

## **JUSTICE: JESUS STYLE**

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St. Paul's United Church, Orillia  
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Be Still and Know that I am God...  
in a world filled with frenzied consumerism...  
the invitation to be still...  
touches a place of longing in our soul...  
in a world where the post modern empire  
bombards us with its primary focus of  
“money as the ultimate end of all activities,  
and as the center and source of life and power”  
(p54 Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire)...  
the invitation to be still and know God –  
touches a place of longing for deep relationship in our soul  
to again “affirm the creative power of God...  
to not become caught in serving the ultimate power of this empire  
of money as the bottom line ...  
but rather to “create life –giving alternatives –  
because as one theologian from Argentina puts it bluntly:  
“The Empire is a source of death.” -  
We have an alternative vision for life –  
that Jesus taught 2000 years ago  
in response to the Roman empire –  
an alternative vision  
that is desperately needed in our world today.

In 2004 at a gathering of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches –  
of which the United Church of Canada is a member –  
we adopted “The Accra Confession” –  
covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth.

“Justice is a matter of faith.  
The Accra Confession states  
that (p1) matters of economical and environmental justice  
are not only social, political and moral issues;  
they are integral to faith in Jesus the Christ  
and affect the integrity on the Church.  
Being faithful to God’s covenant  
requires that individual Christians  
and the churches take a stand against current economics  
and environmental injustices.  
It goes on to say:  
The church stands in solidarity

with persons who are suffering and struggling.  
Following the justice traditions of the biblical prophets  
and of Jesus in the Gospel narratives,  
the Accra Confession views the current world (dis)order  
by “looking through the eyes of powerless and suffering people.”  
It calls the church and society  
to hear the cries of the people who suffer,  
and the woundedness of creation itself,  
>over-consumed and under-valued  
by the current global economy.”

Arising from our commitment to the Accra Confession as a national church –  
a report was presented to the 39<sup>th</sup> General Council in 2006  
called “Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire”. –  
which has been adopted as the focus for our mission theme.

In that report it is noted that:  
(p39), “Our study of empire,  
(in particular through how empire is experienced  
by our global ecumenical partners) –  
has led to the conclusion that  
Empire –  
[which some have] called a “civilization of inequality” –  
threatens ... the faith we confess and profess as followers of Jesus.  
The destruction of,  
and continuing threat to, all life,  
means we are at a critical time  
for the discernment of the gospel.  
At issue is the liberating good news that church professes.  
Empire has lured and co-opted the church  
into theologies contrary to the gospel alternative,  
which is centered on freedom –  
for God, for the world, for the neighbours.  
Yet (and here’s the Good News!)  
through the gift of the Spirit  
we may again be made free to be the church –  
to risk living a life for,  
and with the other,  
and for this world God created and recreates.

Today is Reign of Christ Sunday –  
a phrase that trips off our tongues with ease –  
well known to us after experiencing the new liturgical year these past decades –  
a liturgical year  
that begins with Advent  
and ends with Reign of Christ Sunday

But this concept of the reigning power  
being Christ is the very concept  
that got Jesus ... and Paul-killed –  
for they both challenged the power  
of the emperor – Caesar –  
who was considered to be God on the throne –  
Caesar – Saviour of the World,  
Lord – the one who ensures peace –  
by protecting you with violence.

To say that Jesus was Lord,  
to say that Jesus was Saviour –  
was to say that Caesar was not.  
To say that Jesus is Lord  
is to say that the empire powers  
of the world are not.  
To say that Jesus is Lord  
is to say that violence is not the way to peace.

When you put all the teachings of Jesus together –  
what you came up with  
is an alternative vision of how we are called to live together ...  
an alternative vision  
that Jesus and Paul taught about,  
and developed,  
amongst the communities around them.

In the “Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire” Report  
(p24) it notes that  
“Jesus drew on the metaphor  
of the ‘realm of God or the Kingdom of God’  
taken from the Hebrew prophets.  
He proclaimed God’s covenantal reign of peace,  
compassion, justice, healing, reconciliation,  
and non-violence as being opposite to empire .

According to Jesus,  
God’s reign was freely and graciously given to all,  
especially to the poor,  
marginalized and diseased  
(as well as) to women and children.  
(p23) Jesus reminded those who bore the oppression of Rome  
that God sought their liberation  
by calling them to ...  
communal living of justice and righteousness ...

He also drew upon the Jubilee and Sabbath traditions,  
calling those once enslaved >  
to create a society where liberation from slavery, debt,  
and other inequities was the divine order of the day.”

(p24) “Paul laid the foundations of the church  
as local communities  
(where the alternative vision  
Jesus proclaimed was lived out as much as possible)  
where social, spiritual and economic mutuality was to reign.  
It was this agenda of congregational development  
that was a key factor in the spread and growth  
of the early Christian movement –  
since equality, inclusivity,  
sustenance (of goods and resources and meals shared),  
along with healing and liberation  
were hope – filled and life-altering.  
Conversion ...  
meant incorporation into this body’s healthy and holistic way of living  
which was contrary to empire.  
” Like Jesus,  
Paul was executed by Rome  
as a politically dangerous figure.”

In our early life as the church  
we were persecuted by the empire.  
But then the greatest upheaval in Christian history happened –  
the conversion of the Emperor Constantine.  
(p24) “United Church theologian Douglas John Hall  
states that the emperor  
‘invited the Christians to become ...  
chaplain to his emporium....  
This meant that the church  
then became triumphant and dominant  
along side the state  
(and) became itself –  
in the form of Christendom ...  
(seen in a variety of ways  
including the devastation of the crusades,  
the dramatic expansion of health and property ownership of the church.,  
in the hour of the Holocaust during World War II.”

Hall (p25) reminds us  
that we are “called to a prophetic faith that ...  
holds ultimate hope and trust in God, and yet ...  
is aware of the people and places

where contemporary suffering is most acutely known.

It is this kind of prophetic faith  
that has led South African Christians,  
after the devastation of decades of apartheid,  
to build goodwill for the future –  
through the inspiring process  
of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission  
led by Desmond Tutu and others –  
upon an understanding of “ubuntu” theology,  
which asserts that  
‘I am human when you also are human.’

It is this prophetic faith  
that leads Ofelia Ortega to write:  
“We are called to be nonconformist  
and transformative communities  
because life is not possible  
unless we do transformation that addresses the roots of injustice.

We are called to be transformed  
by the renewing of our minds  
from the dominating and egoistic imperial mindset,  
(to) doing the will of God  
which is fulfilled in love, solidarity and grace ...

We as churches  
are called to create space for,  
and become agents of,  
transformation,  
even as we are entangled in and complicit with  
the very system we are called to change.”

(p54) Nestor Miguez of Argentina writes  
that to begin working beyond Empire  
(a system where power and wealth are drawn away from the most vulnerable).

We need to locate ourselves  
in spaces of hope.”  
To begin working beyond Empire  
is to “create life-giving alternatives for everyone ...  
It is necessary to begin to demonstrate in our perceptions  
(and attitude),  
in our relationships  
and in our communities  
that another world is possible –  
that other ways of living bring dignity and plenitude –  
at least to a greater degree than the devastation of empire.

He goes on and notes that ...

This was the hallmark and means of struggle  
used by the first Christian communities against Empire.  
It was not through the opposition of power against power,  
which would have meant their annihilation –  
but rather through the extension of alternate symbols and life ways –  
of which we are heirs ...  
(In these times)  
the Christian message will be relevant  
if it is able to take part in realizing a vision of ‘life beyond empire.’

There are ways that we as a church  
(as well as ... individuals and as families)  
are involved in growing the alternative vision of life that Jesus taught about –  
where God’s power of grace and compassion  
and a justice of sharing is the power  
that we seek to have reign in our lives.

One of the lay points  
that the report Living Faithfully in Empire – makes  
is that it is critical that the church focus  
not on maintaining itself or on survival >  
but rather on mission –  
on actions and ways of being  
that help to model the way the world could be –  
where all are welcome,  
where we are aware of the pains and injustices in the world,  
where we seek to partner with the most vulnerable,  
where we practice forgiveness and reconciliation  
when we create community  
where we find comfort and are challenged and grow.  
At the enquiry group retreat this past week  
I was deeply moved by the clarity of our group of teens  
who see how the world is filled with injustice  
fueled by evil rooted in greed –  
greed for money and greed for power ...  
then clarity that we need to learn to co-operate with one another ....  
and that we start to do that  
by ensuring that we are intentional in all aspects of our lives –  
to honour the principals and values  
that will be part of building a world  
that is filled with co-operation, compassion, caring and sharing.

It was their suggestion  
that we watch the movie “Blood Diamonds” –  
a painful and difficult movie to watch  
based on the diamond trade out of Serra Leon...  
for them that was such an example of inequality

and bizarre behaviour in our world.  
They were also clear about the message from the movie  
“Remember the Titans” and “Step Mom”  
that show how destructive racism is in “Remember the Titans”,  
and how destructive anger and judgement can be in Step Mom.  
They are clear that there are steps that we can be taking  
in our everyday lives  
as well as challenge what’s going on in the wider world ...  
that can help to build the kind of world we seek.

And through the retreat  
we practiced what we long for  
by creating a sense of community together  
where each person is listened to and treated with respect,  
where everybody is included –  
practicing in a small group –  
what we long to see in the wider world,  
pausing regularly in our journey  
to spend time connecting to God  
through a variety of forms of meditation ...  
an important step  
for we can get mighty tired and discouraged  
when we try to do all this on our own.  
When we create space and time  
for God to be there on the journey with us –  
it is amazing the difference that makes.

So as we journey on  
may we know we are not alone.  
God is with us  
empowering us,  
comforting us,  
challenging us,  
strengthening us.

Thanks be to God

Amen