitment on the men who come to her. Because she might be used and abused by many who come to her.

Rahab was called as a prostitute by the Jericho community, she might be a cultic prostitute. Someone might have pushed her into this situation due to poverty. Rahab might be a socially outcast who lived in the boundary in the city wall which was outside. She was almost treated as an outcast and outsider by her own people. But God made her insider because of her faith in God. Rahab is someone who is trying to save life of both these spies. When the society was not bound by the norms of protecting her from becoming a sex object? How is she then bound by the rules of her society? She understood the call of the God and took risk of her life and obeyed the spies. Her willingness and faithfulness to God is great thing. It is an act of obedience to God.

She is saviour of spies and even the Israelite community. Who believed in her and in the later days she got married and became part of the salvation history. It is a subversive story of Rahab who believed in transformation. Rahab is an example of God's grace as how God used people who are branded and made sinners. Rahab did not put her mind and belief in strong Jericho towers, neither on her king nor on her people who socially ostracised her. She believed in two spies who are running to save their lives in a foreign land. Her act of trusting in the Lord and taking a risky step made her faithful.

So called holy men wondered why God included Rahab, Tamar and Bathsheba. 'sinful' women who are included in Jesus genealogy. This question indicates how society brands and stereotypes women often as sinful and forgetting the men and male dominated society who pushes them into the fringes of flesh trade and slavery. We ought to see beyond the horizons of society branding and stereotyping people. God looks differently from humans. God chose these people to bring transformation in the society.

In the present day scenario millions of children and women are pushed into flesh trade and slavery. The so called 'holy' society brands these vulnerable communities as sinful people and leaving them in their difficulties. Most of the times the stories of these people behind the curtains are not known to the rest of world. Many women gives up any chance of coming out of this tragedy. The reason is the so called society is not welcoming nor happy to accommodate these women and children as respectable citizens. Spies, Israelite community and God trusted in Rahab for a better future. Why not the present day society believe and accommodate these hapless women and children for a better world.

Can you accept Rahab as your faith hero who obeyed God rather than patriarchal norms?

Can you accept people like Rahab as people who deserve dignity and respect?

Monday, February 23

Tale of a Trafficked Woman

Waiting forlorn in the bustling street
Waiting and waiting, waiting for long,
Somewhere in the depths of heart,
I wait for a ray of hope in my life.

With tears and weeping I wait,
Cried bitterly and mocked myself
With wounded body and pure heart,
I wait for a refuge to continue my life.

Waiting for a ceaseless love midst of changing men,
Sleepless days and troubled times of life
At the end of my thoughts,
I wait for perpetual love to cherish my life.

Like moon hid in the clouds,
like a prisoned bird in the cage
only death being the release for me
I wait for a meaningful change in my life.

Never my people comes for me,
Nor I have any one in this life,
With frustrated life midst of mirages,
I wait every day for someone to rescue my life

Tuesday, February 24

As I'm writing this, I am in a guest house in Bangkok, Thailand. I'm here for a conference of theological students organized by the Christian Council of Asia (CCA). The conference deals with a document called "Christian Witness in a Multireligious Society: Recommendations for Conduct" which was issued jointly by the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the World Evangelical Alliance in June 2011. Earlier today, we had heard presentations from some of the participants about the countries they represent. I say some because two more countries will present tomorrow, including my country: Indonesia. None of the presentations had mentioned human trafficking as an issue.

Following the presentations, the conference organizers announced that we would have an outing tonight so that people would actually experience Bangkok and not just sit in a meeting room the whole day. While we all wondered where we could possibly be going, we were told that we would go two blocks down from the guest house we're staying, to one of the most prominent areas where human trafficking is happening. The group is leaving at 8pm. It is now 7:50pm and I am in bed. In my defense, I'm not feeling particularly well. I have a headache and am feeling a little nauseous. But if our field trip destination was somewhere else, I would probably push myself to go. In complete honesty, I am afraid to go to there.

The question I am asking myself is why. Why am I afraid? It seems very hypocritical of me to be sitting here writing about human trafficking when I have the chance to personally observe the reality of it happening. But I am afraid. I am afraid because I know it is a dark and dangerous world. I know I will have to watch myself as we walk down the streets. It will probably be uncomfortable and disturbing. It is easier to not know the reality. It is safe here in my room in the guest house and I am unwilling to walk outside and see what is happening with my own eyes.

Granted, the little field trip will probably not mean much. In a way I could argue that us walking down there would be meaningless because it would make no difference to the people who's daily life consists of being afraid walking down those very streets. I could then argue that because it wouldn't make any difference for them, there is no point for me to go anyway, and perhaps I would be right. Yet, let us focus on the fact that sitting here in my room, I could easily be completely oblivious to what is happening two blocks down from this nice establishment.

This is a lot like how we deal with many issues of injustice in our lives. We know it is happening but it is happening somewhere else, not here, and therefore we can eat and be merry, and sleep well at night. We keep silent about these issues because we don't want them to disturb our comfortable lives. Meanwhile, two blocks down, women are suffering. They are stuck in a world they did not intend to get in, but are now unable to get out. Children are living in ways we would

never wish for our own kids. People are crying silently because they no longer have a voice. How long will we too keep silent?

In our country presentation which will happen tomorrow, there will be a bit about an interreligious coalition formed in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, to speak out against human trafficking. The reason why this coalition was formed? Two people from the area who were trafficked had died in an unimaginable way. In a way, it is good that the coalition is now formed, and hopefully will truly work to end human trafficking. In another, it is too bad that people had to die (and become national headlines) before something was done. Let us be informed of what is happening “two blocks down” from where we are, let us speak out against the violence and the injustice happening in this world. Let us end this atrocity, before it ends those who are victims.

Wednesday, February 25

John 2:23-3:15

Being Born Again

Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus is the context of Jesus' discourse on being born again. Though being a teacher in the law Nicodemus cannot understand the import of what is being told to him. Moving away from a more biological explanation of being born again, Jesus actually points to its social implications. What Jesus seems to be indicating is that our first births do not make any difference at all, what is important is the second birth we have in Christ.

That is to indicate that the sex, class, race, caste, geographical situation we are born into makes no difference, our standing in the Kingdom depends on our second birth or us being born again. This of course had special meaning for Nicodemus who was born into the upper classes of Jewish society, the privilege his birth brought him was supposed to account for nothing.

While this is true, in our temporal world the social location we are born determines many factors for us, including mortality rates, education, employment and vulnerability. It is true that chances of being trafficked increase exponentially for the poor, those living in the third world and women.

What does it mean then to be born again for these who are vulnerable? Perhaps the call then is not for all but for those who are born into privilege to give it up and be born again into solidarity with the vulnerable. Offering then, those born into the privilege of race, caste, sex, geographical location to be broken for others.

Thursday, February 26

John 3:16-21

God so loved the world

Our gospel reading in the lectionary today is perhaps one of the best known New Testament texts, from billboards to posters at sports stadiums, the verse is ubiquitous. While this verse has been often quoted to claim the uniqueness or exclusivity of salvation in Jesus, truth is that it points to something far deeper.

It offers a picture of God that is far removed from the picture of the angry God who demands satisfaction and vengeance. The picture that is offered to us is of a God who does not condemn the world but rather desires its salvation. And desires the salvation of the world so much that the divine is willing to make an offering of the self to do this.

John 3:16 tells us that 'God so loved the world', this is not an indication of how much God loved the world as much as it is an indication of the manner in which God loved the world. God declares love for the world in the giving of God's own son. In many Hindi translations of the Bible, the word used here is *arpith*, which when translated means offered. God offers God's own son for the sake of the salvation of the world.

The giving of oneself for the sake of the other though has often been used to justify the suffering of the powerless who are repeatedly told that the offering of oneself is their religious duty. But the point of this powerful verse seems to be that since God has made this ultimate sacrifice no one need perish anymore, but are instead invited to into the fullness of life for all.

This being the case it is illegitimate that anyone need suffer anymore, the price has been paid. All suffering is unnecessary. The only end of suffering then is the end of suffering. Today let us commit to the ending of all that makes people suffer.

Friday, February 27

John 3:22-36

Jesus' Relationship with the broken

This passage speaks to us of the relationship between the bride and the bridegroom as characterizing Jesus relationship with the people, we must remember that in this passage when the term bride is used it refers to those who have been marginalized by the system of purity and pollution. The immediate context of our text is that some people had come to speak to John the Baptist regarding the rules of purification. It is in the course of this conversation that John speaks to them about Jesus. The background must have been the fact that Jesus subverted rules regarding purity and pollution. It is the context of this subversion of the rules of purity and pollution that Jesus is referred to as the bridegroom. The bride in the text refers to the people and it is Jesus who has the people, the common folk, those who are broken by the system of purity and pollution with him. It is only later that the same metaphor was used of the church. Here we consider the relationship between the Jesus and the broken in terms of intimacy, companionship and care.

Intimacy: Perhaps the most intimate of all relationships is the relationship between the bride and the bridegroom. And it is in the context of this intimacy that each becomes vulnerable to the other, opening ones self to the other. We have already noticed that the metaphor of the bride and the bridegroom in this text is used in the context of the discourse on purity and pollution, where Jesus is seen to have subverted this discourse by not following the prescribed ritual practices. But when we look at the question of intimacy as characterizing the role between the bride and the bridegroom we find that Jesus also shares in the pollution of the bride. God does not distance Godself from the locus of pollution but rather is seen to share an intimate relationship with it. It is this relationship of intimacy that later is also used to characterize the relationship between Christ and the church.

Companionship: The relationship between the bride and the bridegroom is also one of companionship. Marriage is not intended to be a relationship of unequals, but a relationship of equals, of companions. In the sense that the metaphor is used in the passage it is clear that Jesus is a companion of the poor, sickness and dispossessed – those who were on the margins of the society in his time. He was in solidarity with them. This image can also be translated to speak of Christ and the church, where Christ is seen to accompany the church in its struggle to establish the kingdom of God on earth.

Care: Lastly we find that care characterizes the relationship between the bridegroom and the bride. This is not the kind of care that is suffocating, rather it is a kind of care that releases the other into freedom. This is also the relationship that Jesus shares with the marginalized, yes he cares for them, but not in a way that creates dependency but in a way that empowers them and sets them free. We see that this is also the way that Christ relates to the church today.

The relationship of the bridegroom to the church is characterized by intimacy, companionship and care.

Saturday, February 28

John 4:1-26

Restoration of the broken

The conversation between the Samaritan Woman and Jesus is one in which we find that the Samaritan woman is restored to fullness of life. We find here a woman who because she was a Samaritan was excluded by the Jews but also the fact that she was a woman was excluded by her own community. Here is a woman who is broken by the oppressive structures of her time. Yet we find that in this conversation Jesus opens her up and she becomes one who takes the gospel to. If we read the text closely we find that the encounter with Jesus restores the woman with herself, her personal relationships and opens up a way of the restoration of her community with the Jews.

Restoring herself: It is obvious that the woman has a low self-image. Her arrival at the well at noon, a time when people do not normally go to collect water indicates to us that she is one who would prefer to stay away from public eye. Systems of purity and pollution on which she found herself on the wrong side of in terms of gender and community had probably really broken her. Yet we find that in the course of the conversation with Jesus she is one who really opens up. In his conversation with her Jesus treats her like a person, an experience which she probably never had before, with everyone treating her as an object. And being treated as a person she is one who is able to open up and even argue with Jesus. There is a lot of friendly banter going on between the two of them, and in the conversation we find that the woman is able to overcome the brokenness that has resulted in loss of self-image and accept herself for what she is. Her sense of self is restored.

Restoring Personal relationships: Further in the conversation with Jesus we gather that she is also one who has had five husbands and that the man she was living with was not her husband. In the culture at the time of Jesus it was not possible for a woman to divorce her husband rather only a man could divorce a woman, therefore we find that this woman was one who had been really exploited by men. Yet the conversation with Jesus opens her up to her community as well, to those who had probably ostracized her as being a 'sinful' woman she is able to go back and proclaim the good news of the kingdom. What is significant however is that her community listen to her and also come to Jesus for their own healing. The text indicates to us that this woman is restored to her community. The encounter with Jesus leads to the restoration of personal relationships.

Restoring Community Relationships: Jesus in this story however does not only stop at restoring people and personal relationships but also indicates that community conflict can be restored. The fundamental difference between the Jews and the Samaritans surrounded the issue of difference of worship. Jesus however indicates that in worship the place is not as important as worshipping

God in spirit and in truth. He looks forward to a time when this will happen and the communities will be restored to each other.

The encounter with Jesus restores us, personally, in our personal relationships and as a community.

An introduction to the coming week

The trafficking of human beings, modern-day slavery, is a multi-dimensional threat that deprives men, women and children both in the United States and around the world of their human rights. This global scourge increases health risks and fuels the growth of organized crime. Since 2006 when the Presbyterian General Assembly spoke out about child sex trafficking, Presbyterian Mission Agency and Office of the General Assembly staff have been working together to coordinate their work. With the 2008 General Assembly action calling for an expanded focus on human trafficking, The Human Trafficking Roundtable was constituted. The Roundtable is made up of staff persons from the ministries throughout the Church. The Roundtable has been working collaboratively to expand the church's ministry with and advocacy against human trafficking, meeting regularly both to coordinate the efforts of individual offices and to plan joint efforts around trafficking. Below is information about specific office's work to stop trafficking in persons.

Scripture quotations for the week are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, are copyrighted © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission.

Sunday, March 1

“One must never forget that slaves are first and foremost people. Their lives are filled with sorrow and injustice. . . but also. . .they are touched with humor and joy. Just like regular people. Just like free people.” –Richard Holbrook

Planning for Worship

As you plan for a service of worship to raise awareness on this important issue, please note the following:

- When we consider the complexity of human trafficking, it is easy to despair. The problem is so huge that nothing less than a total recalibration of our global economy seems required, which may be why jubilee and Sabbath years were declared necessary by God (See Lev. 25). All of us are part of unjust systems of commerce and exploitative patterns of life that feed human trafficking. But recognizing this can also give us a place to begin working with God to build relationships, policies, and practices that make us accountable to one another and help us love our neighbor in all that we do.
- Consider how to frame this issue in such a way that the full humanity of trafficked persons, not just their vulnerability, is expressed. Print the quotation from Richard Holbrook in the worship bulletin so that persons may use it for reflection as they prepare for worship.
- In concert with the pastor, sessions/councils are encouraged to think ahead of time about ways to embody the Word that will be preached so that we not only pray for an end to human trafficking; we also work toward this end as Christ’s ambassadors. Provide opportunities for congregants to sign up for concrete action against human trafficking as they leave to serve the world. See the resources on www.pcusa.org/humantrafficking for suggestions of possible actions.
- The voices that will be heard in the Readers’ Theatre represent a compilation of the experiences of real persons who have been trafficked, some from the annual Trafficking in Persons Reports and others from the records of organizations engaged in work against human trafficking. In some cases, their experiences are quite graphic. Plan to use this piece when young children are not present, and alert parents of older children in advance that their children may have questions.
- Presbyterians Against Domestic Violence (PADVN), a network of the Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association (PHEWA), has produced its 2011 Domestic Violence Awareness Packet on the intersection of domestic violence and human trafficking. It includes helpful resources for addressing the issue. Download this packet at www.pcusa.org/phewa/padvn. One particularly relevant resource that provides a process for exploring biblical texts using the lens of human trafficking is “Bible Study - Using the Stories of our Faith” by the Rev. Nancy K. Troy.
- For the Prayers of Intercession, it is suggested to set up prayer stations with stories of persons who have been trafficked. You can find such

stories and photos in the annual Trafficking in Persons Report issued each year by the U.S. Department of State at www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/index.htm.

CALL TO WORSHIP from Isaiah 35:10, Ps. 95:1

Come, you ransomed of the LORD. Return and come into God's presence with songs and everlasting joy upon your head. Here you shall obtain joy and gladness and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Come, let us let us sing to the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.

HYMN

"Come All You People"
2274 STF

READERS' THEATRE

To underscore the concept that trafficked persons are people just like us, with their own foibles, hopes and dreams, ask readers to intersperse themselves among the worshipers in the congregation, rising just before they read their assigned part and remaining standing as others read.

Liturgist: As we join together in this place to worship, others are enslaved, some to provide our comfort. Will we not look and listen?

Voice 1: I signed up to be a domestic worker in a foreign country where I could earn more in a year than I could in a lifetime in my country. But once there, my passport was taken. I had no time off. I was beaten almost daily, thrown down the stairs, and nearly choked to death. The hospital helped me escape when I tried to commit suicide.

All Readers' Voices: Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.

Voice 2: I was nine when my father sold me for the equivalent of 100 US dollars to a lady who told me I was going to a special place to live in a big house with pretty things. I was excited. I'd never ridden on a bus or seen a car, and I was going to the big city. But when I got there, there was only a dark, dirty place. The lady told me what she wanted me to do, and I said no. Then a man came and beat me for three days. They didn't feed me. I was hungry, and I wanted to go home. I prayed, but the lady said my prayers aren't heard. It turns out she was right. When I contracted AIDS a few years later, I was thrown out on the street. I died at 16.

All Readers' Voices: Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.

Voice 3: I was sold by my boyfriend of two years.

Voice 4: I was sold by my spouse.

Voice 5: I just went to a sleepover with a friend whose parent drugged me and sold me to be repeatedly gang raped. My parents found me before I was to be sold to a Texan for \$300,000.

All Readers' Voices: Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.

Voice 6: The soldiers came and killed my family when I was 12. They found me shaking in a corner and gave me pills they said would make me feel better. They did, but they made me crazy, too. The soldiers took me and fed me and gave me more pills. They taught me how to kill people. I didn't like doing this, but if I didn't, they would kill me, like they did my friend who was hacked to death by a machete right before my eyes when he refused to rape and kill his own sister.

All Readers' Voices: Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.

Voice 7: I dig through the mud in riverbeds to find the ore for what you call smart phones and computers. Because I'm only 11, I can crawl through the tunnels to where the best ore can be found. The problem is, the tunnels collapse and kill people. But the soldiers with guns make us work and take what we find. Sometimes they pay us. Mostly, they let us live.

All Readers' Voices: Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.

Voice 1: I was only eight years old when my family sent me to work in a brick kiln. After ten years of hard labor, I moved to another kiln, accepting an advance of \$150 to meet my immediate needs. But the owner inflated my debt through fraudulent fees and forced me into servitude to pay off an insurmountable debt, and I worked for fifteen more years before local officials intervened to obtain my freedom.

All Readers' Voices: Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.

Voice 1: I work 20 hours a day in Beverly Hills sewing clothes with labels that say "Made in the USA." Sometimes I get a day off, and I can see my children.

Voice 2: I work 200 hours a week in a restaurant in Detroit in exchange for a cot in the basement. I don't speak your language well, but I can't talk to you if you try to engage me in friendly conversation. My boss is always watching. If I try to escape, I don't know what will happen to me. So I don't try.

Voice 3: I don't go to school so I can pick cotton.

Voice 4: I'm forced to make bricks.

Voice 5: Weave rugs

Voice 6: Work on farms.

Voice 7: Catch fish.

All Readers' Voices: Don't you see us? We're everywhere. Don't you care?

The following are to be said quickly by the different voices without pauses between voices:

Voice 1: We make your beds in hotels.

2: We serve your food in restaurants.

3: We sew your clothes.

4: We make your shoes.

5: We harvest your food.

6: We provide materials for your electronics.

7: We mine your diamonds,

3: your gold,

4: your silver,

5: your copper.

All Readers' Voices: We're everywhere. Don't you see us? Don't you care?

All Readers' Voices: Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.

Silence

A Kyrie may be sung here as a lament, crying for the Lord's mercy for the whole world.

Liturgist: Let us pray together. Eternal God, our judge and redeemer, we confess that we have tried to hide from you, for we have done wrong. We have lived for ourselves, and apart from you. We have turned from our neighbors, and refused to bear the burdens of others. We have ignored the pain of the world, and passed

by the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed. In your great mercy forgive our sins and free us from selfishness, that we may choose your will and obey your commandments; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

ASSURANCE: (from Exodus 3:7-8)

Then the Lord said, "I have seen the misery of the people in bondage. I have heard their cries under the taskmasters. Indeed, I know their suffering, And I have come to deliver them." The Lord has sent you to proclaim release to the captives. In the name of Jesus Christ, We are set free, free to love, free to serve, free to set others free.

Thanks be to God!

HYMN

"Glory to God"

2033 STF

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

Old Testament

The prophets assure us of God's saving action amidst exile and oppression, which invite our response:

Isaiah 40:1-5, 27-31; Isaiah 51:11; Isaiah 61:1-4; Isaiah 65:17-32; Jeremiah 6:13-15; Micah 6:3-8

New Testament

Jesus renews God's covenant, exhorting us to love God and neighbour:

Matthew 5:1-16; Matthew 22:34-40; Luke 4:16-20; John 15:12-17

Epistles

The apostle Paul encourages followers of Jesus to show loving kindness and respect to all:

Romans 12:9-21; Galatians 3:27-29

James and John remind us that our faith must be lived and that we should not fear:

James 2:14-26; 1 John 4:16b-21

Also see the suggested biblical narratives and a process for exploring them in “Bible Study -Using the Stories of our Faith” by the Rev. Nancy K. Troy. This resource is a part of the PADVN packet.

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

For smaller congregations: Around your worship space, post stories and pictures of people caught in human trafficking, like the saints in stained glass windows in cathedrals.

For larger congregations: Post these in the narthex and have tables set up for people to engage in mission advocating for those caught in the web of human trafficking.

Option 1: Make a paper chain that goes all around the room beneath the pictures. Attach each loop to the wall and have people tear one of the loops in the chain as their prayer for that person at each station.

Option 2: Have people walk around in silence, reading the various stories. They may write prayers or prayer requests on 3 x 5 cards. Collect these cards to be read during the following time of prayer.

When all are finished, invite worshipers to lift up prayer requests either silently or aloud. The liturgist may read written prayer requests during this time, too.

Join together in the following responsive prayer:

Break all the chains that hold your children in bondage to sin, whether these be political, social, economic, ethnic, cultural, religious, familial or personal.

Lord in your mercy,

Liberate.

Almighty God, you have shared your power for good with us. Judge those who abuse power.

Grant your wisdom to all who have authority over others that they may lead in accord with your way of shalom for all people. Lord, in your mercy,

Empower.

Holy Lord, you have called your people to embody Christ’s ministry here on earth. Help your church be vigilant for those in need of your freedom and give us the courage to act as your agents of liberation. Lord, in your mercy,

Encourage.

God of Compassion, there are others in bondage to bodies breaking down, so we pray for your healing for those who are also on our hearts this day. {During the silence, lift up your prayer requests either silently or aloud.} Lord, in your mercy,

Heal.

Hear all these prayers, and further them in accord with your will, that your name may be glorified in all the earth. Show each of us how you want us to be a part of the answer to these prayers, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

OFFERING

You may wish to designate a portion of the offering to help victims of human trafficking. One option is, an account that facilitates the work of the Human Trafficking Roundtable of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to lift up the issue of modern-day slavery, provides resources, advocates for further action to eradicate human trafficking and facilitates human trafficking awareness trainings with presbyteries. (E052101)

HYMN

“Live into Hope”

332 PH

CHARGE from Gal. 5:17

It was for freedom that Christ set us free--not just for our freedom, but for all people's.

Therefore keep standing firm and do not allow slavery to be master over anyone ever again

BLESSING

May God who created all for good, Christ who liberated all, and the Holy Spirit who empowers and guides us into all truth overshadow and keep you in God's glory, wisdom, and power now and forevermore. Amen.

STF=Sing the Faith

PH=The Presbyterian Hymnal

Monday, March 2

Daily Readings for Monday, March 2, 2015

Morning Psalms 119:73-80; 145

First Reading Jeremiah 1:11-19

Second Reading Romans 1:1-15

Gospel Reading John 4:27-42

Evening Psalms 121; 6

Marta grew up in the highlands of Guatemala where her family struggled to put food on the table. One day a visitor came and offered to help her parents by taking Marta to the United States where she could get a job as a model and send money back to support the family. A few weeks later Marta was on the way to the U.S. But Marta didn't get that job as a model. Instead, when she got close to the U.S. border she was taken to a house where she was forced to have sex with different men, one after another. A few days later, after they crossed the border, she was locked in an apartment with other women where the human trafficking continued.

This past year over 60,000 children from Central America made their way to the United States in search of family, safety and a future. In many cases, their parents put their trust in smugglers to take their children to the U.S. For all these children, the journey was dangerous—facing attacks by gangs and other criminals, accidents and harsh weather conditions. Although the exact number is not known, some of these children have become victims of human trafficking. In addition to those trafficked from their home, unaccompanied children are at great risk of human trafficking during their migration. Kidnapped or sold by their smuggler along the way, they are placed into many types of forced labor in Mexico and the United States.

Marta was eventually rescued by U.S. law enforcement when they raided the apartment where she was being held. Because Marta was only 16 years old, she was placed in a special program for child victims of human trafficking where she could receive the love and support she desperately needed. Her foster family kept her safe from her traffickers and helped her reclaim her life. Through a special visa for trafficking victims, Marta was able to stay in the United States.

In this time of Lent, we remember Jesus's time alone in the wilderness. Today, many children and young women face their own wilderness experiences, alone, in the hands of human traffickers. As we support efforts to rescue children, like Marta, from human traffickers, we also pray that God will give them strength and hope as they wait until they find their way free.

A prayer for the trafficked (Based on Psalm 121)

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?

Their families do not know where they are. They know no one to call out to for help.

My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

In the darkness of night, they cannot sleep because of the fear and the shame.

You, O Lord, are the only one to keep me company in the darkness. Because you are with me, I am not alone.

As they continue their journey north, they face harsh conditions.

Keep me safe, O Lord. Be my shade to protect me from the harsh desert sun by day and wrap me in your arms at night to keep me warm.

Rescue me from these people who have tricked my family, who treat me like their property. They tell me that if I run away or tell someone, they will have me arrested and deported. Only you, Lord, can help me find a way out of here.

My life is in your hands.

For all who have been trafficked and wait in hope, may they be comforted that the Lord, our God is watching over them. And may we pray with them:

The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore.

Amen.

Tuesday, March 3

Morning Psalms 34; 146

First Reading Jeremiah 2:1-13, 29-32

Second Reading Romans 1:16-25

Gospel Reading John 4:43-54

Evening Psalms 25; 91

Ana's Psalm

Police officer Bradley drove down a long dark stretch of rural road that he had driven down a million times before. This time he saw something he had never seen before, the figure of a small girl crouching in the overgrowth at the side of the road. Officer Bradley doubled back to the place where he saw the figure, certain he would find he was imagining things, but he wasn't. There crouched Ana, fifteen years old, crying and bleeding and speaking a language he did not know.

How did she get here? Who had harmed her?

What Officer Bradley and the family court staff of that small county would soon learn is that she came to the United States from Guatemala weeks before. Her grandmother paid coyotes to smuggle her into the United States to be reunited with her father. Instead, she was forced to work on a small farm in a remote, rural area of the United States far away from her dreams of her father.

I often wonder about the many Ana's in the world and what they pray when they are captive, humiliated, and abused. Which of our faith ancestors' stories give Ana comfort and which make her feel abandoned?

Spend a moment in silence thinking of Ana.

Read Psalm 34 and Psalm 25 aloud. If you are with a friend, take turns reading and then discuss and reflect together the Psalm you imagine Ana would take comfort in and why. If you are alone, please journal about which Psalm would be Ana's Psalm.

Prayer:

Loving God, remind us in moments of certainty of the times we were not so certain of your presence. Help us to find others and ourselves in the stories of your people in all places and all times.

Amen.

Wednesday, March 4

Morning Psalms 5; 147:1-11

First Reading Jeremiah 3:6-18

Second Reading Romans 1:(26-27) 28-2:11

Gospel Reading John 5:1-18

Evening Psalms 27; 51

Reflection from the Gospel Reading:

Imagine lying, infirm, on a mat for 38 years. Imagine lying there, feeling sick and barely able to move, all the while believing the thing that would make you well lie a mere few feet away. You see your salvation and cannot get to it. It might feel like a second curse; the first curse being the illness, and the second being the promise of deliverance that is just beyond you.

Now imagine living in such deep poverty that you cannot feed, clothe, and shelter yourself or your family. Imagine the feeling of hopelessness and fear. And then there comes a promise of salvation from a person offering a job in a far away place. This job offers good pay for hard work. It will be enough to build a life and a future for yourself and your family. Though the journey sounds daunting, it can't be any more difficult than the life you are living. So you go. When you arrive, though, the promise of a new and better life disappears. Your passport is taken. You are forced to work long hours in the field. You don't receive the pay you were promised and you can't even speak the language of this far off land in order to complain. This, too, feels like a second curse.

In 2010, staff of the guest worker recruiting firm, Global Horizons, were charged with luring impoverished workers from Thailand with the promise of good jobs and a secure economic future in the produce fields of the United States. But when the workers arrived, what they found, instead, were long and brutal days of work with little or no pay. This is too often the reality for migrant workers. They leave difficult circumstances for the promise of a good future, but once they arrive those hopes are dashed and they find themselves taken advantage of, isolated, and without help. This type of coercion is a type of human trafficking. These trafficked persons, like the man on his mat, they suffer in silence with the tools for their deliverance seemingly just out of reach.

Into this suffering, however, Jesus speaks a word of Good News. The answer is not to wait for a miracle from outside, but to stand up, in faith, and be made well. Organizations of farm workers, like the Coalition of Immokalee workers in Florida are standing up as workers to demand fair pay and fair working conditions for themselves. They have pulled themselves off the mat and are giving hope and help to other farm workers in the process. For those of us who are not farm workers, they are showing us how to bring about God's justice in the restaurants and grocery stores where we shop and eat. They are shining the light on the problem of wage theft and human trafficking in the food system. As the result of this work, three staff members of Global Horizons pled guilty to conspiracy to violate the forced labor statute. As people of faith, we stand with

the laborers in the fields who are standing up for themselves, claiming the justice and healing that Jesus speaks.

Prayer:

God of healing, cure our food system of trafficking and wage theft. Guide, protect, and sustain the workers as they seek your justice. Help us to stand and walk along side those who suffer in a system of exploitation and deception. Together, by the power of your Holy Spirit, may we bring about the end of these practices. Amen.

Thursday, March 5

Morning Psalms 27; 147:12-20
First Reading Jeremiah 4:9-10, 19-28
Second Reading Romans 2:12-24
Gospel Reading John 5:19-29
Evening Psalms 126; 102

Read Psalm 27

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life of whom shall I be afraid?

The images of the Psalmist are fearful and grim: evildoers assailing and devouring flesh; armies encamping and wars rising up; adversaries surrounding and imposing ill-will; false witnesses rising up and breathing violence. Trapped in such circumstances, the accompanying cries are clearly from one who is desperate: "Hear me, hide me, conceal me, do not forsake me, give me up or cast me out!" It is not inconceivable to imagine this psalm as the voice of one who is being trafficked.

What is perhaps most remarkable is the reservoir of steadfast hope and confidence that is conveyed right alongside the cries: qualities like strength and goodness; images like light and salvation, experiences like beholding the beauty of the Lord, living in the house of the Lord, seeing God's face and sitting high atop a rock. There is a remarkable and resilient hope to the Psalmist in the midst of a desolate and despairing situation.

This is one of those hybrid psalms that combines praise, lament and petition. It chronicles a dire situation, seeks divinely-inspired interventions and praises the unwavering, ever-present goodness of God: three worthwhile endeavors for the church to consider in our shared work to end human trafficking. We must continue to lament, to notice and name, the dire situation of modern day slavery in all its forms and places. We must plead for and engage in divinely-inspired interventions, creatively and effectively working with governments and law enforcement to strengthen and enforce laws that prohibit trafficking and sexual exploitation; providing compassionate and effective support and care to victims. And we must remember and never forget to proclaim that God's intention for all of humanity is one of goodness, dignity and fullness of life.

Action:

Take time to find and read one new story of human trafficking. Consider the divinely-inspired steps you could take to combat this reality. Rest in the assurance of God's good intention for all humankind.

Prayer:

God of all salvation, of both captor and captive, we pray for freedom for women, men and children trafficked for profit and pleasure in our own land and around the world. We pray for comfort and protection for the families of those trafficked, living with uncertainty and even fear of their own physical harm or intimidation.

We pray for transformation of both the traffickers who use force, fraud or coercion to make profits, and of the industries that benefit from the commodification and exploitation of your children. We pray for wisdom among governments, including our own, that they would enact laws and abide by international conventions and protocols protecting and preserving the dignity and human rights of all. And we pray for energy for ourselves, that we may remain steadfast in our efforts to end human trafficking. May we live into the hope of a day when captives are free and modern day slavery ends at last. Amen.

Friday, March 6

Morning Psalms 22; 148

First Reading Jeremiah 5:1-9

Second Reading Romans 2:25-3:18

Gospel Reading John 5:30-47

Evening Psalms 105; 130

Lydia finally escaped. From the Philippines, she had come to the United States as a volunteer with her church's religious mission. At first, she did fundraising work for the church but, after two years, Lydia was sent to New Jersey to serve as a church secretary. Instead, she found herself working as a nanny and domestic worker for one of the church families. She was told that taking care of the family's three young children was her "special mission."

The family kept Lydia's passport and other papers. She slept in the same room with the children and was required to be available to them twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Given no days off, she was not allowed to attend worship, and wasn't even free to leave the house. "I was humiliated," she says, "and threatened."

After three miserable years of servitude, for which she was paid a total of \$200, Lydia finally was able to escape.

Several years earlier, Linda, also a Filipino, had come to the United States seeking a better job so that she could send her two children to college. Despite her college education and fourteen years of professional work in the Philippines, she was only able to find work as a live-in nanny and housekeeper. Linda learned quickly that working conditions for Filipino domestic workers included extremely long hours of work, wage-and-hour violations, and a lack of respect. Additionally, the lack of labor standards and regulations made the domestic workers even more vulnerable. "But," Linda notes, "all this barely prepared me for the depth and scale of the abuses and exploitation I found as a live-in nanny and housekeeper."

"My faith and determination became hope," says Linda, "when I found other Filipino women domestic workers who wanted to take action to improve our lives. My hope became reality when Self-Development of People, a ministry of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), awarded us \$85,000 to support our program for three years."

Self-Development of People, a ministry of the Presbyterian Church's One Great Hour of Sharing, makes dreams come true for people contending with poverty, both in the United States and in several other regions of the world. To be funded, a project must be presented, owned, and controlled by an economically poor community group that will benefit directly from their work together.

The Filipino domestic workers used the Self-Development of People grant to begin a grassroots non-profit organization, which they named Damayan Migrant

Workers Association. (Damayan is a Filipino word that means “helping each other).” Today, domestic workers run Damayan’s core programs addressing the labor, health and gender problems and needs of their members and community. They have a workers’ rights program where they organize monthly legal clinics and where they enable workers to claim their unpaid wages. Damayan’s health program trains their members on the rights of the uninsured and how to navigate the health care system in New York and New Jersey. The organization’s gender rights program teaches members how to identify, prevent and protect victims of sexual harassment and discrimination and domestic violence. “Alongside our core programs,” Linda comments, “we make sure that our members are able to help themselves and other sister domestic workers.”

In 2012, Damayan received additional funding from Self-Development of People which they used to start a new project, Baklas (Break Free) from Labor Trafficking and Modern Day Slavery Project. Through Baklas, trafficked workers are able to heal themselves and to learn how to identify and use available legal and support services. After Lydia escaped, she became involved with Baklas (Break Free) which, she declares, “started my whole process of healing, transformation and empowerment. In 2011, my T (Trafficking) Visa was approved.”

While life improves for the women involved in Damayan and Baklas (Break Free), there are countless other Filipino workers being trafficked. Because of the global economic crisis, Damayan reports, “There is a stronger push for foreign workers from poor countries like the Philippines to migrate and go to more advanced countries like the United States to look for jobs. In the Philippines, many are leaving every day; ninety percent of them are women and seventy percent of these women become domestic workers, or hotel and restaurant workers, in countries like the United States.”

Let us pray for them, and work together to end the horrific human trafficking that is far too prevalent in our world.

Let us pray:

God of compassion, peace, and justice, we pray for our brothers and sisters, both around the world and here in our country, who are being exploited as trafficked domestic workers. Send your Spirit to them, give them courage and fortitude, and call them out of bondage. Amen.

Saturday, March 7

Morning Psalms 43; 149

First Reading Jeremiah 5:20-31

Second Reading Romans 3:19-31

Gospel Reading John 7:1-13

Evening Psalms 31; 143

Reflection 1

Monica left her tiny, dirt-floor home on an island a few stops from Manila to pursue her dream. She wanted to help her family rise out of poverty. She deeply loved her family and community and felt a strong personal and societal pull to take good care of them as they aged. One in three Filipinos has family members working overseas, sending money back home. Because there were no jobs on her island, Monica was leaving to join the work force—and at 20, she was ready for an adventure.

When she deplaned in Malaysia, her passport was taken and she was brought to a warehouse where she would live with hundreds of other girls who were recruited under the guise of being a “guest relations officer.” “They taught me how to drink alcohol,” she said in tears. “If we didn’t service 21 men a night, we couldn’t eat the next day.”

It took three months for Monica to tell her mother. She didn’t want to worry her. It took a year longer to bring Monica back home, back to the village, to her parents and other family members longing to rise from the dark places of poverty.

The government would not help because Monica was over 18. By the grace of God, Migrante, a partner of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, took on Monica’s case. But not without a fatal cost. On the day one of the advocates was to testify in Malaysian court, he was murdered. When Monica left the brothel where she had been forced to work, there were still around 1,000 Filipinas still working there. The love and compassion of Christ is incarnated every day through the work of Migrante.

Prayer 1

For the hungry, the children, the women, the societies, and all who are vulnerable to sex trafficking, we ask that you, God, trouble us into actions of justice and mercy. Shine your light in and through us so that we may become the refuge of the refugee, the freedom-makers of the oppressed, the vindicator of the innocent, the lovers of those who feel shamed and alone. In the name of the love that will never let us go, we pray.

Reflection 2

In August 2011, Nadine Hill and another volunteer were assigned playground duty at a small neighborhood ministry just east of downtown Indianapolis. They

were caring for about 12 children one afternoon, and Nadine was particularly interested in a group of three girls playing with Barbie dolls under a large, flowering bush. They reminded her of her own young granddaughters. Suddenly, there was a ruckus on the other side of the playground. She and her colleague glanced away for just a moment; when they turned back, one of the little girls was missing. They looked everywhere, asked everyone, to no avail. Several months later, they learned that the little girl's 14-year-old cousin had taken her and sold her to a pimp for \$1,200. Tamika was nine years old. She has never been found. They believe she was trafficked out of state.

After praying, meditating, discerning and asking a lot of questions, Nadine decided that she had to do something about this very real horror. In February 2012, she founded the Ecumenical Women's Coalition Against Human Trafficking–Restoring Hope, which focuses on reaching out into the community to help girls at risk of being prostituted and possibly trafficked. Someday, with the help of generous donors, Nadine hopes her group will also be able to focus on rescue and healing of girls who have been trafficked.

In the meantime, Nadine continues to lobby, speak, hold trunk shows to raise funds, reach out to girls and women in prostitution and search for donors able to help EWCA Human Trafficking–Restoring Hope realize its goals of preventing and treating victims of human trafficking.

Prayer 2

God of comfort and light, we pray for those who are impoverished and seeking security, for girls who are vulnerable and easily fooled by those seeking to exploit their needs for worth, security and work. Give strength and courage to those who seek to lead the innocent to safety, who labor to rescue the oppressed, vindicate the innocent, and heal those injured in body and spirit. We give you thanks for those doing your work of love and healing. Again, in the name of the love that will never let us go, we pray.

This story originally appeared in the January/February 2014 issue of *Horizons*, the magazine for Presbyterian Women. Read the rest of the story on Presbyterian Women's justice and peace blog at pwpcusa.typepad.com/jandp.

An introduction to the coming week

Background on South Africa and Human Trafficking

Human Trafficking is a worldwide phenomenon and problem that manifests itself in many different forms. Human trafficking takes place and affects people across all cultures, races, nationalities, as well as social and economical classes. South Africa is no exception, with people being trafficked and dehumanized on a daily basis. In the next few days we will look at a few stories from the South African context to shed some light on this growing problem. These stories will give you a peek into the dark and tragic world of human trafficking, helping you to identify similar (or maybe completely different) stories of human trafficking in your own contexts. Even if you are unaware of human trafficking in your context, there are many of these stories that happen all around the world, including your context—each day! Only when we become aware of these stories can we fight against the systems, contributing to the trafficking of women, children and men—only then can we bring hope and restore human dignity in both our own lives and the lives of people being trafficked.

South Africa is widely regarded as a developing country, where poverty and unemployment is an enormous and growing problem. The apartheid era resulted in daunting economic and social problems that still prevail today after 21 years of democracy. South Africa is a country broken by the apartheid regime, poverty and injustice. South Africa is also a source, transit and destination country for human trafficking, where men, women and children are trafficked within the country itself from poor, rural areas to urban centres like Johannesburg and Cape Town. Young girls and women are trafficked for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation and domestic servitude; boys trafficked for forced street vending, food service, begging, crime and agriculture.

INTRODUCTION

The theme of this Lent initiative is 'Broken for You'... derived from the text in Luke 22: 19. In this text Jesus shares the Eucharist with His disciples, with the words: "This is my body, which is broken for you, do this in remembrance of me...". The title of the fourth week of Lent is *Laetare*, which means "rejoice."

SYMBOL:

The symbol of a white candle with barbed wire wrapped around it can be used throughout the week. This is a symbol that had its origin in the apartheid era in South Africa. The barbed wire around the candle represented the hurt, pain and destruction caused by apartheid, while the white candle represented the presence of God amidst the hurt that so many people experienced. This symbol can be used throughout this week of Lent, where the barbed wire represents the hurt, pain, destruction and death caused by human trafficking. The candle represents God's presence amidst these circumstances and in the lives of people who fall victim to human trafficking.

Sunday, March 8

SERMON ILLUSTRATION

Introduction



Rembrandt The Levite Discovers the Body of His Dead Concubine, c.a. 1655/56.

We all know the saying: A picture is worth a thousand words. Our wedding pictures or the pictures of our firstborn's birth has the ability to bring back memories, emotions and feelings that we can sometimes not explain to anyone – not even in a thousand words.

The Rembrandt etching of the Levite finding his concubine, dead at the door of the house is also worth a thousand words – maybe a thousand of the opposite words that we would use to describe our wedding photos or photos of our child’s birth or other photos that bring back fond memories. Maybe a thousand words of anger, or pain, or disgust, or sadness. Maybe a thousand words of hopelessness. Maybe even just a thousand times ‘why?’.

The candle that is burning in the front of the church stems from the apartheid era in South-Africa, where the barbed wire symbolized the apartheid regime and the light of the candle God’s presence amidst the death caused by apartheid. The barbed wire can also, in the time of lent remind us of the thorn crown Jesus wore on the cross, where his body was broken for us. Today the barbed wire represents the hurt and pain and anguish experienced by victims of human trafficking, whose bodies are daily, continually, with no stop broken over and over again. Just like the concubine who was raped over and over again throughout the night these people’s bodies are today also broken over and over again. The light then represents God’s presence amidst these circumstances – the presence of God, even in our darkest hours.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent, called Laetare, which means “rejoice”. With this meaning and the light of the candle kept in mind, the following questions arise: How can we rejoice after reading a text like this? How can we rejoice with the realization that people’s bodies are broken in our context as well? How can we rejoice when with so many stories of nameless people, similar to that of the concubine, everywhere around us? How can we rejoice when the world is broken? How can we light the candle when the barbed wire around it seems so prominent – when we can hardly see the light amidst the darkness and death around us? Where is God amongst so much pain and hurt? Where is God for people caught up in human trafficking?

Narrative and Background of the text

The narrative of this text is in itself powerful and has a striking affect. The aim of the story of the Levite and his concubine is to shock and to motivate people to take action – to “consider it, take counsel and speak out” (19:30). The next elements with regards to the context and background of the text need to be considered when preparing the sermon:

1. The place of women in the Ancient Near Eastern context. Women were seen as nothing more than mere objects and commodities, used to benefit the men in their lives (Their fathers and husbands)
2. The threats that the Levite and his concubine would have faced on their journey, including wild animals and thieves.
3. The unwritten rules of hospitality that existed towards strangers that entailed that a stranger would be given shelter, food and safety for a fair amount of time. As we will see later however these rules of hospitality protected some (men) more than others (women).

It still happens today

The brutality evident in the text, should not be seen as confined to the text and the Ancient Near Eastern context – this brutality can be seen everywhere around us, today in our context as well. The nameless concubine in this text should be seen as a metaphor for all the nameless people who endure private abuse and suffering on a daily basis in our contexts and societies. The term ‘human trafficking’ and the brutality of this text can mislead people to think that we, as “normal” congregants and children of God are not affected by it. This is however not true. Not only do we often have victims of human trafficking, brutality, sexual abuse, violence and objectification within our midst, but “normal” church people are often accomplices in the system that creates and maintains human trafficking and the objectification of persons.

The Levite was supposed to be a holy man, who had dedicated his service to the Lord. This also reminds us of the parable of the Good Samaritan. The two “church” men – the Levite and the priest – simply passed by the beaten man next to the road. In a similar way the Levite simply stepped over the body of his concubine with the words “get up, we are going.”

What is your role in human trafficking?

In the words of Desmond Tutu, a South African social rights activist and retired Anglican bishop, who received a Nobel Prize for peace for his role in the opposition to apartheid in South Africa: “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”

The words of Desmond Tutu make it clear that it is not only those who are physically abusive or pay for sexual favours, are accomplices in human trafficking and are guilty. His words, in fact, bring the word “human trafficking” a lot closer to our own lives. The moment that we don’t do anything to help the victims of human trafficking we are also accomplices and form part of the guilty party. The moment that we as Christians and the church of Christ and members of society find ourselves to be silent in the face of these inhumane situations, we are also accomplices in human trafficking. The moment that we don’t help to paint a positive, hopeful picture, we are also accomplices – even when we are not the ones who physically force people into human trafficking or pay for sexual favours. We read in Matthew 25: 40: “...Truly, I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mind, you did for me.”

In the Ancient Near Eastern context, where women had less rights than men and was considered as the property of their fathers or husbands, heterosexual rape was considered as less of an offense compared to homosexual rape. The man also considered his responsibility as host (the safety of his male guest) as more important than the honour of his daughter and the Levite’s concubine. (19: 23: “...Since this man is my guest, don’t do this outrageous thing...”). The man, who hosted the Levite and concubine, was following the rules of hospitality, set out by the community and society, when he offered his virgin daughter and the Levite’s

concubine to the perverted men of the city, preventing them from having intercourse with the Levite.

According to these rules and norms of society he therefore reacted in the proper manner towards the request of the men. In the Ancient Near Eastern context society therefore prescribed that the safety of men should be protected, even when it means to do it at the cost of the more vulnerable people in society – in this case women (the concubine). It was the very rules and norms of hospitality that led to the rape and death of the concubine.

While some of us might be like the Levite in the text – people who literally exploit people and force them to be objects and commodities for their own gain, others are more like the neighbours of the old man where the Levite and his concubine resided. In fact, we don't even read anything about the neighbours in this text. Why don't they do anything to help the concubine? Did they not hear the pounding on the door, as well as the screams and cries of the concubine? Were they too scared to leave the safety of their own homes to stand up against these perverted and evil men? Did they approve of these men's' actions? Whether it was out of ignorance, a lack of knowledge or choice – the cries of the concubine was ignored and they stayed neutral while the elephant had its foot on the mouse's tail. For various reasons the cries of people caught up in human trafficking are today also ignored. What is the reason for us not helping our modern day concubines? We might pity the prostitutes, that we see on the street corners, while driving past and maybe even pray for the victims of human trafficking, but do we not often also ignore their plights and cries?

Human trafficking in all its different forms form a part of a bigger system where people in general are reduced to mere objects – an object to use to make money. In a similar way society tells us that people need to work unhealthy and ridiculous hours (to make others rich) and that we really can't do anything to escape from the rat race that we are all a part of. In a similar way society, today tells us that the rights and safety of some people are more important than the safety and rights of other people. Society often tells us that only educated people with a lot of money have a right to a proper legal system. Society tells us that only people with an education or certain occupations deserve a good salary. Society tells us that it is acceptable to see certain people – prostitutes, beggars, children etc. – as “not good enough”. Society tells us that victims of human trafficking did something to deserve their situation – they went out looking for trouble; the skirt she wore was too short; these children don't want to go to school etc. – and therefore they are not worthy of our time and don't need our help. The fight against human trafficking and the objectification of human beings entails more than just the abstinence of physically paying a prostitute for sexual favours or buying fair-trade food.

Israel's reaction

The realization of our own role in human trafficking and the reduction of people to mere objects can cause us to feel hopeless and numb. What can we as individuals do to change this?

In those days there were no formal legal structures, like today. Each family was responsible for some form of justice when violated. The Levites however had no inheritance in the Promised Land and therefore did not have the means to take revenge on those that wronged them. The Levite therefore cuts his concubine's body into twelve pieces to send to the tribes of Israel, as a message and to cause outrage. He needed the other tribe's help. The mere report of the woman's death would not have been enough to cause the needed reaction. The gruesome package that they, however received was more than enough to get the needed reaction out of them. Judges 19:30: *Everyone that saw it was saying to one another, "Such a thing has never been seen or done, not since the day the Israelites came up out of Egypt. Just imagine! We must do something! So speak up!"*

By doing this the Levite therefore made his own personal issue, an issue of the community and places the responsibility on the community to react on these evil deeds. The Levite realizes that he as an individual he can't do much to rectify what the evil, immoral men did (even though he was an accomplice). He therefore calls on the whole community to take action. In this way the life of the poor, unimportant concubine, who died a horrible death is being avenged. The irony is however that the violence against the woman is now being silenced by a series of wars in Chapter 20 that also leaves a blood trail behind. Israel's reaction to the news of the death and abuse of the concubine was, without a doubt, wrong and sinful. You can never fight fire with fire and rectify death with more death, or blood that was shed with more blood shedding.

How can we be light/life bearers and paint a different picture

The truth is however that we, as a community also have the responsibility to react to the stories and statistics on human trafficking. Human trafficking is an issue that can only be changed by a community. No individual person or organisation can make a lasting difference on their own - it is therefore not up to the government on their own, or up to the police on their own, or up to shelters and Non Profit Organisations on their own to make a difference. It is up to the community to bring hope in this hopeless situation. Together we can however change the world for good. It is up to the church – up to us – to paint a picture of life, instead of a picture of death like the picture depicted by Rembrandt's etching.

Jesus' decided to come to earth – to become a part of the chaotic situation of brokenness in the world. In fact... Jesus' own body was broken for us. By dying on the cross Jesus not only came to show us that he has empathy with our situations of brokenness. By Jesus' death and resurrection he made the impossible possible – life out of death. By doing this Jesus empowered each and every one of us to be a part of the impossible possibilities of life and hope amidst death and hopelessness. He empowers us to turn things around and bring hope, even when it seems impossible – because that's exactly what He did Himself.

We bring hope when we make our voices heard against human trafficking; we bring hope when we stand up against objectification in the work place; we bring

hope when we, as men, stop objectifying women's bodies in the media, in adverts, on television, in night clubs etc. We bring hope when we ... (The preacher can think of practical actions that people can take in their own context – organisations that they can become a part of etc.)

Conclusion

The Rembrandt etching of the Levite finding his concubine, dead at the door of the house and every other sad, horrible story of human trafficking are worth a thousand words – a thousand words of anger, or pain, or disgust, or sadness. But may our feelings and emotions of anger, pain, sadness, and disgust motivate us to bring hope. May our thousand whys? change into a thousand how's?. May we, as light bearers of God, as a community, as children of God, as church help to create a painting/etching and stories of life, to replace paintings/etchings and stories of death. It is up to us to paint/etch a picture that is worth a thousand words of hope.

Monday, March 9

- a) Light a candle with barbed wire wrapped around it.
- b) The light of the candle symbolizes God's presence and light in our lives and world–The God who is also present now.
- c) Relax all the muscles in your body. Start at your neck and work your way down to your toes, until all the muscles are relaxed. Focus on the candle and become aware of God's presence.
- d) We are currently in lent. This reminds us of Jesus' death and suffering on the cross.
- e) Lent also reminds us of the brokenness of the world, we live in. The barbed wire wrapped around the candle symbolizes this brokenness.
- f) Read Judges 19

Brokenness... A feeling and situation most of us know all too well. We often even bear the signs of brokenness in our own lives. We also don't have to look very far to see the brokenness in our own contexts – in the lives of the people around us. The TV, radio, newspapers, internet and media as a whole are full of stories and images of brokenness. The world and people are broken - broken by poverty, broken by injustice, broken by inequality, broken by exploitation, broken by death, broken by fear, broken by a lack of security and many individuals are broken by human trafficking – physically, emotionally and spiritually. Women, men and children's bodies and spirits are on a daily basis literally broken in the full sense of the word - torn apart, objectified and used to benefit a small minority.

- g) Discuss:
 - 1. How many characters can you identify in the text of Judges 19? Name them.
 - 2. With which one of these characters can you identify? Why?
 - 3. The barbed wire around the candle represents the brokenness in our lives and world. Where can you see brokenness in your life and the lives of the people around you?
 - 4. Think/Meditate about the words of Jesus to His disciples in Luke 22:19: *"This is my body, which is broken for you..."*
- h) Focus on the candle, representing God's presence, while you pray.

Tuesday, March 10

- a) Light a candle with barbed wire wrapped around it.
- b) The light of the candle symbolizes God's presence and light in our lives and world–The God who is also present now.
- c) Relax all the muscles in your body. Start at your neck and work your way down to your toes, until all your muscles are relaxed. Focus on the candle and become aware of God's presence.
- d) Read the story of Thandi, as it was told by Sonnika Gillespie, who works for Compassion Centre, a faith based community centre, where she is co-coordinator for the Ladies Arise Ministry and Outreach Program in the city centre of Pretoria.

It was one Saturday morning, when Sonnika received a phone call from Thandi. Thandi was crying and asking for help. She wanted Sonnika to meet her at a local shopping centre. When Sonnika arrived at the shopping centre, she saw that Thandi had bruises and was dirty with blood on her jacket.

Thandi was raised by her grandmother. She was only ten years old when her uncle raped her for the first time. She did not tell anyone. Soon she started to dislike school and decided not to attend classes anymore. Thandi moved to live with her mother in her teenage years, where she was molested by the many boyfriends her mother had. This time she decided to speak out and told her mother about what had happened. This was however all in vain. Her mother didn't want to believe her and started calling her terrible names. She even started to abuse Thandi by hitting her with a broomstick. According to Thandi her mother had to buy a new broom every week. Thandi started caring less and less. She started dating older men and lived on the street, where she started to use glue and benzene. A Nigerian man (a so-called "pimp") found Thandi and recruited her to work for him as a prostitute. This also resulted in her becoming addicted to a drug, called "Rock".

Thandi's story of abuse continued, where the Nigerian man she worked for also beat her. She has been working for this man for the past 3 years and now also has a son. Her son lives with his father and therefore she barely gets to see him. Once she got beaten because she wanted to buy her son a birthday gift. At first the man agreed to give her permission to buy a gift, if she raised money on the streets. Thandi made R1600 and asked to use R200 for the gift. That was when the man started to beat her. The man told Thandi that she was worth nothing. At a stage she wasn't even sure if God cared for her, considering everything that had happened to her. In Thandi's own words: "I do not have much faith".

After hearing Thandi's story Sonnika decided to phone the Christian Rehab Centre to ask for help. They however communicated to Sonnika that Thandi would need her Identity Document, before they can offer her any help. This was a problem, as Thandi left her Identity Document at the man's flat and was too scared to go back to get it. Sonnika decided to ask the police to go with them. The policemen weren't very friendly towards Thandi and Sonnika, but still

agreed to help them. Afterwards Thandi told Sonnika that the same two policemen who went with them often received bribe money from this man.

e) Read Judges 19:1-10

The sad story of Thandi's life began years ago—even before she became a prostitute, where her body was sold for the pleasure and gain of others. Thandi's childhood was marked by abuse and rape in her own house—the one place where she was supposed to feel safe. Many other trafficked men, women and children have similar stories, where they got involved in human trafficking, as a last, desperate attempt to escape their circumstances. There are people in South Africa who go for days without having anything to eat, clothes to wear, or shelter to sleep in. Selling their bodies is therefore often the only way to survive and send money and food to their families. Sonnika Gillespie noted that many women, from prostitution and human trafficking, end up returning to prostitution. The reason for this is that they simply see no other way of providing for their families or even staying alive themselves. They are therefore trapped by a system, forcing them to stay victims of prostitution and human trafficking, in order to survive.

The narrative in Judges 19 features a Levite and his concubine (wife of secondary rank), who left her husband four months earlier to return to her father's house. In a similar way the Levite's concubine stayed a victim of the same degrading system. This system entailed that women were seen as mere objects, owned by their fathers or husbands. In the Ancient Near Eastern Context a woman's sexuality was seen as an important and valuable asset, which was transferred from her father to her husband. A woman, who could bear children, was seen as a means to increase a man's social and economical status in society. Therefore the more women he had, the better. A woman and her sexuality were seen as a mere commodity—an object that could be sold and bought at a price. The concubine's father and the Levite held her prisoner and victim of the same system that led to her being sold to the Levite in the first place.

Even after the concubine escaped and returned to her father's house she got caught up into the same situation once again and was forced to return to her husband. This time, however, it had devastating results. This time she not only got caught up in the same circumstances and system, but was also murdered by this system of dehumanization and objectification by society. In the same way trafficked people are forced to go back to prostitution, in order for them to survive and provide for their families. Like the concubine in Judges, these people are caught up in a system of death and destruction, where they are kept poor and unimportant to society. Even those who want to escape often have no means to do so and are therefore forced to stay in the system that daily murders people physically, emotionally and spiritually.

f) Discuss:

1. Where in society do people get objectified, dehumanized and devalued?

2. Where in your life can you identify instances or places where people in power use others for their own personal gain (in the workplace, at school, in the media etc.)?
 3. Have you ever been dehumanized or objectified in the work place? Can you identify names people who have been dehumanized or objectified?
 4. What can we do to stop the objectification and dehumanization of people?
 5. Think/ Meditate about the words of Jesus to His disciples in Luke 22:19:
"This is my body, which is broken for you..."
- g) Focus on the candle, symbolizing God's presence, while you pray.

Wednesday, March 11

- a) Light a candle with barbed wire wrapped around it.
- b) The light of the candle symbolizes God's presence and light in our lives and world–The God who is also present now.
- c) Relax all the muscles in your body. Start at your neck and work your way down to your toes, until all your muscles are relaxed. Focus on the candle and become aware of God's presence.
- d) The barbed wire around the candle represents the brokenness in our lives and world.
- e) Read the story of Mbali Mafa:

Eighteen-month-old Mbali Mafa sits on the pavement at a traffic light along Houghton Road. It's 2pm and she quietly eats cornflakes from a plastic container brought by her mother. Bottles of water and heaps of litter are scattered around her. The conditions are anything but hygienic for a baby, but this is Mbali's life. She comes with her mother, Faith Mafa, to this intersection every day to beg for food and money. This is Mafa's occupation. She claims not to know how to do anything else. The 22-year-old Zimbabwean born mother has been begging on the streets with Mbali since last year. She's one of the many women in the province, and around the world, who beg with their children. It is a lucrative avenue. Last year the police investigated a syndicate in Pretoria thought to be hiring out children from crèches to beggars for R20 (approximately 2 USD) a day.

But Faith and many others like her say begging is the only way to survive. The economic system leaves people like Faith vulnerable: in terms of how to feed themselves, and in order to simply live, individuals then are vulnerable to being trafficked. "Sometimes we get money, food and clothes from people. On good days I collect R70 (approximately 7 USD). It's enough to buy food," she says. "It's better when you're sitting with a baby on the street. People feel sorry for you and give you money" she says, justifying why Mbali is not at crèche. She has two other children back home and says she's tried odd jobs but none pay her enough to see Mbali through nursery school. "I want to work like everyone else but who will hire you with a baby by your side? I don't have an ID and didn't go to school. I can't get a decent job," she says.

Aware of the fumes and dangers of her daughter being knocked down by speeding taxis and cars, Faith opts for the street corner as her best location. She tried begging at a garage, somewhere safer, but was chased away. She also knows too well of "righteous" social workers. She recalls how on several occasions she and other mothers were taken to a social service venue in the city. "They (social workers) come and fetch us. They take us to town and we sit there the whole day. They don't give us anything," she says. Faith says she worries about social workers or the police taking away her daughter.

A car grinds to a halt. Slowly Faith stretches out her hand and smiles. "Hello Miss..." she waves at a motorist, her eyes showing her desperation. Without saying much, she asks for "something" to help feed herself and Mbali. None of the motorists oblige. It's a daily routine she repeats from 9am to 5pm. A woman in a

luxury car slides down her window and hands Faith two cans of pilchards. She drives off without saying a word. Faith quickly throws the cans in her bag and continues to beg. "Supper is sorted out for the day." But many people ignore the beggars. A motorist who did not want to be named says she has become "inured to the begging." She ignores the constant pleas for food, jobs and money. She says people claim to want jobs, but when offered them, they turn them down. Begging has become a "profession." Begging, then, can become a form of trafficking.

f) Read Judges 19: 10-15.

In this text the Levite decided to take his concubine and start with their journey home, despite his father in law's (the concubine's father) appeal for them to stay the night. As we all know, this was not the best decision to make. In fact, any Israelite would have warned the Levite not to travel at night, because of the dangers of wild animals and robbers lurking around. One can almost hear the fear in the voice of the servant when we read how he asked the Levite to let them spend the night in the Jebusite city. Despite the servant's efforts, the Levite however decided that it would be better for them to travel to the city Gibeah, where they would have had a better chance of receiving hospitality from their own people.

An unwritten rule of hospitality existed in the Ancient Near East, according to which strangers was entitled to a place to stay, food and safety for a fair amount of time, while travelling. Travellers would wait at the entrance of the city gate or at the town square for a potential host for the night. The Levite and his concubine arrived in Gibeah with sunset and turned towards the city square. Despite the fact that Gibeah was a city of the tribe Benjamin (their own people) no one was however willing to adhere to this unwritten rule and to act as a host for the Levite and his concubine. No one was willing to open their homes to them.

Sonnika Gillespie tells how victims of human trafficking often seek help at shelters in the area. Shelters however often require victims to have an Identification Document before offering them help and shelter for the night. This is problematic, as victims of human trafficking often do not have the required documents and are sent away because of it, despite their efforts to get help. Churches also often send people seeking for help and a way to escape from their circumstances away. There are various reasons for this: A lack of facilities to take care of these people; a lack of expertise on how to help these individuals; prejudice and a lack of trust; misplaced priorities etc. In everyday life people drive past prostitutes and trafficked children, who are used to beg for money on street corners and simply decide to ignore them and look in the opposite direction—often not even acknowledging their existence.

Despite Carte Blanche (a South African investigative journalism television program) and newspapers raising awareness on the issue of trafficked children in South Africa, this form of human trafficking is still evident everywhere in the streets of Johannesburg, South Africa. Most of us are confronted with this issue

on a daily basis—on our way to work, to school, to the supermarket, to swimming lessons etc. Despite this the majority of people simply ignore these individuals and children, doing nothing to change their circumstances, help these children and open their homes to them. It is human trafficking that happens on a daily basis—all around us, in plain sight—and people that simply walk or drive past, blatantly and comfortably ignoring it.

g) Discuss:

1. Can you identify similarities between the way people react towards victims of human trafficking today and the reaction of the people in the Gibeah towards the Levite and his concubine?
2. What do you think are the reasons for these reactions of people today?
3. Can you identify a situation/MOMENT in your life, where you just ignored someone that needed help? How did that make you feel?
4. Can you identify a situation/MOMENT in your own life where you stopped and took a moment to help someone who desperately needed it? How did it affect your life?
5. Think/Meditate about the words of Jesus to His disciples in Luke 22:19: *"This is my body, which is broken for you..."*

h) Focus on the candle, symbolizing God's presence, while you pray.

Thursday, March 12

- a) Light a candle with barbed wire wrapped around it.
- b) The light of the candle symbolizes God's presence and light in our lives and world–The God who is also present now.
- c) Relax all the muscles in your body. Start at your neck and work your way down to your toes, until all your muscles are relaxed. Focus on the candle and become aware of God's presence.
- d) The barbed wire around the candle represents the brokenness in our lives and world.
- e) Read Nani's story, as told by Sonnika Gillespie:

Nani was trafficked from Durban to Pretoria in South Africa six years ago. When Sonnika saw Nani for the first time she had stitches in both her hand and head, from being beaten with a steel pipe. After spending two days with Sonnika, at their crises room, she was taken to a clinic for medical check-ups. The Ladies Arise team found a rehabilitation center where Nani received help for six weeks. The team stayed in contact with Nani, paying her visits. According to them "... it was amazing to see the change that had already taken place in Nani's life..."

Nani's choice to seek help made a difference not only in her present situation, but also had a major impact on her future. After spending time in a second rehabilitation program, where she learned a variety of skills Nani has grown as a person. Hope has returned to her life. The Ladies Arise team also helped Nani to find a job and earn her own money in a healthy way and enabling her to move into her own flat. The next step for Nani will be when her son, who now lives with her sister, can go and live with her.

- f) Read Judges 19:16-21

The Levite and his concubine stayed at the city square for a while, but no one offered them help and a place to stay. After a while an old man, who was from the hill-country of Ephraim and therefore himself a stranger in Gibeah, passed the Levite and his concubine on his way from his fields, where he worked. He pitied the Levite and his concubine and decided to offer them a place to stay and food for the night. The Levite realized that this old man was their only hope for a host and accepted the man's offer. He humbly assured his potential host that they brought everything they would need to survive with them and therefore would not cause him any trouble. The old man however answered him: "You are welcome in my home! I'll take care of you; you don't have to spend the night in the square" (Today's English Version). At his house the man was the perfect host for the Levite and his concubine. He looked after their animals, washed his guests' feet after their long and dusty journey and gave them something to eat and drink.

Despite the fact that the majority of people simply ignore persons in need - prostitutes, beggars and other victims of human trafficking–stories of hope, similar to the story of the old man in Judges 19, do still exist in the form of ordinary individuals, organisations and churches who are willing to open their

homes and hearts to people in need, when everyone else simply ignores them. The story of Nani is a South-African example of one person who's life was changed and transformed because of the help she received from a handful of people who dedicate their lives to help victims of human trafficking and other people in need. They do us, not only through financial means, but also through interaction and building relationships and friendships with these individuals.

g) Discuss:

1. There are various ways of helping victims of human trafficking. (counselling, speaking out against human trafficking, protesting, by buying fair-trade food, through financial contributions etc.). To truly open your home to someone, in the full sense of the word, however means to also open your heart to him/her, to be present in their lives and to build relationships with these individuals.
2. Do you know of people or organizations in your community that helps people who fall victim to human trafficking and are willing to open their homes and hearts to these individuals?
3. If not, where can you find people that help victims of human trafficking?
4. If you do know of organizations of people who are involved with trafficked persons how can you and your congregation help these people?
5. What can you do in your daily life to open your heart and offer help to victims of human trafficking?
6. Think/Meditate about the words of Jesus to His disciples in Luke 22:19: *"This is my body, which is broken for you..."*

h) Focus on the candle, symbolizing God's presence, while you pray.

Friday, March 13

- a) Light a candle with barbed wire wrapped around it.
- b) The light of the candle symbolizes God's presence and light in our lives and world–The God who is also present now.
- c) Relax all the muscles in your body. Start at your neck and work your way down to your toes, until all your muscles are relaxed. Focus on the candle and become aware of God's presence.
- d) Read the following stories of human trafficking:

Nani's story

Nani arrived at Sonnika Gillespie, with stitches in both her head and hand, from being beaten with a steel pipe. She was trafficked from Durban to Pretoria, South Africa six years ago.

Thandi's story

Thandi phoned Sonnika Gillespie, crying and asking for help. When Thandi saw Sonnika for the first time she grabbed her and cried. Thandi was dirty, full of bruises and had blood on her jacket.

The story of Mozambican girls

A sixty-year-old man was accused of luring young girls from Mozambique to South Africa by promises of a better future and education. Instead these girls were raped and then kept as sex slaves.

The story of an eighteen-year-old girl from Durban

An eighteen-year-old girl told the Durban Regional Court how she was kept locked in a room until she eventually became addicted to crack cocaine. It all started when she and a friend ran out of money on their way home from a Shopping Centre and a woman approached them with a promise of help and money. After being caught up in prostitution she sold her body for R50. "Doing it was never easy. Taking drugs and then having someone holding you are not nice at all... Some people would ask us why we are doing this. That would affect us. You did not know how to reply. You would want to reach out to this person, but you could not give up the drugs."

- e) Read Judges 19:22-28

While the Levite and his company, together with the old man were having a good time inside the old man's house, the devastating sound of someone pounding on the door suddenly filled their ears. A group of street thieves must have heard about the guests residing at the old man's house. They hammered on the door and yelled the following words to the old man: "Bring out that man that came home with you! We want to have sex with him!" (19: 22). As the host the old man was responsible for his guests' safety. He was however old and a stranger himself and therefore couldn't do much to protect them. His plight for them to not react according to their evil plans was ignored and the next best thing this old man could think of was to decrease the impact of "such an evil, immoral

thing” by giving the thieves an alternative. There were also women in the house... his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine.

In the Ancient Near Eastern context and society, where women had very little rights and were seen as their fathers’ or husbands’ property, heterosexual (between a man and a woman) rape was seen as less of an offense than homosexual (between two people of the same sex—in this case two men) rape. As the host, the man saw his obligation to protect the safety of his male guest as a priority above the honor of his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine (Judges 19: 23). Despite the old man’s attempt, these immoral men at first didn’t want to settle for the two women. The Levite, who was only thinking about saving himself, then did the unthinkable—he forced his concubine to go outside to the men. He literally threw her to the wolves.

According to verse 25 the immoral men “...raped her and abused her throughout the night, and at dawn they let her go.” Barely alive, she still had the strength to crawl back to the old man’s house, where she lied until it became light. The Levite simply got up (an unthinkable thought that he actually went to sleep!) and prepared to continue his journey. When he opened the door he saw his concubine, who had fallen in the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold. These few words that we read in verse 27 speak of the absolute powerlessness of this woman. As if nothing had happened, the man demanded her to get up. But there was no answer..... The woman was already dead.

We read here how a powerless, exploited woman, with little rights was objectified by the old man, the Levite and the perverted men. We read that this woman was abused and raped, up to the point where she died from her injuries. In the context and society this text was written in women formed part of the marginalized, excluded group of people who were seen as “not good enough.” In fact this woman is nameless—she was not even seen as important enough to write down her name. She, like many people in our societies today, was nothing more than a nameless victim. Similar to the circumstances in this text, it is often also the powerless, the poor, excluded and exploited—the “not good enough”—who are objectified and fall victim to human trafficking in our societies. Nameless people who get used, abused and eventually killed at the hands of others, just to become a number added to statistics.

f) Discuss:

1. Who are the nameless people in your society?
2. Societal norms that stated that women were mere commodities, owned by their husbands and fathers caused women to be nameless. What in your context and society contributes to certain people being nameless and seen as “not-good-enough”?
3. It often happens that the names of victims of violence and human trafficking today also remain unknown. What can you, together with your congregation, do to make the names of these people in your own context known and to restore their dignity?

4. Think/Meditate about the words of Jesus to His disciples in Luke 22:19:
“This is my body, which is broken for you...”
 5. What do these words of Jesus mean to women, men and children who fall victim to human trafficking?
- g) Focus on the candle, symbolizing God’s presence, while you pray.

Saturday, March 14

- a) Light a candle with barbed wire wrapped around it.
- b) The light of the candle symbolizes God's presence and light in our lives and world—The God who is also present now.
- c) Relax all the muscles in your body. Start at your neck and work your way down to your toes, until all your muscles are relaxed. Focus on the candle and become aware of God's presence.
- d) Read Judges 19:29-30

Nowhere in the text do we read about the Levite's emotions or thoughts when he put the body of his concubine on the donkey. Was he angry? Was he sad? Did he feel guilty? Did he blame himself? After he arrived at home he cut the body of his concubine into twelve pieces and sent it to the twelve areas of Israel. His brutal reaction shows that he must have felt some sort of heavy emotion. After everything the concubine had gone through, why would the Levite do another evil deed towards this woman? It seems as if not even in her death she deserved dignity.

When we take the context of this text into consideration it can shed some light on the Levite's reaction, when he cut the body of his concubine into twelve pieces. This method was used to direct people's attention to something newsworthy and to motivate them to take action against those evil deeds. When Saul wanted to motivate the Israelites to action in 1 Samuel 11:7 he, in a similar way, cut the bodies of two oxen into pieces and sent it throughout Israel by messengers (1 Sam. 11: 7). The fact that the body of a human being was used here, is however very disturbing. It is ironic that the body of this woman that was already objectified and misused until she died was once again objectified when used as a letter to motivate men to take violent action. Even in her death she was nothing more than a mere object. And we don't even know her name...

Hope is however restored. Some Biblical translations follow the Greek composition of the Biblical books (the Septuagint). In these translations the book Judges is directly followed by the story of Ruth. The geographical setting for the story of Ruth is the same as that of Judges 19-21 and Ruth's family in law (Naomi and her sons) were descendants of the Benjamite tribe. In contrast to the text about the Levite's nameless concubine, the name of Ruth is included in the text. While the concubine had no future, Ruth has a future—she not only became the great grandmother of King David, but Jesus Himself was also a descendant of her generation. In a similar fashion the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel follows the book Judges in the Hebrew Bible. Hannah was also from the same region as the nameless concubine. In this text, the name of Hannah is once again included in the text and in contrast to the concubine Hannah also had a future. Hannah became the mother of the prophet Samuel.

It seems as if the compiler of the canon tried to correct the horrible, disturbing story of the concubine in Judges 19, by adding these stories of hope right after a story that seems so hopeless. Even though women were seen as mere objects in the Ancient Near Eastern context (like we saw in the story of the concubine) the

stories of Hannah and Ruth proofs that there was still hope amidst the horrible and degrading circumstances women often had to live in.

e) Discuss:

1. How do we react when we read Judges 19?
2. How do the stories of Ruth and Hannah give hope, in light of the hopeless story of the Levite's concubine?

f) Read the following information

You can make a difference.

The problem of human trafficking goes beyond just the human trafficking itself; the problem is that many people refuse to accept the fact that human trafficking exists. Make a difference by actively raising awareness and funds in your community. We need your help.

- Speak out.

Get involved by speaking out and educating those around you, raising funds, signing petitions and writing to politicians.

Be wary of the following situations. Regard them as potentially dangerous:

- An attractive job is offered to you that is far away from home — in another province or country. It may be a modelling contract, a waitressing job, or a contract with a sport club. These offers may appear in newspapers or you may hear of them via word of mouth.
- No qualifications are required and free housing and transport is offered with the job, plus the free processing of your visa and/or work permit.
- The people you are dealing with organise for you to cross a border illegally.
- A friend or relative offers to send you to an expensive/good school that is far from home and offers to pay your school fees.
- Travel documents that were obtained by illegal means, are given to you.
- A recruitment agent tells you that a visitor's or tourist visa is good enough for working purposes.
- Someone with whom you are chatting on social media (Whatsapp, twitter, Facebook etc.) wants to meet with you face to face (to offer you work or a free holiday or an academic scholarship)

How to ensure that a prospective employer is genuine:

- Call them on a LAND line to confirm they are a legitimate company and are recruiting. (Be wary of a company that has only a cell number or free web-based email address, such as Hotmail, Yahoo, Google mail etc.)
- Sign a contract with your employer before you leave your home country. A good employer would not object to this. The contract should state your

terms of employment (i.e. wages, costs deducted for travel expenses and housing, your duties, working hours). You can do this through email or regular mail. You can even ask your employer for references.

- Call the Chamber of Commerce in your area and check that the recruiting company is a registered company.
- Before accepting a job in a foreign country, check on the immigration website and find out for yourself what the visa requirements are.

Other important tips to protect yourself from being trafficked:

- **Travel with contacts.** Carry the number of your embassy in the country to which you are relocating. Inform your embassy when you arrive. Have a list of phone numbers of friends or contacts in the host country. Call them when you arrive.
- **Travel with an emergency plan.** Provide your family members back home with all of your contact details. Call them and give them your new phone number and address when you arrive, as well as the phone number of your embassy and the local police. Should something go wrong and you lose contact with them, or they cannot reach you, have them call your embassy, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the local police on your behalf.
- **Travel with a copy of your passport.** Do not give your passport to anyone! It is illegal for your employer to ask to hold your passport for any reason.
- **Know your rights.** No one has the right to force you to do something or keep you against your will. If you are trafficked, you are the victim of a crime. You may have entered a country illegally, but you still have rights. You may be in “debt” to your trafficker, but this is not a legal debt. You do not have to honour it. If your human rights are being violated, you are the victim of a crime.

How to help prevent trafficking in your community

- Tell your friends and neighbours how to protect themselves from being trafficked.
- Learn to recognize trafficked persons.
 - They are often unable to speak the local language.
 - They appear to be trapped in their job or the place they stay.
 - They may have bruises and other signs of physical abuse.
 - They do not have identification documents (passport, ID, refugee or asylum papers).
- Report places where you suspect trafficked people are kept (for example, brothels, farms, factories, shebeens) to the local authorities and the media.
- Report people you suspect may be traffickers to the local authorities (police, NGOs) and the media. (Source: World Hope South Africa, Schools curriculum)

g) Discuss:

1. With all the violence we see in the media, as well as the brokenness of the world it is easy to become numb to the emotional and physical pain of others. How can we prevent this from happening?
 2. The theme for this fourth week of Lent is Laetare, which means rejoice. How is it possible to rejoice when we are surrounded by hopeless stories, like that of the concubine in our daily lives?
 3. How can you as an individual/ as a congregation bring hope in the hopeless situations of victims of human trafficking?
- h) Think/ Meditate about the words of Jesus to His disciples in Luke 22:19:
"This is my body, which is broken for you..."

Sunday, March 15

Leviticus 13:10-17; Philemon 1:27; John 10:10

God needs you to lift up people!!!

Many women can't rise alone. They need our help as the bent woman needed Jesus. What is interesting is that the woman did not take the initiative to go to Jesus, it was Jesus who saw her and showed his compassion.

What can we learn from this story of the bent woman? Jesus saw the woman and set her free!

Jesus saw the torment of the woman and reacted. Nowadays still many women are tormented, many women are restricted in their freedom.

Jesus wants to free people, and as Christians we have this mission to free people from all unnecessary suffering. The Bible says that the devil comes to steal and lie. There is much unnecessary suffering. People are victims of Human Trafficking. The enticed do what the Bible says, they steal, kill and destroy people; they take everything of the person, they take their passport, identity and often wage on the grounds that they owe them. One of the purposes of this Lent campaign against Human Trafficking is becoming aware of the traps, do not fall in the lies of promises of employment and earning a lot of money.

Coming back to the bible story we can see that not everybody got happy with the cure. The woman got very happy and praised the Lord, but the boss of the synagogue got angry and wanted to give a lesson to Jesus in front of everybody. According the leader of the synagogue Jesus had disrespected the Sabbath, the Day of rest to cure the woman. However, Jesus is very wise and asked the man: don't you untie your animals on Sabbath in order to drink water? How can you liberate your animals and I can't liberate a human being!!!

For the leader of the synagogue the woman was less important than an animal. Nowadays many women still live an inhuman life. Jesus gave value to the woman. He saw her and set her free.

Human traffickers see men and women as goods, which can be sold. They say it is better to sell women than drugs, because you can make more profit of them, drugs you can only sell once, but women you can sell again, until they die of AIDS or kill themselves. Remember Jesus Said the thief comes to steal, kill and destroy.

As Christians we have the responsibility to help people who are suffering, looking for a way to release them, like Jesus did.

Pray for the victims of human trafficking; for stopping the human trafficking; for better conditions of life, better distribution of goods; for more equality.

Monday, March 16

Nehemiah 1:1-11; Hebrews 13:3; Matthew 5:4

God doesn't want his people mistreated!

The letter of Hebrews tells us to remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. Many people are being mistreated and exploited all over the world. Slavery did not end with the abolition in the 19th century.

The practice still continues in one form or another in every country in the world. From women forced into prostitution, children and adults forced to work in agriculture, domestic work or factories producing goods for global supply chains. People are forced to work for nothing to pay off debts, or girls are forced to marry older men.

How do you react when you hear these things? Nehemiah got indignant and very sad when he heard that his people were suffering in Jerusalem. He lamented a lot, but also prayed to God to prepare the heart of the king to help to change the destiny of his people suffering humiliation.

Many people especially who are forced to work in prostitution feel humiliated. If you have ever been humiliated you can imagine just a little of what these people are going through. If you suffer abuses don't deliver yourself in despair to alcohol or drugs, but pray to God and look for people who can help you. God will hear your prayer; He will answer you. He will comfort you, and miracles will happen. Remember the people of God in Egypt, the Pharaoh didn't want to release them, but God worked on the heart of the pharaoh and finally he set them free.

Despair makes people blind and takes away your power. Therefore don't permit this feeling to dominate you. Pray to God; tell your fears, frustration and anguishes. Prayer can help you to calm down and give new hope, because God is stronger than everything which can put you in bondage, even death was not able to hold Christ.

Prayer:

Let us pray for the victims of modern slavery, people being humiliated, mistreated and exploited. Let us also pray for the aggressors that they change their way of behaving, that they regret what they are doing and that they also can have a new way of living.

Tuesday, March 17

Nehemiah 1:10-2:10; Matthew 21:12-14

God wants us to work on God's side against injustice!!

When Nehemiah got to know about the situation of his people, he cried, but he didn't get desperate. Although the situation of his people was terrible, Nehemiah knew someone who could help him. Nehemiah knew that he alone couldn't solve the problem. He needed God's help and the king's help. Therefore Nehemiah prayed to God knowing that no situation was too hard for God to solve. What is interesting is that Nehemiah didn't blame God, but asked God to help him to be successful in changing this humiliating situation. Even though Nehemiah was comfortable in the palace, having a good position, far away from his people, his heart was not in peace knowing that his people were suffering.

During this period of Lent, we remember what Jesus did for us. He left the comfort of heaven to be among us on earth. Jesus showed us what he expects from us. He wants us to show compassion, to combat injustice. He turned over the tables in the temple. Jesus wants us to turn over the system of exploiting people. If you feel indignant seeing or knowing how people are exploited God wants you to do something. Jesus felt indignant when he saw people exploiting other people in the temple. The feeling of injustice is Jesus protesting inside you to do something. Be sensitive to what Jesus wants you to do.

Prayer:

For the people who blame God, but don't do anything themselves to change the situation; for God's blessing over your struggle against injustice. Amen.

Wednesday, March 18

Nehemiah 3:1-10; 6:15-16; John 10:10

Together we are stronger

Nehemiah shows us what happens when different groups with different professionals work together. Together they were strong enough to rebuild the wall in a short time (52 days), even if some people told them they wouldn't be able to repair the wall. The rebuilding of the walls of the city meant more than only repairing walls, rebuilding the walls meant rebuilding the identity of a people who felt insecure, unprotected and abandoned. Rebuilding the walls meant rebuilding hope, strengthening relationships with God and each other. Rebuilding together meant that they felt like one people working on the same objective stimulated by their faith in the same God. The priests started to rebuild the wall and the gate to show obedience to God's will and had brought back his people as He had promised and wanted them to rebuild their lives. By rebuilding the wall the people felt safer and stronger. The ruins reminded them of the bad time, which had passed, the reconstruction of the city would give them hope and new life, like Christ wants to give to all of us. Christ wants to give us live in abundance; this doesn't mean that Christ promised us a lot of material things, but Christ wants his people to live life, to love God and to love your neighbor with all your heart and all your soul. If you live life this way you live life in abundance!

Prayer:

Lovely God, we ask you to put the right words in our mouths to speak with people who don't see hope, who feel despised and humiliated. Help us to pronounce words which encourage people like Nehemiah encouraged his people; help us to show possibilities to people who are desperate and feel ashamed. Lord, we ask you to help us to be a light for these people who live in darkness that one day these suffering people may be happy and shine happiness like the sun on a sunny day. Dear God, we believe in the power of resurrection, and ask you to give back life in abundance to the people who have lost their sense of life. Thank you for listening, we pray to you in Jesus' name. Amen.

Thursday, March 19

Nehemiah 4

Together we are stronger!! (continued)

Alone we can't do so much, but when we work together with other people we can go further. The enemies of God's people wanted to paralyze the rebuilding of the city, because they didn't want God's people to become strong, they wanted them defenseless. The rebuilding of the wall was necessary in that time not to divide people, but to unite and to protect the people of the city. This reminds me of a law which has been created in Brazil in order to protect women's rights. The law has as objective to prevent men using aggression to their wives. The popular name of the Law is the Law of Maria de Penha, who was a victim of domestic violence for 23 years. In 1983, her husband twice attempted to assassinate her. At first, with a firearm, leaving her paralyzed, and second, by electrocution and drowning. After this second assassination attempt she took courage and denounced her husband. It took 19 years of trial before her husband was punished and when he finally was punished it was for only two years in closed regime. This punishment made Maria sick, so she sought justice of the country and formalized along with the Center for Justice and International Law a complaint to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which is an international body responsible for the fulfilling of international agreements. Along with a lawyer, Maria de Penha couldn't do so much, but with the help of other organizations they got success to improve the protection of women. Like the walls of Jerusalem, the Law of Maria de Penha is a wall of protection for many people. Together we are stronger together we get further!!

Prayer:

For victims of domestic and sexual violence. Pray also for the abusers in order they repent and stop abusing people.

Friday, March 20

Nehemiah 5:6-13

The 18th of May is the national day of combating the abuse and sexual exploration of children and teenagers in Brazil. It was the day that Araceli an 8-year-old girl died from drug users who gave drugs to her, beat and raped her. This crime choked Brazil, but also the lack of punishment for this barbarous crime. Therefore, this day has been chosen as a symbol of all violence that is committed against children.

The accused of the death of Araceli were very rich men and well-known in the town. It was also known that they promoted parties in their apartments. At these parties they were drugging and raping girls. The men responsible for the cruel death of Araceli were the leaders of a group of addicts who used to roam the schools of the city looking for new victims. Araceli was one of these victims. The case went without punishment.

On the same date in 1998 eighty public and private organizations got together for the first meeting of ECPAT in Brazil. ECPAT is an international organization, which fights for the end of sexual and commercial exploration of children and teenagers, pornography and child trafficking started in Thailand. In this gathering the idea of a national day of combating abuse and sexual exploration of children and teenagers was born. In the year 2000 the first national day of combating abuse and sexual exploration was commemorated.

Since then, organized activities have been established in the country to make the society and the authorities aware of the seriousness of sexual violence and to reaffirm the responsibilities of the Brazilian society in guaranteeing the rights of all Aracelis.

It is unbelievable how people use and abuse other people. In Brazil, if a child abused from sexual violence, and appears in the hospital, the doctors are obliged to denounce WHAT?. The problem is if teenagers or adults are abused it's much harder to prove. Many times these girls or women complain that they are not taken serious or they themselves don't have the courage to denounce.

Pray for the victims of any kind of violence; pray that people become sensitive to the signs of abuse. Pray that people are taken serious, like God takes each of us serious and worries about each of us.

Saturday, March 21

Luke 13:10-17

People should be more important than laws!!

The Bible tells us that one day Jesus met with this woman who was dominated by pain and suffering. She had been suffering for eighteen years, and when Jesus saw this woman in the synagogue he called her and healed her. This calls our attention to the knowledge that not everyone was happy with this cure. The woman was overjoyed and blessed God there, but the priest of the synagogue was angry. He said Jesus had flouted the Sabbath, the day of rest, to heal this woman. Jesus valued the woman, he saw her and set her free, but the chief priest of the synagogue believed the law was more important than the person. Even today, many people think that the law is more important.

See the following case: A lawyer had to defend a case because the mother was addicted to drugs (cocaine), and she gave her child to another family. This family was already taking care of this child for some years and the mother continued using drugs. When the family asked to adopt the child, the judge of the city didn't allow the child to stay with the family who was already taking care of her, because this family was not on the list of adoption. The child was taken away from the family and went to a house of transition to wait to become adopted. In this case, we have something similar to what Jesus is talking about. The fulfillment of the law is more important than the wellbeing of the child. Imagine what the child has to go through? The child has to wait until the bureaucracy decides which family can get her. If she would have stayed with the family who was bringing her up, a lot of emotional and psychological stress could have been avoided.

Prayer:

We pray, for children who are adopted that they don't feel as a weight or burden to their families. We pray that these children know that even if their father or mother abandoned them, God never abandons them. We pray for the children who are waiting for a family that they will find a lovely and caring family. We pray for all children who are looking for their biological father or mother that they can find them.

Sunday, March 22

A Liturgy

Song of Entrance

“Jesus shall reign wherever the Sun”

People enter, one with a Bible and one with a newspaper, more people can enter if you want, while the congregation is singing.

- Welcoming on this Sunday in the Lent period, a time of the year we are looking at Jesus' attitudes and reflecting about our attitudes. Let us in silence rethink our attitudes especially towards the people who are suffering.

Prayer of invocation

Eternal God, our refuge and salvation, hope of the ones who the world has forgotten; Heavenly Father, listen to the outcry of the hurt people and teach us by the Power of your Spirit, to listen like you listen, to be sensitive to those who cry out. We pray for those who suffer in silence, for those whose life has become unbearable, for those who don't see light in the darkness, we ask you God to open our eyes that we notice these people among so many people. Open our ears that we can listen the voices of millions of people suffering in silence, whose voice is hardly hearable by suffering. We ask you this in Jesus' name. Amen

Song

“Shine Jesus Shine”

Moment of Confession

Prayer of confession of sins alternates with the song “O Lord hear our prayer”

Prayer: God, we, who are called Christians, followers of your Son, Jesus Christ, followers of the way of Jesus, we ask you to forgive us when we are indifferent to the pain of our brothers and sisters who suffer. How can we announce the God of Love, if we don't show Love?

Sing: O Lord hear our prayer

Prayer: We ask you God to forgive us for each gesture of help we didn't show and help us to be more sensitive to the people who suffer and help us to be a sign of your Love.

Sing: O Lord hear our prayer

Prayer: Lord we pray you for the inequality in the world, remember us always that before thee we are equal, independent if we are men, women, children, young people or elderly people.

Lord, many people are discriminated and explored because some people are just interested in moneymaking. Help us God to show to the world what has more value to you. You created each of us in your image, let us always remember that each of us has a breath of you in him and her.

Sing: O Lord hear our prayer

Prayer: God we ask you to make our hearts in peace to overcome the anguishes of life so we can work on the values of your Kingdom: justice and life for everybody.

Let us pray the prayer Jesus taught us: Heavenly Father...

Declaration of pardon

God is Good and God is Justice; Read 1 John 1:9

Song

“Seek you first the kingdom of God and his righteousness”

STORIES OF LIFE FROM THE BIBLE AND FROM THE NEWSPAPER

(two people appear, one with a Bible (R1) and one with a newspaper (R2);

R1: Do you know Nehemiah?

R2: No, I don't know him very well. I have heard about him, but I have never read the Bible book of Nehemiah.

R1: Then listen, and I will read some verses to you.

R2: Okay, go ahead.

R1: I will read Nehemiah 5:1-3...

R2: Stop for a moment, I don't believe what you just said. Are you telling me that people in Nehemiah's time had to sell their children to buy food?

R1: Yes, that's what is written here.

R2: Let me read something for you I have just read in the newspaper:

R1: Okay, go ahead...

R2: Parents sell children: Families affected by extreme poverty sell children to ensure the survival of the family.

Haunted by necessity and hunger, Akhtar Muhammad first sold some of their animals then rugs of the family, metal utensils and even the logs that supported the roof of the house, but the money they did not give. Hunger always

reappeared. Lastly, Muhammad took two of his ten children to the bazaar of the nearest town and exchanged them for bags of wheat.

Now, Sher, 10, and Bar, 5 two boys are living away from home . "What else could I do?" asked the father, in Kangori, a village in northern Afghanistan. Muhammad is not indifferent to this tragic situation: "I miss my kids, but at home, there was nothing to eat!"

R2 (speaking to R1): Have you seen how the situation of Akhtar is similar to the situation in the time of Nehemiah? People are selling their children to buy food!

R1: Yes, unbelievable.

R2: Listen more, here is another article: people selling their children because of debts.

Parents sell children to spend the money on video games. The couple's first child was the result of an unplanned pregnancy, but instead of raising the kid, they decided to sell him as a baby to child traffickers in order to support their father's addiction in online games. Months later, the woman was pregnant for the second time, and once the household budget was being drained by the games, they decided to sell the second son to try to remedy some of its debts.

R1: My goodness, how can people do that? How can they sell their children to pay debts of videogames? It's not possible! But do you know that in the time of Nehemiah people also had to sell their children because of debts? It were not debts because of vicious, but debts because of high taxes. These debts were caused because the people were exploited and didn't earn enough money to pay the debts.

Listen, I will read for you: Nehemiah 5:4-5...

R2: Do you know that nowadays many men and women, children and teenagers are exploited and sold as if they were goods?

R1: My God, what a world we are living in!

R2: A world, which needs God and people who want to be God's partners in combating injustice.

R1: Do you know that Nehemiah was a very good man and an example for people in combating exploitation?

Listen: Read Nehemiah 5:6-13...

R2: I didn't know that the Bible was so actual? The same things, which happened in the times of Nehemiah still happen today. People continue to be exploited in forced labour, in prostitution. They can't set themselves free because they are in debt with the 'boss' who promised a lot of things to them and in the end they discovered they were misled, they fell in a trap.

R1: Do you know I love Jesus? He is really a friend of the people, especially of the ones who suffer.

I will read for you: Luke 13:10-17...

R2: Let us pray (spontaneous/free pray)

Song

“Your Word is a light on my path”

Reflection (A brief Sermon)

Silence for reflection

Prayer of dedication

Together we heard God’s word together we want to give our witness of faithfulness to Jesus’ project. The people who suffer, who are despised need to have place in our hearts. Help us God to be a light and a blessing for these people. We pray you in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Song

“Deus chama a gente para um momento novo“

Sending and Blessing

May the blessing of the God of peace and justice be with you

May the blessing of the Son, who sheds tears because of the suffering in the world be with you

May the blessing of the Spirit, who inspires us for reconciliation and hope, be with you, today and forever. Amen

(All the music is available in the hymn book *Cantate Domino* and *Thuma Mina*)

Monday, March 23 and Tuesday, March 24

John 9:1-17, 18-41

If one were to read the text carefully one would notice that there are three separate movements that Jesus performs in this text. We shall study these three movements under the headings of relocate, restore and rebel.

Relocate: It is interesting that the question of the disciples regarding the man who suffered from blindness is whether he or his parents had sinned. In the time of Jesus as now many tend to locate sickness and suffering within the framework of sin. Even in our times today people imagine that those living with disabilities are so because of some sin, the situation with people living with HIV and AIDS is even worse because everyone wants to know how they contracted the illness, women forced into sex work are made out to be as women of ill repute. It becomes a way of blaming the victim for their victimization.

Jesus however relocates the discussion on sickness and suffering out of the framework of sin placing it in the language of glory. For Jesus how one gets sick or what is the reason for a disability is not so important as what we can do about it. How can we show the glory of God in a particular situation? What can we do to make the situation better is what is actually what is important.

Restoration: Jesus restores sight to the man who was living with blindness but more importantly we find that Jesus restores him within the context of his community. In a context where those who live with disabilities are considered to be less than human, imperfect in some way Jesus restores this man to his community. However what is important for us to consider is that from the disability discourse there are two perspectives to healing. One called the medical model sees the person living with the disability as the source of the problem and things are done to make him or her feel better.

On the other hand from the second model is called the social model and this model seeks to change society so as to make it a better place for those living with disabilities. Not all disabilities can be cured and not all disabled people want to be cured, rather what they want is to be treated as full humans.

Rebel: The Pharisees do not like what Jesus has done, his restoration of the man living with blindness has upset the status quo of their society which was neatly divided into light and darkness, with people living with disabilities on the side of darkness. Jesus however challenges this proposition and says it is actually those who see who are living in the dark. In reality it is they who are blind because they cannot see the kingdom of God is at hand. Perhaps we need to rethink our positions as well, those of us who are born on the side of privilege tend to believe that we are the ones who are of the light and called to save those who are in darkness, victims of trafficking for example. Jesus turns this around, he calls us to rethink our positions and to seek how we can find our own salvation through our solidarity with the powerless.

Jesus calls us to also participate in the work of the kingdom which is to relocate, restore and rebel.

Wednesday, March 25

John 10:1-18

The metaphor of Jesus as the good shepherd is often used to speak of two alternate kinds of leadership, the leadership of the one who takes care of the sheep and the leadership of the butcher who seeks the slaughter of the sheep. In our text we especially have the use of three metaphors that are shown here.

The metaphor of the shepherd: When we speak of Jesus the good shepherd, the word 'Good' here refers to a model or ideal Shepherd and not just to say that Jesus is good at his work of shepherding. As we now live in a place and time quite different from Jesus', we need at first to think about how to make relevant to context this metaphor of Shepherd. And so maybe we could speak of Jesus the Good or ideal Teacher, or Good or ideal Doctor. But perhaps the best Indianized metaphor would be to speak of Jesus as the Good or Model Guru. One who came not to be served but to serve; one who gave his life as a ransom so that we who were in bondage to sin could be released for eternal life. Unlike our modern Gurus who expect their disciples to fulfill their every need, Jesus the true Guru is one who rather serves his disciples.

The metaphor of Sheep: While one can well understand the metaphor of the shepherd, the metaphor for sheep is more difficult. After all who wants to be sheep? Yet here we should not place modern understandings of the metaphor of sheep into the text. The metaphor of sheep here refers to the vulnerable, the powerless and the weak. The opposition between the shepherd and the butcher becomes clearer here. The shepherd is the one who has the best interests of the sheep in mind unlike the butcher.

The metaphor of the gate: In the time of Jesus these false shepherds would be seen as primarily the spiritual guides of Israel, especially the Pharisees, but the picture of the gate and the destroyers of the flock would extend their application to the whole range of religious rulers, teachers, messianic prophets, and nationalistic leaders of the people. People who pretended to be leaders who cared but actually had their own interests in mind. One cannot help but think of all those down the line who are involved in the criminal task of trafficking. Those who profit from the selling of humans and modern day slavery. They are like butchers for the vulnerable sheep. Yet it is only those who truly care for the sheep who can enter through the door. The truth is that our entry into the kingdom depends on our relationship with the most vulnerable.

Thursday, March 26

John 10:19-42

The text for today speaks of Jesus facing rejection from the religious elite. How do we speak of the presence of God in the face of the suffering and the rejection of the innocent? How can we speak of God in the midst of the violence faced by those thrown into slavery?

The following text by Jessel Rakover will perhaps enable us to throw some light on the issue.

After the Second World War a piece of paper was found among the ruins of the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw. It contained the last words of a Jew, Jessel Rakover, as he was preparing himself for the pogrom. Part of it read as follows:

“I believe in you God of Israel, even if you have tried your best to dissuade me to believe in you. I believe in your laws, even if I cannot approve of the way you manage things. ... I bow my head before your majesty, but I will not kiss the rod with which you hit me. ... I would like to say to you that at this moment, more even than in previous period of our eternal struggle for survival, we, the tortured, the humiliated, buried alive, burnt alive, insulted, mocked, we, murdered by million, that we have the right to know: until when are you going to allow it to continue? ...

I say this to you because I believe in you, more than ever before, because I know now, with absolute certainty, that you are my God, because you cannot be the God of those whose deeds are the most horrendous expression of godlessness: ...

I die in peace, but not appease; persecuted, but not enslaved; embittered, but not cynical; a believer, but not pleading; a man who loves God, but does not say amen to everything. I have followed God even when he had flung me down, tortured me, and made me an object of humiliation and derision. And these are my last words to you my angry God: all this will do you no good. You have done everything possible to destroy my faith, yet I am dying precisely as I have lived, dying: ‘Shma Yishrael, hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, one Lord.’

Into your hands, O God, I commit my spirit.”

Friday, March 27

John 11:1-44

Your brother will rise

Our gospel text for today is that very famous story about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, it is a text that has often been expounded to explain the deep truths of both the vulnerable human aspect of Jesus who weeps at the loss of the one he loved but one that also speaks of the powerful divine aspect of Jesus who raises his friend from the dead. Our narrative begins from the place where Jesus hears of the illness of Lazarus and wants to leave to Bethany to meet him. Yet the disciples of Jesus are wary of this decision because they know that there is opposition to Jesus. In fact in the gospel according to St. John we find that the story of the death of Lazarus appears immediately after the narrative of how Jesus is almost stoned in the temple at Jerusalem. In this light, the disciples point out to Jesus that it is probably a bad idea for him to go to Bethany, which was just two miles away from Jerusalem. However when Lazarus dies they understand the compulsion to go and surprisingly even offer to go along with Jesus so that they may die with him, as Thomas suggests.

Surprisingly the gospel does not tell us much about Lazarus, although it can be argued that he is the one who Jesus loves, in the gospel according to St. John Lazarus is only described as the brother of Martha and Mary. We do not know how old Lazarus was or what was the illness that he was suffering from, the only thing that we know about him was that he was apparently held in some esteem among his peers because when he died a number of people had come to console Martha and Mary. It is in this context of a household in which there has been a death, a death perhaps of a rather young man, that Jesus enters and makes an attempt to console the two sisters. Let us not imagine that death was a stranger in the times of Jesus, living under the military occupation of Rome, the death of young men was not uncommon. It was probably not unusual for young men to be picked up by the Romans or by the Zealots and be tortured for information. These pick ups and torture were not unusual in a time of occupation and insurgency. Conversations with our brothers and sisters from around the world would inform us of how many young people die every single day because of either the armed forces or the insurgent fighters... let us not fool ourselves, these are also places of occupation and insurgency. How does one offer comfort to the families of those picked up and tortured?

It is apparent that Jesus was a comfort to the family because as soon as Martha meets him she indicates that had Jesus been there Lazarus would not have died. What did Martha mean when she said this, from what we know from Martha in this and other stories we know that she was one who had her head on her shoulders, not being the one to expect miracles, in fact a few verses later she indicates exactly this to us... perhaps Martha is indicating to us that Jesus would have mitigated the circumstances that led to Lazarus' death. Perhaps Jesus could have healed the illness that Lazarus was suffering from, perhaps Jesus could have prevented his arrest and torture; perhaps Jesus could have done something

different... Around the world there are young men being forced into armed conflict, child soldiers in Sri Lanka, young men in the DRC, racialized communities in the United States of America being encouraged to join the armed forces as the way out of grinding poverty. What are we doing different to prevent this from happening?

Jesus' answer to Martha is simple and direct...your brother will rise again. Five simple words but words filled with power. I wonder what those words did to those who heard them. What did those words mean to those who loved Lazarus? Martha met these words with faith and hope but with a faith and hope in the beyond, she believed that in the final reckoning there would be a resurrection when she would see her brother. This is the hope that we can offer people too, but often in offering a faith in the beyond we often lose sight of the here and now, our words of comfort should have relevance in the here and in the now as Jesus' words had for Martha. There will be a resurrection but we must also offer comfort in the here and in the now. We must evoke a resurrection in the here and now.

Yet the words of Jesus would have also struck fear in the hearts of some, some who were involved in the death of Lazarus. Fear in the hearts of a health care system that could not prevent the death of a young man, fear in the hearts of those who may have tortured young men in prisons, fear in the hearts of those who have suppressed the truth and have let falsehood prevail, fear in the hearts of those who remained silent in times of persecution, fear in the hearts of the religious leaders that could not provide an adequate word of comfort in the here and now. Fear in our hearts because we have not been able to provide adequate words of comfort for people who die in conflict. We have remained silent, watching their grief.

The words that we as religious leaders need to hear in our times of the death of young men is that our brothers will rise again, that our sisters who are being suppressed into silence will raise their voices, that our mothers who are witness to their young disappearing will let their grief turn to anger. Your brother will rise again... these words need to strike fear in our hearts because our brothers are rising. In villages across Asia and Africa our brothers are rising. In town after town in South America our sisters and brothers are raising up to say no to armed conflict, in town after town in North America our brothers are saying no to the evil power of the state. In town after town our brothers are rising; our sisters are organizing...will we rise with them?

Saturday, March 28

An affirmation of Faith in the context of economic injustice

(Based on the Accra Confession)

We do not believe in exploitation of the earth for the sake of economic profit
But we believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

We do not believe in the obscene accumulation of power
But we believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord.

We do not believe in the increasing distance between those who make the decisions and those who suffer them
But we believe that God became human and was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

We refuse to give our consent to militarization and the weapons of mass destruction
For we believe that our Lord Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

We do not believe that the forces of death will prevail
But we believe in the resurrection of Jesus, his ascension and that he is seated at the right hand of the father.

We do not believe that the world is at the mercy of the powerful
But we believe that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead.

We do not believe in the ideology of market, consumerism or materialism
But we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord the giver of life

We do not believe in hierarchy, prejudice and discrimination
But we believe in the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,

We do not believe in revenge or the annihilation of the oppressor
But we believe in the forgiveness of sins,

We do not believe that death is the end
But we believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen

Sunday, March 29

A Sermon for Palm Sunday

Noise, words, shouting, these are of course one way of expressing oneself. But many times people also express themselves through silence. There are many reasons why people keep silent, there are of course the strong silent types, people for whom silence is a form of masculinity and power, on the other hand there are also the shy, timid people who are too scared to open their mouths. Still we also find those who are forced into silence, sometimes by threat or by overt or covert violence. There are even those who keep silent because they want to be neutral, their silence is a way supporting the status quo.

Today is Palm Sunday and the day in which we remember the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Unlike Good Friday, which is marked by mourning, Palm Sunday is a noisy day that marks the beginning of the Passion Week. In many churches there are processions going around the church building with singing and chanting. It is a day that remembers the triumphant entry of Jesus into the temple city of Jerusalem. It must be remembered that Jerusalem was on a hill and that it was often that pilgrims made their way up the hill singing and chanting as they walked up the hill to God – a noisy event indeed.

And as Jesus makes his way up the hill we find that it is the crowd who makes a noisy welcome for him. They strew the roads with palm leaves and their cloaks singing out and welcoming Jesus who they believe will be their liberator. This is not the first time that this had been done, history records that other insurgent leaders who dared to challenge the power of Rome as well as Herod also made a similar journey while people laid their cloaks out for them in welcome. Similarly it is likely that the crowds also welcomed victorious rulers and kings and other such nobility as they entered into Jerusalem. Yet it is this same crowd who today welcome Jesus who turn against him at the trial before Pontius Pilate where they call for his crucifixion. A significant point because it does show us that it is the common people, people like you and I, who today wave palm leaves, but a week later are baying for his blood and death.

But today we shall not concentrate on the crowds who are making noise and welcoming Jesus, we shall not also concentrate on Jesus who also speaks in this text, but rather we shall concentrate on the silent voices. And in doing so we shall use our imaginations to ask why are these people silent in the midst of a crowd that is making so much noise, what are the possible reasons for their silence.

If we read the text closely we will notice that there are three groups in the text who are silent, who do not speak. The first is of course the two disciples who Jesus sends off to get the donkey and the colt, the second person who is silent in the text is of course the owner of the donkey and the colt, and lastly we find that it is the donkey and the colt which itself are silent.

The first set of silent people who we encounter in this text is of course the two disciples. It is significant that Jesus asks these two disciples to go and bring the

donkey and its colt. We are given no indication of who these two disciples are but both Matthew and Mark's gospel contain the story of the two brothers, James and John, whose mother approached Jesus for positions for them just before this text of the triumphant entry. It may be possible then that the two disciples that Jesus sent out for this task are actually James and John. They of course carry out the task perfectly and one can probably imagine that they are hoping that this task would bring them a reward, maybe a good position in the kingdom of Jesus when it came. It must be understood that the entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem was as a military ruler who was coming to take over from the Jewish elite and the Roman colonizers. It is likely that James and John were caught up in this fantasy and believed that Jesus would take power that they would be able to share in this power if they carried out the tasks that they were given well. It is probably why they carry out their orders with implicit obedience, and theirs is the silence of an obedience without questioning. Maybe if they had asked Jesus questions he would have explained to them what he was about, that his task was not to grab power for himself but instead to empower others by sharing of his life, a task that he also required of his disciples. But the silence of implicit obedience of the disciples does not allow them the space to question and instead they assume that Jesus is planning a powerful takeover of Jerusalem and they want a share of the spoils.

In our world today we are brought up not to question, to just accept things as they are and not to challenge the status quo. We must break the silence of this unquestioning attitude and must question everything. For we must remember that Rebellion against injustice is after all obedience to God.

The second person who remains silent in this text is of course the owner of the donkey and its colt. We must remember that this was a time of political insurgency, there were a number of insurgent and militant groups operating that time. We of course know of the Zealots who were carrying on an armed campaign against the Roman colonizers and their collaborators. Militancy, war and insurgency, often takes a terrible toll on local populations. Militancy and official armies need resources and these resources are often taken from common people. Friends from the North East often tell us stories of how the local militants impose a tax on the locals, extortion and looting are often part of the deal. In many contexts extortion takes place from both the state army as well as from the local militants. It is in this context probably that the colt and the donkey are so easily taken away.

While Matthew's gospel gives no indication of what the owner has to say, the narrator silences the owner, in Mark and Luke we find that when people protest, they are told that the 'Lord has need of him!'. Even in Matthew we find that this is what the disciples have been told to say. The Lord has need of him, the poor owner of the donkey and the colt may have thought that some insurgent leader needs these animals and makes no protest at all. This is the silence of fear. Often fear forces people into silence, we are afraid to upset the boat, afraid to protest because of what it may mean for us and our families, we are believe that if we keep our heads down and don't say anything then it will all be alright. This is the silence of fear.

The third group who keep silent are the donkey and the colt, now this may be a bit surprising because donkeys do not speak anyway. But the fact remains that Biblical donkeys do. The donkey of Balaam spoke! While of course the text can be read this way, it is also true that in the context of the Bible donkeys are symbols of powerlessness, of weakness. In the Bible horses are examples of power, donkeys on the other hand were symbols of powerlessness. It is significant that this text begins with mentioning the Mount of Olives, from the prophetic tradition, when the final battle against the forces of evil are to take place, it begins at the Mount of Evil, this was well known to the Jewish people and is found in the book of Zephaniah. Yet it is equally significant that Matthew quotes from the book of Zephaniah, but from a different section, the section that speaks of the messiah coming on an ass, or in other words, in powerlessness. He uses an alternative understanding of the messiah – seeing the messiah as being powerless.

The reason for the silence of the donkey and the colt is of course powerlessness, and there are people today among us who are forced into a culture of silence because of powerlessness. Dalits, Tribals, Women and others are forced into silence because of a lack of power. Yet we find that it is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that empowers us to fight against these forces of death that push people into silence.

Today is Palm Sunday and the crowd is making noise, a week later the same crowd is baying for his blood. But the fact is that that time also there are people who are silent, people who should have spoken up but didn't. Was it because they didn't want to question things? Or was it because they lived in fear of what would happen to them? Or were they silent because they had no power?

Today we as a Church are also silent, we sing our hymns so loud because we want to drown out the noises from outside that are disturbing us, these are the noises of innocent blood being shed, of people being unjustly accused, of young trafficked girls, of injustice and the powerful manipulating to get their own way. The silence made sure an innocent man died that day, let us raise our voices in protest!

Monday, March 30

Bible Study on Trafficking

The Context:

"I have lost my childhood. I have lost my dignity. My place of refuge turned out to be a place of exploitation, first by my brothers and then my friend's father where I escaped for shelter. All of them raped me several times. My dream is to get married and have a home and a family," says Haseena* a fourteen year old girl street child in sex work in East Delhi.

"They promised me a job in a home but I landed in a brothel. I managed to escape but I do not know my way back to my village. I live in the railway station, begging and pleasing the police and coolies. Is there a safe place I can go and stay now? Can I ever get back to my parents?" asks Prema*, a sixteen year old trafficked survivor and now a street beggar in Siliguri.

"My dream is to have my childhood back", says a sixteen year old Rashmi* a street girl child in Sewri, Mumbai who is a victim of sexual abuse at home and is now pregnant from her step-father's brother.

Statistics point to the fact that in recent years millions of women and children have been victims of human trafficking, both nationally and across international borders. It is estimated that the profits generated out of human trafficking accumulate to around five to seven billion US dollars a year that is considerably more than the global narcotics or arms trade! While many women and young girls are pushed into sex work, the issue of human trafficking is also about forced labour, domestic workers and organ trade. The situation of economic globalization has of course worsened the situation because the moving of human populations across international borders has become more prolific. To make matters worse the increasing amount of sex tourism within the context of globalization has only enhanced the number of trafficked persons. It is estimated that around 200,000 commercial sex workers in India are of Nepali origin of which around 20% are children.

The large demand for domestic workers in India and other countries in Asia has only increased the demand for human trafficking and a number of young girls are employed as domestic workers. The possibilities of exploitation and abuse of domestic workers is huge and often goes unreported. In fact Nivedita Menon in her book, *Seeing Like a Feminist* has pointed to how many women have turned to sex work from domestic work because of the high rates of abuse.

Indeed trafficking has brought to the forefront the collusion between patriarchy and economic injustice in the world today. It is important that we as a reformed community divert our energies towards fighting this dreadful form of human abuse.

The Text: Yet though human trafficking is such a large issue around the world, it is not often that the Bible is read from this perspective. While the Bible has some texts that speak about human trafficking (The Joseph narratives, the exiles in Babylon etc.) these texts have seldom been read from a trafficking perspective. The text that we shall be looking at however is a rather obscure text that is found in 2 Kings 5:1-19 which tells the story of Naaman, who was the commander of the Syrian army. The text is unique in the sense that it shows the concern of God for all nations and not just Israel, the paradox of the text is that the commander of the Syrian army, who was the tormentor of Israel finds healing in the context of Israel itself. The narrative of course is part of the larger Elisha cycle of narratives whose central emphasis is the assertion of the prophetic traditions.

It is within this context that we find the story of Naaman who though being a commander in the Syrian Army is one who is living with leprosy. It should be mentioned that in the Biblical language leprosy was a generic term used for many kinds of skin disease. Having been unable to find a cure for himself, this commander is informed by his wife's servant girl about the prophet in Israel who would be able to cure the commander. The girl appears only in the very first part of this story and we are told that she is one who was captured during a war raid. Many commentaries on this text assign the girl a negligible role or do not mention her at all. The attempt of this Bible study is to re-read this text from the perspective of the girl. If we are to look at the text closely we will find three things about this young girl, firstly she is rootless, secondly she is powerless and lastly she is futureless.

Rootless: As mentioned before the girl in the text is marginalised by the more powerful men around her, both in terms of the men in the text and the men who have interpreted the text historically. Most commentaries do not give the girl more than a second glance, at best just a passing reference in verse 3. Significantly however this girl is nameless. We know nothing about her except for the fact that she was kidnapped by a raiding Syrian army and was brought to serve in Syria.

Names have a very significant role to play within the context of the Bible. They indicate the destiny of the person. Naaman for example means pleasant, and though one would begin by assuming that there was nothing pleasant about this army commander, at least initially, the text itself seems to favour him in the end someone who turns pleasant. Likewise Elisha means the God of supplication or of riches and in this text we find that this meaning coming true as well. Naaman's request is heard through Elisha and on the other hand Elisha does not accept any gift indicating that the God he worships is rich enough.

Yet we find that this young girl does not have a name. This is of course typical of the patriarchal world within which the Bible was written. Being a girl, that is to say not yet even a woman and because she was working as a servant, more like a slave really in the household of Naaman, the girl is considered by the text to be insignificant, rootless, without a story. Her only place within the context of the whole narrative is to be the one to point to Elisha as being the person who could bring salvation to Naaman. It seems as though the narrator was stuck with the issue of how would the Commander of the Syrian army hear of Elisha and this

problem is neatly solved by this young trafficked girl. Apart from the fact that she was kidnapped and brought to Syria, which would explain how Naaman hears about Elisha, there is nothing else we know about her. What was her family like? How many brothers and sisters did she have? Or even more, what was her life in Syria like? Was she a victim of sexual abuse? It does seem likely that slave girls during that time were? Did she have any of her own people with her?

The fact remains that the girl who appears in the opening verses of chapter 5 is rootless, not because she originally was so, but because the Syrian army and the text makes her so. She is forgotten in the pages of the Bible. In fact she could be one of the many girls who work as domestic help in one of the big cities of India, or perhaps like one who lives in the many brothels of the city. Rootless, homeless, not because she was born that way but because she was trafficked.

Powerless: With being rootless of course is also the issue of being powerless. Without the security of her community of course this girl was powerless, after all she worked as a servant to the wife of the commander. We are not aware of what kind of physical or even sexual abuse this girl faced but it is very likely that she was victimized on this front. In short it would not be wrong for us to look at this girl as being powerless.

What is significant though is that the entire narrative in 2 Kings 5 is a question of the negotiation of power. The first negotiation begins with Naaman and the King of Syria, though Naaman is this powerful commander he needs a letter of introduction for him to go to Israel and get treated. The King of Syria of course is also in a position of power over the King of Israel who was his vassal and so he shoots off a letter. The king of Israel is shocked with the letter because he takes it as a threat or an affront and essentially throws a tantrum. He feels that he is being pushed into a corner by Syria. Elisha comes into the picture and quells the king's fears saying that he would be able to do the needful.

The exchange between Elisha and Naaman is then also a negotiation of power, when Elisha asks Naaman to dip in the Jordan, Naaman is affronted. He probably imagined that it would be an elaborate ritual that required much expense yet the solution that is offered to him is awfully simple. He is also affronted because he takes it as a personal attack on his culture and society and makes the claim that the rivers in Syria are as good if not better than the Jordan. Fortunately another nameless servant of Naaman comes to his rescue (One has to wonder where Naaman would be without his servants!) Naaman of course surrenders more to his servants than to Elisha and is eventually cured, he then becomes a worshipper of the God of Israel.

In these short verses we see that each person tries to negotiate with the power that they have. Yet it is this young girl who has no power to call her own.

Yet an alternative reading also brings to the forefront that this girl was not absolutely powerless. For one we find that she speaks in verse 3, while words are put into her mouth by the narrator, she is one of the few women in the Bible who actually does have a voice; most women are usually reduced to being silent

spectators. We also find that this girl has the power of information; she knows where help can be sought. From our part it is rather naive to assume that street children and trafficked persons are absolutely powerless, this kind of thinking smacks of our own elitist messianic aspirations. Fact is that many have some amount of power, deep reserves of inner strength that have enabled them to overcome the violence and oppression that they face. Yes they are powerless in one sense, powerless to act in violent ways or abuse power as their oppressors do, but to claim that they are absolutely powerless is not entirely correct either. We in fact have a lot to learn from trafficked persons.

It is also likely that this girl by giving her information about Elisha was also claiming the supremacy of her culture over that of the culture into which she was trafficked. It may have been a subtle subversion of the power that was being exerted on her. But what is also startling is that this girl offers this information, one would think that she may have been angry with her master and mistress, with the community that she was inserted into, or even that she has turned bitter with the deep violence that she had faced, but no, she was more than willing to help when she had the chance. In fact if one were to read the story closely one would notice that it is the servants who are keen on their masters healing. On one level it could possibly tell us something about Naaman and his household, that maybe he was a good person, but it is more likely that this is a truism about the oppressed, that they are willing to make the situation better when they can!

We find then that this girl, even though she is a powerless, victimized person, is willing to use even the little power that she has for the betterment of others, even her master!

The last point that we find about the girl is that she is futureless. She is forgotten in these pages never to be remembered again. Everyone in the text that we have read seem to have some future that is hopeful. The King of Syria is assured of his power and status as long as this is not disturbed he doesn't have to worry. The King of Israel doesn't have to worry because what was asked for was done, he is also concerned about his power and position. Naaman of course had the most to gain because he will return to his community as a healed man. Elisha has been vindicated and he has found one more disciple for his God. The story seems to end well for all concerned, except for this girl of ours. Restoration happens for Naaman, why doesn't it happen for this girl? What happens to her we do not know. One cannot also help but wonder that when Elisha was being asked what he could be given, why didn't he ask for that girl to be returned to her community and her people. It should be remembered that Elisha was one who stood within the prophetic tradition of Israel, he was one who stood for justice, did he not see that this girl was a victim who needed restoration? Was his ministry only to the wealthy, powerful Naaman? Is the ministry of the church today only to the powerful, are we like Elisha unable to see the victims of trafficking, or consider this unimportant? Millions are being trafficked, what is our response?

The girl in the text has no future, the text does not allow us to look into her future. This is the case of many, many girls and women who are trafficked, the

future looks very bleak for them. The challenged before us is how can we make their future better.

Questions

1. Imagine the future of the young girl, how did it turn out for her. Represent your imagination in skit, drawing or poem form.
2. Who in the text are we as a church closest to? Naaman? Elisha? The King of Israel? The King of Syria?

Tuesday, March 31

Prayers of confession (Adapted from various sources)

Confession:

Let us pray to the Lord.
We have heard the cries of injustice:
The cry of the single mother
Working at night so she can feed her children.
The cry of the old woman, who just lost her job,
The cry of the young woman
Who was promised a land of milk and honey,
And found only violence.

Mayenziwe 'ntando yakho

The cry of the Dalit woman being brutalized
Her day's wages being denied
Finding only sexual abuse...

Mayenziwe 'ntando yakho

Yet we have been led to believe that this is normal
Not out of the ordinary
We have been taught to not get involved
And we have obeyed
Unquestioning, believing
Having faith,
Not in God, but in the lords of this earth
Help us to question Lord
To not follow blindly
But to ask the difficult question
To expose reality
To doubt and through doubt
To come to true faith in you. Amen

Mayenziwe 'ntando yakho

Absolution:

Hear the good news
Who is in a position to condemn?
 Only Christ
 And Christ died for us,
 Christ rose for us
 Christ reigns in power for us
 Christ prays for us.
Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.

The old life has gone
A new life as begun
Know that you are forgiven, and be at peace
Thanks be to God. Amen

A litany of the Kingdom

We often hear it said that 'The Poor will always be with us.'

Give us the courage then to say 'Your Kingdom Come.'

We often hear it said that 'It's what they're used to... they're not like us.'

Give us the courage then to say 'Your Kingdom Come.'

We often hear it said that 'I don't want to think about it – it makes me depressed.'

Give us the courage then to say 'Your Kingdom Come.'

We often hear it said that 'What did she expect—dressed like that.'

Give us the courage then to say 'Your Kingdom Come.'

We often hear it said that 'It's the world – you can't change it.'

Give us the courage then to say 'Your Kingdom Come.'

Amen

Wednesday, April 1

A thought for April Fool's Day

In 1976 the British astronomer Patrick Moore announced on BBC Radio 2 that at 9:47 AM on the first of April a once-in-a-lifetime astronomical event was going to occur that listeners could experience in their very own homes. The planet Pluto would pass behind Jupiter, temporarily causing a gravitational alignment that would counteract and lessen the Earth's own gravity. Moore told his listeners that if they jumped in the air at the exact moment that this planetary alignment occurred, they would experience a strange floating sensation. It was all an elaborate April fool's joke and when 9:47 AM arrived, BBC2 began to receive hundreds of phone calls from listeners claiming to have felt the sensation. One woman even reported that she and her eleven friends had risen from their chairs and floated around the room.

April Fool's is a great occasion for merriment and joy within the context of a community, and often within the context of a seminary community. I remember distinctly how in my student years in seminary on the night before April fools students would make much preparation to fool others. Once the students carried a fellow student's scooter to the third floor of the boys hostel. In TTS I remember how on one dark night, because there was no electricity, cows from the cowshed were let loose into the hostel and the students were woken up by their confused and disoriented mooing. I am sure that student and faculty present here would have a story or two of their own to share about April Fools day.

The origins of April Fools is of course very vague there are many theories of origin, some linked to a change in the calendar system and others say it is a vestigial of the festival of Lud, the god of humour. What we do know of course is that April Fool's day has been celebrated at least since the 16th century. Likewise days of revelry and fooling around are common to various cultures around the world in the time of the seasons changing from winter into spring. Our own Holi is a similar festival in which revelry is integral to its celebration.

Maybe of course there is something fascinating and desirable about fooling around that endears us to such festivals. It is likely that on these days we drop our masks and act like ourselves even. To act 'foolish' then is to act our true selves, to let down our defences and become once more who we really are.

Biblically speaking though we have to admit that there are two kinds of fools. The first kind of fool is the kind that is found in Psalm where it says, the fool has said in his heart there is no God. A common interpretation is of course that there is ignorance in atheism, that atheists are somehow foolish people. But if one were to read the Psalm closely one would find that this is not what is being referred to here. The so called 'sin' here is not of ignorance of the existence of God, rather what is being implied is that it is foolishness to think that a person can do all kinds of wickedness and evil and get away with it. If one were to read the whole Psalm one would notice that it speaks of the wickedness of a person who oppresses the poor and does all other manner of evil things and still thinks

he can get away with it. The right reading of this text then is that it is foolishness on the part of the wicked to believe that they can get away with evil. It is foolishness of the powerful to think that they can get away with the abuse of their power. This of course carries on today as well, the powerful think that they can get away with their abuse of power as though they will not be held accountable for it. The snatching away of people's land and resources for the sake of profit, the accumulation of wealth as the sole meaning of life that the rich industrialists in this country and in other parts of the world are indulging in are all part of this foolishness. In fact one can quite imagine God telling them 'You Fools, today your life will be required of you!' This is of course one kind of foolishness in the Bible – the foolishness of the powerful who abuse their power and think that they will get away with it.

A second kind of foolishness that the Bible speaks of is the foolishness of the gospel. Paul speaks of this foolishness of the gospel very clearly in the very first chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians that we have had read to us. Paul writing in the context of the Greek philosophies and ideologies claims that the cross of Christ is indeed foolishness to the Greeks. And of course it is, what sense would a dying man on the cross make, a defeated saviour so to speak, a God who gives one's life on the cross for the sake of us humans? And in our world today in the face of all the ideologies of winners and being victorious and doing well and accumulation, the gospel message of giving one's life for the sake of the other is once more seen to be as foolish. If we really think about it the message of Christ is utter and total foolishness according to the logic of the world. It is a gospel of the losers.

Yet the text does not stop here, it goes on to say that those who have turned to the gospel are also not those who are of the powerful of the world that it is really the foolish, where foolishness is defined as powerlessness that have turned to the gospel. The gospel does not belong to the powerful and strong, but instead the weak and the broken. It is for such that Christ in his death expresses solidarity.

This is of course the story of the gospel where ever it has been: it has been the downtrodden, the weak, the marginalized and the oppressed that have endeared itself to its message. It is the weak who have been attracted to the foolishness of its message, on the other hand we find that the powerful have said in their hearts that there is no God and have turned away from it.

And may you be blessed with the foolishness to think that you can make a difference in the world, so that you will do things, which others tell you cannot be done

Maunday Thursday, April 2

The time has almost come for Jesus to be arrested and then be crucified. And in these final moments Jesus institutes the new community among his disciples. And from the text we have read we can see that this community that Jesus has initiated has three specific characteristics.

Firstly we see that it is a community that serves one another. It is not a hierarchical community but rather one in which the one who serves is considered the greatest. Therefore we find our Lord washing the feet of the disciples, a parable in action through which Jesus instructs his disciples that we must serve one another.

Secondly we see that this is a community that shares. It is significant that even now we remember Jesus through the common sharing of a meal together. A meal in which all of us share from one bread and one cup. And every meal becomes a sign of the community that Christ inaugurates. Hospitality stands at the centre of this new community initiated by Jesus. To show hospitality to the migrant, the broken and the disinherited lies at the heart of who we are as Christians.

Lastly we find that this community has the character of giving up for the sake of the other, the disciples are told to love one another just as Jesus loved them. And how did our Lord love them but by giving up his life for their sakes and ours. If the disciples and we are to love each other just as Christ has loved us it means that we must be willing to give up ourselves for the sake of the other.

We are part of the community that Jesus initiated that first Maundy Thursday and we too are called to serve each other, to share with each other and to give up ourselves for the sake of the other.

Good Friday, April 3

Today the cross is a universal symbol of Christianity, to see a cross is to identify someone or something as Christian. The cross was of course not always the symbol of Christianity, to the early Christian, the symbol of the fish was, where the Greek word for fish, ICTHUS stands for Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour. In fact in the early Christian period the cross was a symbol of shame, of what would happen to someone who dared to challenge the Roman Empire. It was the symbol of a cruel death that involved much suffering and it was used as exemplary punishment when the Romans wanted to teach local populations that they had colonized a lesson. The symbolic meaning of the cross within the context of early Christianity was then tied up with systems of violence and human suffering.

Yet somehow the symbolic meaning of the cross as Christian has lost its meaning in the modern world. On the one hand the cross is seen as a product of Christian triumphalism in the context of colonialism and on the other it has become an ornament in the postmodern world. The cross, essentially a wooden tree that one carried on ones back, has become a totem to signify Christian presence or even a decoration that one hangs around ones neck. The symbol of suffering has taken on other meanings for us today.

Good Friday as an annual ritual however, forces us back to re-look and re-symbolize the cross as an expression of suffering. Today I believe while we look to the cross we must also bring to the forefront our understandings of suffering. In conclusion to the entire service we have had today I would like to make three points.

Firstly while we focus on the cross we must Re-spiritualize suffering. The re-symbolism of the cross in our world today to remove it out of the framework of suffering has also worked side by side with the re-symbolizing of suffering itself. Unfortunately what we as the church and theology have done is to spiritualize suffering and therefore to normalize it. Even more unfortunately the cross and Christ's death on the cross is used to justify and legitimize suffering for us. Therefore women who are brutalized in the context of their marriages are told that they must bear with the pain and go back into what can be only be called unholy alliances because Jesus also suffered. The suffering of the poor is explained away by suggesting that suffering is part of the Christian life. Further the real suffering of an innocent man on the cross is explained away in terms of salvation and spirituality by which we depoliticize the dynamics of power that actually murdered and innocent man. In our reflections on the cross we seldom see the violence that is part of it and a violence that killed and continues to kill many like Jesus.

Fact is that the cross and the death of an innocent man on it should bring to our awareness the cruelty of systems that murder off people and then treat it as being normal and perfectly legitimate. The drama of the passion of Christ should bring the real suffering of Christ and others who suffer closer to us. We must allow ourselves to be disturbed by this terrible travesty of justice and of injustice

everywhere else also. In stead of wrongly spiritualizing suffering as the inevitable practice of this world and legitimizing it as the means of salvation or the norm of the Christian life, the cross must enable us to evoke other responses to suffering in the world. Other responses that are deeply spiritual – the cross must evoke in us empathy with others that are suffering, it must evoke in us protest against all that makes people suffer, it must evoke in us initiatives to reach out in healing and succor to all who are suffering. We must re-spiritualize our response to suffering to enable us to ensure that it happens no more.

But the question is what theological resources do we have to be able to re-spiritualize suffering in this way. The first theological resource that Good Friday brings to the forefront is the entire question of the absence of God. While I know that it is popular for us to speak of God being everywhere, I think it is also time that we humbly accept that sometimes we need to speak in terms of God absence, God behind the veil so to speak. I would believe that all of us here have experienced moments of God absence – times when we have cried out to God asking “Where are you?” To question God in this manner is a legitimate question in the face of human suffering, and it is also the experience of Jesus on the cross when he cries out, My God My God why have you forsaken me? This experience of the absence of God is made clear to us when we think of Christians in Kandhamal who were brutally murdered, some of them after being tortured and even played with for hours – probably just as Christ was. Or when we think of the entire experience of the Jews under the Nazi regime, or when we think of the many who died in the Tsunami.

The liturgical year is in acknowledgement of God absence – while at Christmas we celebrate the presence of God in terms of Immanuel or God with us, in the context of Good Friday we also remember times of God absence – that there are moments of extreme human suffering when it seems as though God is not there. This is why after the Passion Sunday and all of Passion week and Holy week the cross remains veiled. To remind us of times of God absence – an experience that even Christ had.

Yet what we must remember that even in moments of God absence we are not alone. The absence of God necessitates the presence of human community, even I would argue the presence of the community of the redeemed. This is the last point that I would like to leave you with this Good Friday, that in the midst of suffering, in the midst of God absence, what is essential is human presence.

To Christ on the cross human presence was exemplified in the presence of the woman, the faithful disciples who stood by Jesus in his moment of despair. Even when God was absent and he cried out to God, it was the women who were present at the foot of the cross.

Today we live in the world in which there is much suffering, we should not legitimize it or spiritualize it by arguing that it is part of the Christian life or life in general, rather we must meet this suffering with human solidarity. With Christian presence.

Holy Saturday, April 4

Thinking about Forgiveness

Forgiveness is one of the central messages of Jesus and this comes out forcefully in his first word on the cross itself and in doing so Jesus calls us to re-interpret what forgiveness actually is.

Firstly we must note that all of us are in need of forgiveness because all of us are responsible for the suffering of innocent victims. It is significant that Jesus' first words on the cross are not only a prayer but also that they are a prayer for others: For the forgiveness of those who were doing this horrible thing to him. Yet in these first words on the cross we find that Jesus responds with a deep love for those who are doing this to him. We find that Jesus responds to what is happening to him almost with a pity towards those who are performing such violent actions. He realizes that the Roman soldiers are probably acting on the orders of their superiors and of those who held political power in his time. He understands that the soldiers are acting in unreflective ways that do not bring their own personal agency into what is happening. And he calls on God to forgive them because they have not understood what they are doing. In doing so Jesus actually draws attention to how we unreflectively and unthinkingly become party to systems of violence. This is true in our day as well, for those of us who are from the middle class we are unthinkingly part of a system that discriminates the poor and excludes them from full participation in society. As men we are unreflectively part of a patriarchal system that not only commits all kinds of violence against women but also privileges us as men. Whether we like it or not at some level we are also beneficiaries of human trafficking, whether it is through slave labour or cheap products produced by slave labour. At other times we fool ourselves into thinking that it is not our problem, let us not get involved, we are merely following orders. But the prayer of Jesus reminds us that if we are not actively involved in making the world a better place for innocent suffers then we are actually part of the system and are in need of forgiveness.

By calling for forgiveness on those who do not know what they are doing Jesus calls into account the fact that all of us are culpable in these violent systems. We may not realize it but we are to blame for the violence in the world around us that takes innocent victims. The point is that we must become aware and struggle against these systems.

The second point that we must note about the words of Jesus is that forgiveness is the privilege of the victim. The question is who can forgive? And the answer only can be that those who have been wronged and sinned against can offer forgiveness. In our world today we often choose easy and quick ways for forgiveness and absolution, if we sin against someone, talked a bad word, done an evil deed, made life more difficult for someone. We confess and seek forgiveness from God. But these words of Jesus on the cross show us very clearly that God is not the one who can give forgiveness. Forgiveness has to be given from the one who has been wronged. The Bible is very clear in telling us that if we have sinned against someone and have come to the temple to sacrifice, we

should leave what we have, go and seek forgiveness from our brother or sister and then come back to offer our sacrifice. If we have wronged our brother and sister we must seek our forgiveness from them and not from God, in this sense the privilege of forgiveness belongs to the victim and not even to God.

The question that we have to ask then is whether God has a place in the act of forgiveness or not. I would argue that it is precisely because of Jesus death on the cross that God has this right. In the death of Christ on the cross Jesus, God himself, becomes the representative of all of the victims of history. Jesus on the cross symbolizes all those innocent victims of history who have been unjustly victimized. In this sense, realizing the victimization of Jesus and his being the representative of all the victims that we may seek his forgiveness. This is why Jesus is able to call on God to forgive those who did not know what they were doing.

Lastly we have to acknowledge that though forgiveness can only be given by the victim that forgiveness is actually the right of those who have committed the sin. If the sinner, the oppressor truly comes in contrition and repentance to the person to whom they have committed the sin against, the victim of the sin can in no way refuse forgiveness. These may be hard for us to swallow, but this is the gospel message. If those who have sinned against us, come and genuinely ask for our forgiveness, the imperative of the gospel is that we cannot refuse them forgiveness. Forgiveness and a second chance is their right. Therefore for those who are trafficked cannot refuse forgiveness if those who had done this to them come in repentance. If a brother or sister has wronged us we cannot refuse to forgive them if they have come to us to say sorry, that is their right to be forgiven.

Having said this of course it is important for us to note that the way of Jesus is better, Jesus was willing to forgive even those who had not come to ask him for forgiveness, he was willing to forgive even those who had not realized what they had done. Today as we reflect on the work of Jesus on the cross let us remember that his first word reminds us that we are all in need of forgiveness because we are all unwittingly part of systems of violence even today, that forgiveness is the privilege of the one who has been victimized and lastly that forgiveness is the right of the one who has sinned. Amen

Easter Sunday, April 5

An Easter Sermon

It is not unusual in many parts of our country, and in all possibility also in other parts of the world, that on Holy Saturday, a Easter pageant is conducted where the entire passion narrative as is found in the gospels is enacted out for audiences. I say that this is not unusual not only because this is a rather popular occurrence, but also because the passion narratives lend themselves to the dramatization of the events that take place in the build up to the crucifixion and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As a literary form the passion narratives play a distinct role in each of the four gospels, as a style of writing they are different from any of the other writings in the context of the gospels themselves. Almost standing alone, in the context of the gospels, they take the reader through the dramatic buildup of events from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the glory of the empty tomb. The narrative is fast paced taking the reader through the clearing of the temple, the betrayal of Jesus by one of his own inner circle, the last supper, the arrest, the trial, the denial of Jesus by those he considered his closest, the torture, crucifixion, death and finally the resurrection. These several events are packed into a tightly written narrative the high drama of which cannot be missed.

Traditionally the passion narratives are read as a typical action movie, where each of the elements of an action film are to be found, with Jesus as the protagonist and the antagonists being the Romans and the Jewish Elite, one also finds other elements that are part of action films even today for example, the supposedly close friend who betrays, the one who promises loyalty but denies the friend, the collusion of the evil forces that use an innocent victim as a scapegoat, the travesty of justice in a kangaroo court and finally the death of the one who was anticipated as the king who would bring the rule of justice for all. The plot seemingly ends with an anti-climax where the expected does not happen, Jesus, instead of inaugurating the reign of God, dies at the hands of the villains – however in a twist the anti-climax is not the end – the climax is still to come with the resurrection of Jesus. In the final analysis then the villains are defeated, good over comes evil and the victory is won. Jesus the hero of the plot has the final say with the Schwarzenegger like statement promising that he'll be back!

While this is indeed a legitimate reading of the narratives, today I would like to suggest an alternative reading of the text – to move away from looking at it like a fast paced action sequence, with its heroes and villains but seeing it in terms of farce. Farce can be defined as a literary style which is marked by dramatic exaggeration, fast paced events and a dramatic twist in the plot referred to as *deus ex machine*–in which a difficult problem is solved in an unexpected manner that is usually contrary to the logic of the plot itself. In the context of the passion narrative this is emphasized in the resurrection of Jesus coming as an absolute twist in the tale that resolves the travesty of justice that takes place in the arrest, trial and death of Jesus. As is common within the style of farce it is often combined with another literary genre, which I would believe in the passion

narratives, is political satire. Where the passion narrative is actually delegitimizing the status quo of both the Romans as well as the Jewish elite, exposing them for what they actually are.

If this be the case then, I would suggest that unlike the traditional readings of the text that see Jesus as the hero, in this alternative reading of seeing the passion narratives as farce and political satire would actually see Jesus as the clown. The comedian of the piece so to speak.

Our popular understandings of the clown or the comedian is unfortunately influenced by modern literature and popular Indian cinema, particularly from the eighties, which views the role of the comedian or the clown as only offering comic relief, that is to say that the clown or the comedian only appears at times when a break from the intensity of the main story is required. The role of the clown is seen to provide a break from the larger narrative, appearing only in the sub-plot, however in the context of farce the clown plays a larger role—in fact even the role of the protagonist, the main character of the entire storyline. It is this role that I believe that Jesus plays when we view the passion narratives as farce.

But how do we nuance the understanding of Jesus as the clown? In the usual costume of the clown, the clown itself can be seen to have many faces, sometimes this face is sad, sometimes this face is mocking, sometimes this face is joyful and happy. For our sermon this morning we shall be concentrating on these three faces of the clown and we will be looking at how Jesus, in the context of the passion narratives, fulfills all these three roles.

The first face of the clown is the clown viewed as an object of ridicule, the buffoon of the show so to speak. This can be referred to as the mocked at face of the clown or even the sad face. In this face of the clown the clown is the fool of the piece, the object of our derision. He is seen as the innocent one who is unaware of the ways of the world and as a result suffers because of it. The typical country bumpkin who has difficulties in negotiating through the ways of the big bad city. As we watch this face of the clown, the clown becomes someone who is laughed at, mocked by us. We as the audience privilege ourselves over the naivety of the clown, in what the Germans would call *schadenfreude*, we derive pleasure from the suffering of others, it is pleasure at another's pain.

The psychology that goes behind the clown playing this role is that we project ourselves and our inabilities upon the clown who takes it upon himself. In a way, we are laughing at our own inabilities and deficiencies when we are doing this. The clown then plays the role of the scapegoat, instead of feeling bad about our own inadequacies we are able to convert those into our derision of the clown who in a way represents our very selves. In taking the mocking and the derision the clown invites us to become aware of our own weaknesses and while we are doing that to be able to overcome them by laughing at the clown on whom we project these weaknesses. We are endeared to the sad face of the clown because it resonates with our own experience of sadness, but in our projection of our own weaknesses upon the clown we are also able to overcome them.

The imagery of Jesus as the suffering servant fits into this idea of the clown who is mocked at. The imagery of the suffering servant does not conceive the messiah as the hero who overcomes but rather as the one who is derided and mocked at – but through whom our redemption is also received. In the imagery of the suffering servant we are invited to identify our own weaknesses in the weakness of Jesus but at the same time also to find redemption by doing so. The sad face of Jesus the clown invites us to identify ourselves in him but at the same time through the act of the resurrection also offers us the hope that we are able to overcome these weaknesses.

But the mocked at face of Jesus is not the only face—what we have to come to terms with is also the mocking face of Jesus.

The mocking face of Jesus:

The mocking face of the clown is one that we are all familiar with. In the Indian tradition it is epitomized in the stories of the court jester who time and again gets the better of the king. The fact is that the role of the clown often is to be able to speak truth to power, but to do so in a humorous way. This is seen as well in the mocking face of Jesus the clown as well, who is able to speak truth to power of course we know that Jesus was able to do that in his words, but Jesus was also able to do so through symbolic action. This mocking face of Jesus comes out extremely clearly in the course of the passion narratives.

The beauty of farce or of political satire for that matter is that it mirrors our own society for us and by doing at it is able to expose society for what it is. This is of course the role that the entire passion narratives play for us, that they expose the violence of the Roman Empire in which an innocent man is tried and executed. Jesus of course is the representative of other innocent victims who have been extinguished by the power of empire. By going through the role of the scapegoat or the victim of the piece, Jesus the clown is not a mere pawn in the entire drama, but by doing so he is able to expose the reality of the system for what it is.

Therefore we must not read Jesus as being subservient to the powers that be; instead he is elaborately acting out, even exaggerating his role as the victim so that he is able to reveal the evil of the Roman Empire. In playing the role of the 'mocked at' clown Jesus is in effect mocking at the Romans and the Jewish elite because he has exposed them as being violent, cruel rulers who murder innocent victims, who attempt to extinguish dissent and opposition. Of course in the act of the resurrection, Jesus shows the powers that be that one cannot really victimize the innocent because they will resurrect and will challenge those who try to suppress unheard voices. Jesus in his resurrection mocks at the naivety of the powerful who believe that they can crush the voices of the oppressed by murder—insurrection, when crushed breeds resurrection!

In a way it can be argued that Jesus goes laughing all the way to the cross because he knows that he is making a fool out of those who are trying to kill him.

This laughing Jesus takes us to our last point for today – the happy face of the clown.

The happy face of the clown:

The happy face of the clown Jesus is revealed to us in the joy of the resurrection. This is the happy face who welcomes all to laugh not at him, nor the face of Jesus laughing at the powerful of the world, but rather the face of Jesus who welcomes us to laugh with him. Today on Easter morning Jesus welcomes us to laugh with him because death has been overcome. In the final twist in the tale, the system of violence that ends in death for so many has been vanquished, death itself has been crushed, death has lost its sting. The clown has not only exposed the violence of the system but has managed to overturn it completely. The clown has tumbled his last summersault in which not him but the whole world has turned upside down. The first have become last and the last have become first, the mournful are comforted and the sorrowful have their tears wiped – the kingdom of God has been inaugurated and it is the clown who has done the trick! Jesus the clown has the last laugh!

The farcical story of the passion narrative however, does not have an ending like normal stories do, instead the reader, the listener, the watcher is invited to participate in the ending of the story. The resurrection of Jesus is not an end, rather it is an invitation to join in the laughter. Today, this Easter, Jesus the clown invites us to laugh with him.

Easter Sermon 2

John 20

What does Easter mean to you? Is it just Easter eggs for the children and a good lunch or does the meaning of Easter really mean more to us than that?

In our morning's Easter meditation we shall make an effort to look closely at the gospel text that was read to us, the text that spoke about that very first Easter morning on which Mary Magdalene and the two disciples of Jesus discovered that empty tomb and try to find what meaning that event that took place so many years ago still has in our lives today.

The first Easter meant that the first become last and that the last become first

The first thing that the text speaks out to us is that that very first Easter meant that the first became last and the last has become first. It is very significant that in John's telling of the story of the resurrection that Mary of Magdalene was the first to be a witness to the resurrected Lord. There can hardly be any doubt that women in the time of Jesus were extremely oppressed and were left out of the mainstream of Jewish society. Yet in the gospel of John we find that it is a woman who actually becomes not only the very first witness to Jesus but is also the first apostle as she is sent to go and tell the others. In many ways John is tying up

neatly the story of Jesus. For it is a woman who was the first to learn of the birth of Jesus and it was a woman through whom this child was born, it was women who were at the cross of Jesus when all the men had run away and it was also to a woman that the good news of His resurrection was revealed. The very life of Jesus shows us that the social order has been overthrown those who were first have come last and those who were last have now been placed first. And this is the good news of the Easter message to us even today, that those who society has left out, women, the marginalized the poor and the oppressed Jesus has placed first. Likewise the religious, political and the socially elite ones are ignorant of the resurrection of Jesus. In the glorious resurrection we learn that Jesus overturns the social order by making the first last and the last first.

The first Easter meant a chance at starting things fresh

But not only does Easter have the meaning that now the first have become last and that the last have become first but the story of Easter also shows us that we have an opportunity of making a fresh start. While the women in the life of Jesus never deserted him the two disciples who ran to see the empty tomb surely had a different story to tell. The first man to reach the empty tomb in this story does not have his name mentioned but we can make a fairly good guess is the disciple John, being a younger man he was able to outrun Peter and reach the tomb first. We must remember that this was the same John who along with his brother James asked Jesus whether they would be allowed to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus when he entered into his 'glory.' At that time Jesus had asked the both of them whether they would be willing to drink the cup that he was going to drink from and whether they would be willing to be baptised with his baptism. Both had willingly agreed at that time but when the time of trial had come both disciples had shrunk from the task that they had promised. The story of Peter is even more familiar, not only did he desert Jesus in his time of need but also he was the one who openly denied Jesus.

One can't help but wonder what these two disciples were thinking when they were running to that tomb, no doubt their minds were filled with disbelief, expectation and excitement. But I also believe that they must have had that dread of having to now confront the person who they let down. It is significant though that in all the recorded meetings that they had with Jesus after his resurrection this is never an issue. In their meetings with the risen Christ the disciples and Peter and John in particular are offered a new beginning, a fresh start.

Many times in life we make bad decisions, we make wrong choices or as we say in the confession we do things we ought not to have done and don't do things we ought to have done. But the beautiful message of Easter, and the message of this Easter in particular is that in the risen Christ we have been offered a second chance, we are offered the opportunity to make a new beginning and a fresh start. Today the risen Christ makes that same offer to each one of us, by His resurrection He offers us the chance to make a new beginning, come to Him and start afresh for in His resurrection He makes all things new.

The first Easter meant hope for all of humanity

Finally we can also say that the message of Easter is that it is the hope for all of humanity. Not only is it the hope that Jesus overturns the social order and that he offers us a chance to make a new beginning but also the hope that even death is not too powerful for us, that even death is not the end. This is not only true in the literal sense that Jesus promises us that those who believe in him will also rise again but also in the metaphorical sense that we have the ability to survive even the most difficult situations and circumstances. The world is faced with the horrific issue of human trafficking and modern slavery, the statistics are overwhelming and hide the faces of the women, men and children who are caught in this terrible web, it is almost as though a powerful message has gone out throughout the world that might is right and that righteousness, justice and peace has no place in the modern world. Yet it is the power of the resurrection that gives us the hope that even in these times of darkness the truth will prevail. It is the power of the resurrection that offers us the hope that though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death we shall still prevail. This is true not only of large world events but also in our personal and daily struggles of life...it is the resurrection of Christ that enables us to have hope and enables us to say "He is risen... he is risen indeed"