



# Biblical Reflections

## In all things rejoice in *God's* peace

Philippians 4:4-9 (NSRV)

<sup>4</sup>*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.* <sup>5</sup>*Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.* <sup>6</sup>*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* <sup>7</sup>*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.* <sup>8</sup>*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.* <sup>9</sup>*Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

Writing to Christians in Philippi while he was in prison, Paul addresses conflicts in the community, and calls it to unity and peace, a community working towards a common goal.

### state of mind

'*Rejoice in the Lord always*' and '*Let your gentleness be known to everyone*' - a state of mind. Towards God, great joy - this is not a call to rejoice in every situation we may find ourselves, because often this is not possible. But towards God and God's presence with us, rejoice. Towards others, gentleness - respectful of those we are in relationship with, those we meet. A state of mind that is considerate of all as created in the image of God.

### promise of presence

'*The Lord is near*' - a promise of the presence of God in all situations. In situations of happiness, sadness, grief and loss, God is near. At times when the questions that we ask have no answers, God is near. When violence erupts, and peace seems impossible, God is near.

### sharing of concerns

'*Do not worry about anything*' - sometimes worrying is not an option, we are faced with situations so far beyond our control and we cry out in prayer. '*but in everything... let your requests be made known to God*' - God is near, a companion on the journey, to share the journey with. We pray/speak about everything that confronts us, harms us, brings us joy, makes us cry. And as a result of sharing our requests and concerns, our hearts and minds will be guarded by the peace of God in Jesus Christ.

### reflection leads to action

'*...whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing... think about these things*' - reflection on ways of being that exemplify a community of people living the transformative Gospel message of God's love, justice and compassion for all. Following this reflection, '*keep on doing the things you have learned, received, seen heard*'. Actions as a result of reflection, reflection in a community with a joyful and gentle state of mind, that believes in the continuing presence of a God with whom we can share the journey and everything that is experienced as part of that journey. '*and the God of peace will be with you.*'

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*What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6.8b*

The Bible is the record of God's dealings with God's People, in which there is a constant wrestling with the issues of life and death, justice and injustice, peace and violence. God sets the way of life and freedom before us, and offers us forgiveness and grace to walk the path of peace.

In an attempt to stimulate reflection and action around the Decade to Overcome Violence, the WCC has identified the following four themes as a focus for contributions to the Decade:

- ✦ *the spirit and logic of violence*
- ✦ *the use, abuse and misuse of power*
- ✦ *the issues of justice*
- ✦ *religious identity and plurality*

These might also be understood in terms of a search for God's Truth, Mercy, Justice and Community: four key elements in expressing our Faith together today.



The following four bible studies thus aim to help us begin to address these themes through the four questions:

- ✦ **Is violence inevitable?**
- ✦ **How do we use power?**
- ✦ **How do we act justly?**
- ✦ **What kind of identity?**

*Biblical reflections drawn from **Why Violence? Why Not Peace?**, a WCC study guide to help churches reflect and act in the Decade to Overcome Violence guide (written by Diana Mavunduse and Simon Oxley, WCC 2002)*

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# Biblical Reflections

## Is violence inevitable?

The prophet Jeremiah wrote a surprising letter to the people of Jerusalem who had been taken off into exile in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar.

- **Read Jeremiah 29.4-7**

Jeremiah did not tell them just to live for the day their exile would be ended. Instead, he told them to make themselves at home in exile - building houses, planting gardens and continuing family life. If that surprised them, they might have been shocked by the words which followed. In verse 7, they were told to pray and work for the welfare, peace, or even salvation (according to different translations) of their city of exile. Good could come for them only if good came to that place.

Think about their situation - they bitterly resented the political situation in which they found themselves; they were forced to live among the enemy whose religion they despised. An understandable reaction would have been to make opportunities to offer violent resistance and to take revenge. Yet they were told to work for the welfare of the enemy for their own good.

- **Read Romans 12.9-20**

Paul was writing to Christians who knew what persecution meant. It is easy to quote Jesus' words about turning the other cheek (Matt 5.39), more difficult to do it and even more difficult to follow Jesus' instruction to love our enemies (Matt 5.44). Paul was clear that retaliation is not our business; instead, we are to use good to conquer evil. This is the divine logic of reconciliation as opposed to the logic of violence.

*Why, when our instincts may tell us to retaliate against those who threaten or harm us, does faith call us actively to love our enemies?*

*How do we find our welfare or peace in seeking the welfare or peace of those whom we fear, despise or hate?*



*Seek peace and pursue it... Psalm 34:14*

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# Biblical Reflections

## How do we use power?

King David is remembered in popular imagination for two things - an act of heroism and a monstrous abuse of power. The story of Bathsheba, David and Uriah is not particularly about sexual promiscuity. After all, David had many relationships in ways which were culturally acceptable to his contemporaries. When David caught sight of Bathsheba and her brought to his room, he entered on a disastrous course of action. Bathsheba became pregnant. Trying to cover this up, David tried to persuade Uriah, her husband who had been away at war, to return home so that the child to be born could be thought to be his. Out of a sense of responsibility to his comrades, Uriah refused. So David gave a cynical order to have Uriah placed on the front line of the next battle. Uriah was duly killed in action, and David took Bathsheba as one of his wives.

- **Read Samuel 12.1-7a**

*In what ways do you see David abusing his power?*

*Why do you think that David genuinely seemed to want to use his power to right the wrong in Nathan's story and yet seemed unable to see or control his own abuse of power?*

- **Read Philippians 2.5-11**

This is a beautiful passage where Paul is probably quoting a very early hymn of praise. It says many things about Christ, each of which is worth meditating upon. Look most closely however on what this says about power.

*What does this passage tell us about the use of power?*

*Why is the way of self-emptying, identification and death so powerful?*

*What do these two passages say to you about the way you exercise power in your relationships?*

"We are convinced: A clear witness to peace and nonviolence grounded in justice is what the world needs today from all churches together... As Christians, we are motivated and encouraged by the Gospel message of the peace of Christ and the rich biblical tradition of peace with justice... We want to engage in constructive efforts to build a culture of peace.  
(Message from the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, 1999)

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# Biblical Reflections

## How do we act justly?

Exploiting other people appears to be a consistent human characteristic throughout history. The people of Israel knew how they ought to relate to one another under God. Yet they had to be constantly reminded by the Hebrew prophets about God's insistence on acting justly.

- **Read Amos 8.4-7**

Rigging the market in favour of the seller is the same whether you are trading in corn or on the stock exchange. The result is that the poor lose out. Selling inferior products as though they were the real thing is wrong whether you are passing off the husks as wheat or marketing soft drinks. This is made worse by the hypocrisy of religious people who sit in worship looking forward to that moment when they can get on with pursuing unjust business practices again.

*What is the relationship between justice and our worship of God?*

Around 800 years later, Jesus stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth and claimed some words of Isaiah as a foundation for his own ministry

- **Read Luke 4.17-21**

Luke places this account in the time following on the temptation of Jesus in the desert. Jesus had resisted the temptation to a self-serving and superficial ministry. Instead of simply condemning or even calling retribution on those who had caused the poverty, captivity, blindness and oppression, he uses these words to speak of righting wrongs. Jesus affirms a justice which restores.

*Would an observer use these words to describe the ministry of your church?*

*What do these two passages say to us about how we should do justice?*



*Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream... Amos 5.24*





# Biblical Reflections

## What kind of identity?

Being God's chosen people carries both a privilege and responsibility. Moses spelt this out to a gathering of the people of Israel.

- **Read Deuteronomy 10.12-22**

There are two problems with privilege - we may come to enjoy it so much that we forget the responsibility and we may keep our privilege within a closed circle. There seem almost too many examples of these problems in the Hebrew scriptures and in the history of the Christian church. Perhaps that is why Moses is recorded as constantly emphasising privilege and responsibility, themes later taken up by the prophets. There is a dynamic relationship between the two rather than a simple teaching to 'keep God's rules' so you 'get the reward of God's favour'.

However, included within the circle of privilege and responsibility of Israel were the strangers who lived among them - those who came from elsewhere, those who did not fully belong, those whose culture was different. God cared for them and for those who were weak or who had no position in society.

*Do our circles of privilege and responsibility in the churches include or exclude the strangers who live in our communities?*

*What does it mean for God to care for them as much as God cares for those of us who believe?*

- **Read Ephesians 2.13-18**

The claim here is not simply that Christ breaks down barriers, even the barrier between Gentiles and Jews. That would be good news in itself. Ephesians goes further to say that Christ makes a radical change by creating a new humanity.

*How can we find our identity in the new humanity in Christ rather than behind the barriers of enmity which divide the church and our societies?*



*There is no longer Jew or Greek,  
there is no longer slave or free,  
there is no longer male and female;  
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus... Gal. 3.28*

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