

thinking
BIBLICALLY
building
PEACE

AN ECONI RESOURCE





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FOREWORD

At heart, the work of ECONI is about change. Our desire is to be a catalyst for radical biblical discipleship as we engage with society at critical points of contention and change. Our struggle is to interpret the living word to a community in conflict in the midst of a changing world.

Biblical faith requires us to engage with the changing culture in which we live. As Christians, our commitment must be to explore a credible application of biblical principles to the profound changes that face both church and society in our time and place.

Living in a community where sectarian hatred and violence has left deep wounds and divisions, Christian peacebuilding involves us in a continuing process of engaging with God's word and the hurts and hopes of people. We must be willing to reflect biblically on our identity and contribution as we share responsibility for building the future.

In offering this resource, drawing together a range of biblical material from our work over the last seven years, we extend an invitation. Not simply to read and use the material for reflection, but to be part of that change where it most counts. To see our own hearts transformed and minds renewed as we allow God to change us.

For that is the real issue that faces us as disciples of Jesus. Are we willing to change, not because it keeps us relevant, but because it keeps us related to the living God? While the Bible has never changed anyone, it is as we read it as God's word to a broken world that we open ourselves to the Spirit who forms in us the mind of Christ.

The scriptures are God's inspired and authoritative revelation. Not for us to use to beat back the storms of a transient world, but rather for the church to nurture transformed lives among those who have heard the call to follow. While experience and encounter enrich that call, it is scripture that informs it and ultimately provides the measure against which our contribution will be viewed as Christian.

It is difficult to envisage a church that is concerned to build peace that does not first learn how to think biblically about the world in which it finds itself. In encounter with the text of the Bible, we in ECONI have found it pertinent and searching for our time and place. This material invites you to share that experience of God with us.

David Porter

Lent 2002

INTRODUCTION

Thinking Biblically – Building Peace is a church resource based on material commissioned over a seven-year period for a unique initiative known as ECONI Sunday. On the 7 November 1993 we introduced our first ECONI Sunday by inviting churches to reflect on their responsibility to address the cultural and political divisions in Northern Ireland. Forty-six churches participated in the original programme. In 1994, under the title *Aliens and Strangers*, sixty-two local congregations held a special Sunday service exploring Biblical perspectives on the nature of Christian citizenship in a divided society. Since then approximately 400 Churches, involving thousands of people, have considered a variety of issues around the themes of peace, justice and reconciliation using the ECONI Sunday material.

Central to ECONI Sunday was the development of a comprehensive series of resources designed to help local congregations engage with peacebuilding. Our hope was that this material would be relevant, accessible and most of all prophetic. We sought to challenge Christians to be active in healing the hurt caused by decades of conflict and participate creatively in the shaping of a new and inclusive society. Also, we wanted the resources to be practical. The first ECONI Sunday guide suggested seven things that, as conscientious Christian citizens, we could immediately affirm and practice:

☞ Identify with all who suffer hurt, pain and grief as victims of violence and reach out with compassion and the comfort of God.

Matthew 5:4; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

☞ Pray for those in authority in the exercise of their God given role.

Romans 13:1; 1 Timothy 2:2

☞ Learn to love our enemies as Jesus expressly commanded us.

Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27

☞ Reject the rhetoric of suspicion and hostility and follow instead the example of Christ.

1 Peter 2:23

☞ Repent of the evil of sectarianism which has corrupted many of us and reach out across the divisions of this community with acceptance and sincerity.

Acts 10:28

☞ Support structures that uphold biblical standards of justice for the good of all the people of this community.

Jeremiah 9:24; Psalm 106:3

☞ Put our hope and confidence in God and God alone in whom real security and freedom from fear can be found.

Isaiah 41:10; Psalm 27:1

Sadly these issues remain as pertinent for us today and we again offer, in this collected form, seven years of ECONI Sunday Resources as an Evangelical Contribution On Northern Ireland.

Thinking Biblically – Building Peace includes a wide range of study material relating biblical themes to the issues of sectarianism and community conflict in Northern Ireland. This is offered in the form of sermon outlines, study notes, worship ideas - including liturgies, prayers, hymns and questions designed to stimulate discussion and small group work. Each section offers some recommendations for how the material might be used. However there is no right way to integrate the content into a Sunday service, study group or discussion forum. The material lends itself to either a linear presentation of each study or a creative adaptation to suit a particular context. Although we have sought to harmonise the layout of each section there is a distinguishable difference in literary style and structure representing the personality of a particular author. However, rather than being a distraction this diversity contributes to the strength of the publication.

Thanks is due to those whose work has brought this project together: Claire Martin (ECONI's Programme Co-ordinator) for her tenacious planning; Megan Haltemann and Amy Wolfe (ECONI volunteers) for their diligent editing; Dorothy McMillan for her patient proof reading and Merve Jones at Spring Graphics for his clean layout and intriguing cover design. I am particularly grateful for the commitment of those whose study and writing made this resource possible: Rev David Montgomery (Knock Presbyterian Church), Glenn Jordan (East Belfast Mission), Alwyn Thomson (ECONI Research Officer), David Porter (ECONI Director) and Michael Wardlow and Pastor David McMillan, former chairs of ECONI.

Derek Poole
Programme Director

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Jeremiah

A PROPHET FOR OUR TIMES

This series of studies is designed to show how the themes in Jeremiah are relevant today for reflection on Christian witness in our divided community. The Pack contains six sets of Bible Study / Sermon Notes. These notes can be used to form the basis for a series of sermons. A set of Study Questions to cover each theme also allows them to be used in the context of a midweek study group.

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Contributors: *David Montgomery, David Porter, Earl Storey, Alwyn Thomson*

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

Jeremiah is arguably the most important prophet in the Old Testament. The book bearing his name is the longest in Scripture and is referred or alluded to between forty and fifty times in the New Testament. Half of these references occur in the book of Revelation. Yet it remains one of the least read and understood of all the Old Testament books.

1. JEREMIAH'S WORLD

☞ Jeremiah was active as a prophet for 40 years (626-586 BC) in one of the most volatile periods of Israel's history. It was a time of great change and violence, covering the reign of five kings, two of whom only ruled for three months. Three are mentioned in Jeremiah 1:1 and for further historical background see 2 Kings 21-25 and 2 Chronicles 33-36.

☞ It is summed up by one commentator as a “politically, socially, morally, and spiritually chaotic

era.” In this world his ministry did not evade the important issues. He related to political events and engaged with the community on those areas where most was at stake. He was politically active in the sense that he was not afraid to speak out on matters of concern to God. The honour of God was at stake.

2. JEREMIAH'S BOOK

¶ The book is hard to follow with no clear thematic arrangement or pattern discernible. It is difficult to read through, with no chronological framework to help. In chapter 36 we are told of the fate of the scroll dictated to his secretary, Baruch. Having been destroyed it is re-written in circumstances which are hardly conducive to a coherent structure.

¶ The book is stylistically difficult, including a range of prose, poetry, drama and history. Most significantly it is rich in biographical detail of the life and ministry of its principal character:

3. JEREMIAH'S LIFE

¶ By birth Jeremiah was a priest, of the tribe of Benjamin, a heritage shared with Saul (the first king of Israel) and Paul (the apostle to the Gentiles). He was young when called to be a prophet, around twenty. His name means 'Lord exalts', a truth reinforced by the words of Jeremiah 1:5 in which God makes clear the divine action which brings him to the fore - God knew, formed, consecrated and appointed Jeremiah. It is interesting to note that this appointment was not limited to Israel or Judah, but extends to the nations (Jeremiah 1:5 & 10).

¶ The biographical detail found in Jeremiah arises from the fact that in a profound way his life and character are bound up in his calling and ministry. There is much to be learnt about his ability, emotions, motivation, courage and relationship to God. His prayer life is addressed frankly and we are exposed to the heart of a man whose life is a long martyrdom of suffering, persecution, loneliness and isolation, all for the sake of the message given by God.

¶ For many he is the most Christ-like of the prophets, with one commentator having noted 16 points of comparison. Both Jeremiah and Jesus wept over the fate of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 8:18-9:3 and Luke 19:41-44). Indeed there were those who thought Jesus was Jeremiah (Matthew 16:14). Like Jesus there remains this profound sense that the impact of Jeremiah's ministry was not simply in what he said but in the consequences for his life of being the bearer of the message of God.

4. JEREMIAH'S CALL

¶ His call (chapter 1) came 13 years into the 31 year reign of Josiah (see 2 Kings 22-23). Josiah was a reformer who took the covenant seriously. In the eighteenth year of his reign he began a systematic programme designed to undo the damage caused by the 55 year reign of the corrupt and evil king Manasseh (see 2 Kings 21). However, despite his best efforts, it seems that the effects of Manasseh's reign were deep-seated and lasting (see 2 Kings 23:26-27).

¶ Together Josiah and Jeremiah worked for the transformation of their society. While on the surface Josiah made changes, it seems that changing the hearts of the people was a more difficult matter.

☞ Politically, Judah found itself sandwiched between two more powerful kingdoms: to the south lay Egypt, ruled by Pharaoh Necho; and to the North lay the increasingly powerful Babylonians under their king, Nebuchadnezzar.

☞ Pharaoh Necho, fearing the power of Babylon, marched his army through Judah to do battle with Nebuchadnezzar. Josiah foolishly tried to stop him and paid with his life (see 2 Kings 23:29-30). His son, Jehoahaz, took the throne, but only three months later was deposed by the returning Pharaoh Necho who installed another son, Jehoiakim, as king. Judah was reduced to the status of a client state of Egypt (2 Kings 23:31-24:7).

5. JEREMIAH'S MESSAGE

☞ As the power of Babylon grew and that of Egypt waned, Jehoiakim was forced to submit to Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah saw that Babylon was to be the means by which God would punish his people and counselled them to accept the authority of Babylon, but they would not. Jehoiakim rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar who eventually sent his armies against Jerusalem. Jehoiakim died and was succeeded by Jehoiachin whose reign lasted only three months. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and the first wave of exiles was taken, including the king. In his place Nebuchadnezzar installed Zedekiah (see 2 Kings 23:36-24:17).

☞ Again Jeremiah advised the people to submit to the authority of Babylon, (see Jeremiah 37) but again they pursued an alliance with Egypt, and again Nebuchadnezzar's armies besieged Jerusalem. This time when the city was captured it was burned and destroyed. More of the people of Judah were taken off into exile (see 2 Kings 24:18-25:21). Jeremiah, however, chose to remain with those that were left. They were ruled by a governor, Gedaliah, appointed by Nebuchadnezzar. However, following his murder, the people fled to Egypt, fearing Babylonian reprisals, and Jeremiah was carried off with them (see Jeremiah 41-43).

☞ So Jerusalem was destroyed and the people carried into exile in Babylon as Jeremiah had prophesied (see Jeremiah 25:1-11). While the fate of the nation could be understood in terms of power politics, Jeremiah saw beyond the power of Nebuchadnezzar and Necho to the power of God. For it was God who had brought a disobedient and rebellious people to judgement and exile.

☞ While Jeremiah looked forward to the end of exile, the judgement of Babylon and a new covenant, these would only come about in God's time (see Jeremiah 29).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

TIME LINE

639	Josiah becomes King
627	Jeremiah is called
622	Josiah begins his reform programme
609	Josiah is defeated and killed in battle with Pharaoh Necho of Egypt Jehoahaz becomes king

	Jehoahaz is deposed by the Egyptians and Jehoiakim is made king
605	Babylonians defeat Egyptians and Jehoiakim submits to Babylon
598	Jehoiakim rebels against Babylon and makes an alliance with Egypt
	Babylonians besiege Jerusalem
	Jehoiakim dies and Jehoiachin becomes king
597	Jerusalem falls to the Babylonians
	Jehoiachin is deposed and deported with many others
	Zedekiah installed as king by the Babylonians
588	Zedekiah forms an alliance with Egypt against Babylon
	Babylonian army besieges Jerusalem
587	Jerusalem falls and is destroyed; more of the people go into exile
	Gedaliah is appointed governor
	Gedaliah is murdered
	Jeremiah is taken forcibly to Egypt

DATES OF THE PASSAGES FOR STUDY

- ☞ Chapter 1 reflects Jeremiah's call around 627.
- ☞ Chapter 6 is difficult to date except that it clearly precedes the destruction of the city while anticipating its coming.
- ☞ Chapters 8-9 probably date from the early part of Jehoiakim's reign when the sympathy Jeremiah could expect from the godly Josiah had been replaced by a more hostile response under the evil Jehoiakim - 606-605.
- ☞ Chapter 12 is the first of a number of 'complaints' and is difficult to date but possibly comes again from early in Jehoiakim's reign.
- ☞ Chapter 29 reflects the situation in the days following the first deportation to Babylon in 597.
- ☞ Chapter 32 reflects the events of the summer of 588 when the Babylonian army had temporarily withdrawn following the appearance of an Egyptian army.

STUDY ONE

CALL

Jeremiah 1:1-19

1. THE GOD WHO CALLS

- ☞ God's calling of Jeremiah to be his prophet was a sign both of judgement and of grace.
- ☞ It was a sign of judgement because Jeremiah was to proclaim to this people God's anger at their disobedience and the consequences that would follow if they did not change their ways.

☞ It was a sign of grace because, despite it all, God was still calling his people to repentance. In their unfaithfulness God remained faithful.

☞ That God called Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations (5) was a challenge to a people who thought they had their God on their side. They assumed that grace was for them and judgement for others. They forgot that God was Lord of all nations, dealing justly with all nations. They forgot that the covenant not only brought blessing but also could bring destruction. God, the God of all nations, was about to bring that destruction on his people Israel, through the Babylonians.

2. A MAN WHO IS CALLED 4-9, 17-19

☞ From the book of Jeremiah we get the word 'jeremiad' - a long, mournful lament. The message that God was entrusting to his prophet would provoke anger, even hostility. Jeremiah, proclaimer of God's message, could expect to be on the receiving end of that hostility (see 11:18-23; 18:18; 20:1-2; 37:11ff; 38:4ff).

☞ Thus, at the very start of his ministry, Jeremiah receives a fourfold assurance from God:

- 1) Jeremiah was chosen for this work, even before he was born.
- 2) Jeremiah was called by God - his ministry is not a personal whim but a divine commission.
- 3) Jeremiah would be given words to speak by God.
- 4) Jeremiah would be kept safe by God.

☞ While the prophet feels only the burden of his own youthfulness, inexperience and fear, he is challenged to look not to himself and his weakness, nor to his audience and their hostility, but to God. It is in the Lord and in faithfulness to him that Jeremiah is to find his ultimate identity and security.

3. A MESSAGE TO PROCLAIM 10-16

☞ The message Jeremiah is given to proclaim is short on pleasant thoughts or words of encouragement. No wonder he needs to be assured of his calling and God's continuing presence with him.

☞ Jeremiah is called to see things in a new way (11,13). His prophetic vision is not simply tuned into the people's personal wickedness or God's heavenly glory. Jeremiah can see the bigger picture - the plot line of history - as the Lord of the nations works out his purposes among those nations. It is not that the people were ignorant of the power politics of their day. It is rather that they viewed these things from their own perspective, not God's. Jeremiah's perspective, on the other hand, is that of God.

☞ Not only can Jeremiah see the full picture from God's perspective, but also he is charged with proclaiming that picture - that is, proclaiming judgement. "Disaster will be poured out" on God's people in God's land. This is what happens when the people of God become complacent, presuming on their standing before God. The people are sleepwalking to destruction. Jeremiah is trying to wake them before they go over the precipice.

☞ Uproot, tear down, destroy, overthrow, build, plant (10) - these are the key motifs of Jeremiah's ministry. They are more negative than positive; they presuppose judgement before grace; despair before hope. The first four "assert that no historical structure, political policy, or defence scheme can secure a community against Yahweh when that community is under the judgement of Yahweh." The last two "assert... that God can work newness, create historical possibilities ex nihilo, precisely in situations that seem hopeless or closed." (Walter Brueggemann)

4. WE NEED MORE JEREMIAHS

☞ God's people always face a terrible risk - the risk of taking grace for granted. The people of God in Northern Ireland are no different in that respect from the people of God in Jeremiah's day. Having known so much of God's blessing it is easy to become complacent - we are the people, God is with us, God will punish our enemies, and God will protect us.

☞ The trouble is that our complacency can blind us to the dangers we face and can deafen us to the voice of God. We can end up mistaking God's forbearance for God's approval. Sometimes God needs to shake us in order to open our eyes. In the Bible we have all the warnings and challenges we need. The Bible is God's wake up call to a complacent or self-satisfied people.

☞ Yet who will make this message known? Who will stand like Jeremiah and tell God's people God's message? This is after all an uncomfortable message. It will earn no plaudits. It will not go down well in our local churches or in the wider Christian community. Those who choose to speak may be accused of being prophets of doom, perhaps even of being false prophets, betrayers or deceivers. Yet, as another prophet wrote:

The lion has roared -
Who will not fear?
The Sovereign Lord has spoken -
Who can but prophesy?
(Amos 3:8)

☞ Like Jeremiah, those whom God chooses to speak may find themselves weeping with and for the community which is a part of them and of which they are a part. But like Jeremiah they may see that their greater identity and security can be found only in God and in faithfulness to his call.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Why do you think many Christians find it difficult to speak out publicly about the conflict in our community? How willing are we to risk rejection for being faithful to what we believe? What weighs more heavily with us - our own inadequacy or God's assurances?
- 2) In what was Jeremiah's most profound sense of identity rooted? Is this a realistic model for Christians in Northern Ireland?
- 3) Many people in our community claim to speak God's word. How do you think we should assess their claims? And how do you think we should respond if we believe that their words are not the word of God?

STUDY TWO

CHOICE

Jeremiah 6:1-30

In this chapter Jeremiah challenges a complacent people by confronting them with God's message. Israel had tried and tested God's patience - now that patience had run out. Since they had refused to walk in the good way they would have to flee from the coming judgement.

1. THE STATE OF THE NATION

☞ The people of Israel had more than their fair share of leaders willing to tell them what they wanted to hear:

"Peace, peace," they say. "No sword or famine will touch this land," they say. "You will not serve the king of Babylon," they say. (Jeremiah 6:14; 14:15; 27:9)

God's assessment is radically different. Throughout the chapter God, through his prophet, delivers a devastating indictment of his people.

☞ This people proclaimed its loyalty to God; this people was confident in its standing before him, yet this people combined that religious fervour with contempt for the word of God.

2. THE PATIENCE OF GOD

☞ The people have tested God's patience to the limit. There was a God "who has reached the limit of yearning and the far edge of compassion." (Walter Brueggemann). God's goal was to refine his people, purging the evil and calling them back to a right relationship with him. But the refining was in vain (27-30). Jeremiah was this people's last chance (10,17,19).

3. THE LAST CHANCE

☞ The people had reached a crossroads (16). Their chosen path was leading them further away from God and closer towards judgement. Through Jeremiah God spoke to his people once more, giving them one more opportunity.

☞ God called his people to

STAND - to stop their headlong rush to destruction and consider their situation;

LOOK - to look at their society and see the truth, to look ahead and see the looming consequences;

ASK - to find once more the good way, the way of Abraham, of Moses and of David;

WALK - to make a decision and set out on a new journey in a new direction, on God's chosen path.

But the people said "We will not!"

☞ Instead of heeding God's prophet, they imprisoned him; instead of hearing God's word, they burned it (chs 36-38). Finally, God's patience ran out. Judgement was coming. It was too late for repentance, too late even for the prayers of a righteous man (7:16; 11:14; 15:1).

☞ In 598 the Babylonians conquered the nation. In 587 they returned. Jerusalem was burned, the temple destroyed, the king blinded and the people carried into exile (52:1-16).

4. THE JUDGEMENT OF GOD

☞ It is more comforting to believe that when we suffer it is because of our faithfulness to God. Yet in the Bible, more often than not, it is not Satan who fights against the people of God, but the Lord himself (Deuteronomy 28:62-64; Jeremiah 25:1-7; Ezekiel 12:15; Habakkuk 1:12-2:1).

☞ When we take his covenant lightly, he does not. When we are unfaithful, he is not. When we are disobedient, he remains faithful to his covenant - and that faithfulness means that sometimes God's people experience God's wrath. In such times as these God is not his people's defender but the judge of their sin and faithlessness.

☞ Yet, can it really be that God is angry with us? Throughout his book Jeremiah spells out for his people why God is judging them. Perhaps in the details we do not see ourselves in the same position as this people. But the fundamental problems have a frighteningly familiar ring. This is a religious community sure of its identity as the people of God - God is their God. Yet it is a community in which things have gone badly wrong - their God is their possession, their guarantor. Their God is on their side. They presumed on the blessings and security of their relationship with God; they are deaf and blind to the warning signs.

☞ Is this also a vision of our community? Are these characteristics of the Christian community in Northern Ireland? Is God our guarantor? Is God on our side? Do we presume on God's presence, pleasure and blessing? Are we dismissive of his judgements? Are they to come only on others - the disobedient, the rebellious, the compromisers?

5. AT THE CROSSROADS

☞ In 1968 Captain Terence O'Neill made his famous 'Ulster at the Crossroads' speech. Since then as individuals, as the people of God and as a community, we have stood at many crossroads. The compounded fears and suspicions of hurt communities will be with us for many years to come. Both our politicians and our churches will be continually challenged by decisions that affect the kind of society we create. Standing at the crossroads is a metaphor for continuing decision making in our sectarian society. What will we do? What will we choose? And what will be the implications of our choice?

☞ The command of God through the prophet, to seek the good way and walk in it, recognised two realities. First, that the present certitude of the people was founded on the wrong premise. Second, that real certitude could be found only in a fresh understanding of and commitment to God - not God as he was understood by them at that time, but God as he wished to be known and as he revealed himself through the prophet.

¶ These ancient paths that sound so comfortable, so familiar, so reassuring are nothing of the sort. To walk in these paths is to be willing to challenge every conviction, every certainty we have, no matter how dear, no matter how much these are part of us as people.

1) It means to face the challenges that others will not. It means to ask the questions that others dare not ask. It means to take the risks that others cannot take. It means exalting the grace of God through lives of obedience and holiness. It means standing against the false prophets who speak untruth in the name of God.

2) It means to look afresh at God's word - to set aside our convictions that we know and understand, to let the word loose from the cage of our Protestant and evangelical traditionalism that has bound it. It means hearing God's word in order to be challenged and not simply to be confirmed.

3) It means "taking captive" (2 Corinthians 10:5) our thoughts about the political life of our society, about our political ambitions and goals, about our attitudes towards our neighbours, about where we find our identity as people, about our attitudes to peace, justice, and holiness.

¶ The challenge for the people of God in Northern Ireland is to face the same call and decide what our response will be. Will we too say, 'We Will Not?' Will we refuse to acknowledge that we too have lost the way, that we too have hard and painful decisions to make, that we too stand at the crossroads?

6. ARCHITECTS OR VICTIMS?

¶ God sets out two visions for the future of his people. They can be architects (7:2-7), or they can be victims (25:8-11).

¶ As God's people in Northern Ireland, will we hear and heed his word? Will we be architects or will we be victims?

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

- 1) Is there room in your understanding of God for the conviction that his patience has a limit?
- 2) Do you ever feel that as individuals or as a community we have tested that patience to the limit?
- 3) Thinking of the problems facing our community, how would you define the 'good way'? What are the implications of walking in the good way for the churches in Northern Ireland?
- 4) Does God have cause to judge his people in this country? If so, what are those causes?
- 5) As you look at the community and the church, what things are you certain of? What is there that you can put your confidence in?

STUDY THREE

LAMENT

Jeremiah 8:18-9:26

INTRODUCTION

¶ Jeremiah's ministry is defined in stark terms. Six words in 1:10 summarise his calling - pluck up; pull down; destroy; overthrow; build; plant. Four are destructive and two constructive.

¶ While his message was primarily denunciatory, there is always a tone of sadness and heartbreak in Jeremiah's ministry. He remained throughout tender-hearted and able to sympathise with the hurt and grief of his people. God was the judge, not Jeremiah. He never forgot he belonged to them, or that they were his people.

¶ The heartbreak reaches its climax in the long passage of mourning found in chapter 8:18-9:26.

¶ This passage comes in a section which begins in 7:1 and runs through to 10:25. It is known as Jeremiah's temple address (7:1-2) and is described as the speech for the prosecution. Jeremiah is setting out God's case against Judah, the basis for his judgement, and this is summarised in chapter 7.

¶ God's case against Judah is that their religion has gone wrong. At its heart is the twin spiritual dynamic of revelation and relationship. God has been revealed to Judah and relates to them in a binding covenant. This is expressed in God's desire to "dwell with you" (7:3,7). But this commitment by God required a commitment by the people which they had broken. They had allowed their living faith to become a false religion. Their belief no longer governed their behaviour and, worse still, they then presumed on God for their safety (7:10).

¶ The terror evoked from 7:16 onwards when the scale of God's rejection is evident (no prayers or intercessions will avail) culminates in the call to raise a LAMENT for the generation that has provoked such wrath (7:29).

1. WHY IS THERE NO HEALING?

¶ This lament is raised in chapter 9 - the chapter of tears. With a profound understanding of the situation, Jeremiah embraces the grief of his people. It is the end of a way of life, the collapsing of a world view that had seemed to serve the people of Judah well for centuries. The implications were personal, environmental and communal as demonstrated in the three laments raised.

2. LAMENT OF A PROPHET 8:18-9:1

¶ The build-up to the prophet's wail begins in 8:18. His distress is evident as he passes into deep grief. Like Jesus, Jeremiah weeps over Jerusalem and the fate of "my poor people" 8:19, 21 & 22. He weeps uncontrollably at the prospect (9:1). He weeps buckets and calls for a refill. His overwhelming emotion does not detract from his devastating analysis. At the heart of this calamity were three factors:

Bad Theology - 8:19 - believing that God was in control and that nothing could happen to them irrespective of their behaviour.

Lost Opportunity - 8:20 - failing to make the most of God's restraint to find salvation.

Ignored Remedy - 8:22 - ignoring the healing available, for of course everyone knows there is balm in Gilead.

3. LAMENT FOR A LAND 9:10 & 11

☞ The economic ruin of the land is vividly described in both rural and urban images: the low productivity of the land, the absence of the sound of cattle and birds, the desolation and emptiness of the cities and towns. The agricultural and economic ruin is complete, domestic and commercial life is in chaos, the system has collapsed. The cause is not market forces or lack of investment. It is the moral and spiritual failure of the people. The response is not to talk the economy up or put on a brave face - no 'Positively Jerusalem' campaign - but a call to 'Weep, Wail and Lament!'

4. LAMENT OF THE PEOPLE 9:17-22

☞ Jeremiah now calls for a public and organised lament. The women who are skilled, who can raise a dirge, are called for: Some of the most haunting words of the effect of injustice and violence are found in 9:21 & 22. The grim reaper has come, death enters through the window, a generation has been defiled and the children and young men cut down. It is this dirge which confronts the people with the tragedy of their situation.

☞ For Jeremiah the end game was the crying game. Lament became the way out, for in shared grief was the softening of heart required if healing was to be found.

5. WHY IS THE LAND RUINED?

☞ Now the question is raised - why? And the people are called to listen (9:12-13a), not to the voice of their leaders but to the voice of God.

The LORD said:

False Worship - At the heart of their problem was their failure to follow God and their persistent turning to false gods (9:14).

False Security - Part of this idolatry was their dependence on the symbols of faith for security: temple, tradition and tribal solidarity. Yet it was all without substance (9:4-6).

False Comfort - This in turn led to a dangerous complacency (8:11). The leaders and the people saw no need for repentance. In their meticulous performing of ritual they were blind to their own perverting of the law of God.

False Hope - Rather than defend them God had no option but to judge (9:7). Wormwood and gall (9:15) would be their fate and not balm, scattering and not security (9:16).

☞ Jeremiah received more opposition from more enemies than any other prophet. Unlike Elisha, Isaiah and others who urged the nation to withstand their enemies and promised God's help, Jeremiah continually preached one theme: unconditional surrender; not to their enemies, but to God - God's discipline and God's judgement.

6. WHO IS WISE ENOUGH? 9:23-24

☞ The tragedy is that the path forward has always been clear for those willing to learn. This requires understanding; not the proud boast of the wisdom of the scholar or politician, nor the strength of the warrior and terrorist, nor the riches of the financial community (9:23).

☞ It lies in understanding and knowing God. This is true wisdom and is evidenced by a life that reflects the things that please God.

The LORD delights in:

Steadfast LOVE - A readiness to manifest grace and mercy in our relationships with others: our neighbours and, according to Jesus, even our enemies.

Biblical JUSTICE - A proper evaluation and promotion of rights and responsibilities based on human dignity and protected by the law of God: we are all made in the image of God and accountable to him.

Practical RIGHTEOUSNESS - A commitment to live and behave towards God and the rest of society on the basis of God's values: we are all called to amend our ways.

There is nothing new in these things. They have always been at the heart of God.

Micah 6:8 "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

CONCLUSION

We need to be careful in applying Jeremiah directly to our situation today. No one ethnic group or nation today stands in a similar relationship to God as Israel. However there are clear principles set out for any community which presumes God is on their side. Without the presence of living faith, God comes as judge and not deliverer. Such living faith is shown by the values which inform society and not the tradition on which it rests. In face of such judgement our only response is to LAMENT, LISTEN and LEARN.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) "While his message was primarily denunciatory there is always a tone of sadness and heartbreak in Jeremiah's ministry". Can you see practical ways in which Christians in Northern Ireland could express a similar ministry?
- 2) Jeremiah called for a public organised lament (19:17-20). To lament is to feel and express sorrow, remorse and regret. Lament was the way out, for in shared grief was the softening of heart required if healing was to be found. How is this at all relevant to our situation in Northern Ireland?

- 3) How do you respond to the challenge presented in 9:23-24?
- 4) Jeremiah preached a message of unconditional surrender to God. How can our attitudes in the midst of division and conflict sometimes get in the way of this?

STUDY FOUR

COMPLAINT

Jeremiah 11:18-12:14

INTRODUCTION

¶ Through the book of Jeremiah there are a number of passages known as his 'confessions' or 'laments' (11:18-12:6; 15:10-18; 17:5-10; 20:7-12). In these, the prophet pours out his heart to God - sometimes in anger, sometimes in sorrow, sometimes in confusion. These passages are marked by a fierce honesty as Jeremiah confronts the implications of the message he has been called to preach and reflects on the cost of obedience to God's call.

¶ Jeremiah can talk with God in this way because Jeremiah takes God seriously. As David Day notes: "There is a kind of faith which is mere niceness. It is too polite to say 'boo' to God, it never argues with him. And at its heart it doesn't take God seriously enough to put his promises and his character on the line. Sometimes it may look terribly pious to say, 'Thy will be done,' when God often prefers someone who is involved enough to argue with him."

1. JEREMIAH'S LAMENT

¶ It seems that Jeremiah's preaching (11:1-17) had not gone down well - little wonder: "The Lord Almighty...has decreed disaster for you," he proclaims. Their response was to try and rid themselves of this troublesome prophet by entering into a conspiracy to murder (11:19, 21). Worse still, it was the people of his own village (see 1:1), his neighbours, who were plotting his demise.

¶ Jeremiah bewails his situation - he is an innocent, he is like a lamb to the slaughter (11:18-19). His neighbours, his community, those who gave him his identity and belonging, those who should have given him support and security, had turned against him.

¶ Left alone, Jeremiah flees to God for vindication and entrusts himself to God's justice (11:20). His appeal for vengeance is met by God's reassurance that those who threaten the prophet's life will be punished (11:22-23).

2. WHY DOES THE WAY OF THE WICKED PROSPER?

☞ Jeremiah is not finished. The particular circumstances facing him lead him on to the greater question: why is it that the righteous - in this case, Jeremiah - suffer, while the wicked - those who reject God's word and plot against God's prophet - seem to prosper? (12:1). Israel's praise proclaimed the blessedness of the righteous and the judgement of the evil, yet it seemed to Jeremiah that in the real world the positions were reversed (12:2).

☞ Jeremiah's question presupposed two things - first, that God is indeed righteous and second, that God is sovereign. This is the question, not of the sceptic, but of the believer.

☞ In his frustration Jeremiah once more demands that the righteous God act righteously and destroy the wicked. If he is a gentle lamb to the slaughter then they should be like sheep to be butchered (12:3). Is this a passion for justice or a thirst for vengeance? Perhaps it is a little of both - like all of us Jeremiah's motives were often mixed.

3. GOD'S REPLY

☞ If God's first response was an assurance that justice would be done and would be seen to be done, his second response was a lot less comforting. In effect God said to Jeremiah, "If you think it's tough now, just wait." Not only would Jeremiah face the pressure of hostility from his neighbours, but his own family would turn against him and deceive him (12:6).

☞ Inevitably as the people turned their backs to God and pursued their own way the prophetic word would become harsher, the warnings of judgement more forceful. Inevitably, the hostility of the people towards the prophet would mount. Moreover, when the tide of God's wrath engulfed the land, even God's prophet could not escape its consequences.

☞ There is no reassurance in God's reply, no comfort to be had. God does not address Jeremiah's question. Instead, there is simply the challenge to Jeremiah. Will he fall when confronted with the pressure of hostility or will he concede the force of his own argument and abandon God? Will he cling to the God who has called him? Will he remain faithful to his ministry? Will the reality of God overcome all the other realities that threaten to engulf him?

4. GOD'S LAMENT

☞ If Jeremiah has felt the pain of Israel's situation his pain is nothing to that of the Lord. Israel was God's house, his inheritance and the one he loved. But now it will be forsaken, abandoned, given into the hands of enemies (12:7). The destruction of Israel is not the action of an arbitrary God or the inevitable consequence of the political circumstances of the day. It is rather the action of God (12-13) against his people who have betrayed him and rebelled against him (8).

☞ However, God's judgement is not an occasion for triumphalism or gloating but a time of tragedy, sadness and despair.

CONCLUSIONS

¶ Many in our community, when confronted with personal tragedy, have asked the question: Why? It has not been the questioning of cynics, but of believers who hope and trust in God, yet who struggle to make sense of their experience in the light of that belief.

¶ Ultimately, the assurance is given that God is just and, in the end, all will be well. Yet, sometimes as the day draws to a close and night comes in that assurance does not come. Sometimes, it seems, there is only darkness. Sometimes, it seems, we are hanging on to God by the skin of our teeth.

¶ At those times perhaps the best thing we can do is to do as Jeremiah did - to pour out our hearts, our frustrations and our fears to God. As our heavenly father, is this not what he wants from his children - total honesty and total dependence?

¶ At those times too we see more than Jeremiah did of the sorrow of God and the infinite compassion of God. We see the tears of Jesus as he weeps over his rebellious people (Luke 19:41). We see the suffering of Jesus for righteousness' sake as he hangs on the cross (1 Peter 2:19-23). We see suffering transformed and the risen Lamb reigning in glory where there will be no more death, mourning, crying or pain, where God will wipe away every tear (Revelation 21:4).

¶ For others the challenge may be to count the cost of speaking what they know is right. Jeremiah was faithful to the word of God and the cost was hostility, misunderstanding, confusion and rejection from his community, his neighbours and his family. It is possible that many of us have felt at times that God's word challenges much that has gone on in our community over the years. Perhaps we have held our tongues for fear of the consequences. Yet, perhaps God would have us count the cost and speak anyway, knowing that when everyone else has rejected us, our Father in heaven remains with us and will - ultimately - vindicate us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Take a few moments to consider the substance of Jeremiah's prayer in 12:1-2, 3a-4. Have there been times during the Troubles when you felt the urge to say similar things to God?
- 2) How do we speak God's word to those for whom there seems to be no answer and for whom there seems to be only darkness?
- 3) What can we learn about prayer from this passage?
- 4) What pressures inhibit us from speaking what we believe to be the truth in our community? What might the cost be?

STUDY FIVE**LETTER***Jeremiah 29:1-14***INTRODUCTION**

¶ This passage refers to a time when Babylon was the main superpower in the Middle East. In 597 BC Jerusalem was captured and plundered by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar. King Jehoiachin, along with the majority of the aristocracy, artisans and soldiers was exiled to Babylon. Jeremiah was left behind in Jerusalem.

¶ The situation of the exiles in Babylon prompted him to address a letter to them. The substance of this letter is our passage for reflection.

1. UNPALATABLE TIMES (I)

¶ This time of capture and exile was a time of immense distress and trauma for God's people.

¶ At the beginning of this time of exile a number of false prophets in Judah began to prophesy an optimistic message that the reign of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar would not last long and that the return of the exiles would soon come about.

¶ This had a distracting and unsettling effect on the population. It encouraged them to be preoccupied with the hope of an imminent deliverance from their plight.

The teaching which Jeremiah gives to the exiles is as bold as any to be found in the New Testament, such as the exhortation to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21) and to "adorn the doctrine of God" by "perfect courtesy toward all people" (Titus 3:2).

2. UNPALATABLE TRUTHS

¶ The exhortation from Jeremiah (29:5-6), including the advice to "build houses and live in them; and plant gardens and eat their produce", was a clear indication that the exile was not going to be of short duration. This directly contradicted the message of the false prophets (8-9).

¶ Not only would the time of exile extend for longer than the people desired, Jeremiah had some shocking advice for them (29:7). They were to seek the welfare of the city of Babylon. This was astounding advice considering the fact that Babylon had shown itself to be a brutal conquering enemy.

¶ As well as exhorting the exiles to seek the welfare of Babylon, Jeremiah also recommended that they should pray for its welfare. Surely this teaching matches any New Testament counsel to love one's enemies.

¶ One can imagine the feelings of the exiles as they listened to the contents of Jeremiah's

letter. They were being told that their time of exile would last for seventy years and not two. Not only this, they were going to have to seek and pray for the welfare of their enemy. It was in doing this that they would promote their own welfare. The initial reaction was likely to be the sullen inertia and self-pity of thinking, "How on earth can we be expected to put up with such a situation?"

3. THE QUESTIONS

- ¶ The exiles may have had many questions.

- ¶ If God was their God, and was concerned with their welfare, then how could it be that they should remain in exile for such a long time?

- ¶ How could it be the case that God would ask his people to seek and to pray for the welfare of their enemies?

- ¶ The circumstances that they seemed to be called to live in went beyond their understanding of how God dealt with his people.

4. THE ANSWERS

- ¶ At this time God's people could not see further than their immediate situation. Alleviation of their present circumstances was the only thing on their agenda. They could not see that God's purposes could involve other than this.

- ¶ The reality was that God had profound purposes that went further than anything the people could then perceive. They had not realised how far they had wandered away from their God. His desire was to change the heart of his people - to draw them back into faithfulness. The people's plan was that their exile should be ended. God's more profound plan was that they should come back to a place where "you will search for me with all your heart". God would use their exile in Babylon to allow them a time for heart searching and deep prayer. It would be a time to bring a renewed openness to God.

- ¶ The exiles were to resist the temptation, fuelled by false prophets, to become preoccupied with false hopes of an immediate end to their situation. Such preoccupation would stop them living effectively and fruitfully in the present. God wanted them to do whatever came to hand and made for growth. He wanted them to do the things that make for peace (29:7).

- ¶ Seeking and praying for the welfare of their enemies was no easier for the exiles to do then than for us to do now. However, the key to their own welfare lay in seeking and praying for the welfare of their enemies. This is a principle that the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament only reinforces.

5. UNPALATABLE TIMES (II)

- ¶ The last thirty years of unrest and violence have been a time of trauma and distress for our community. The pain of this has been felt particularly by those whose lives have been directly impacted by violence.

- ¶ Deep divisions are present in Northern Ireland. This feeds, and is fed by, acts of violence.

- ¶ It is a sad reality that division and destruction are present in a community that has a high proportion of professing Christians.

6. THE CHALLENGE OF JEREMIAH

- ¶ The most important things in our lives can turn out to be the situations that immediately face us. Our greatest desires can be that we want God to prevent the circumstances that we most fear. Our priorities at this time can be taken up with specific desires for the political future of Northern Ireland. We can often miss the deeper issues that God may want to address which concern our need to walk faithfully in his ways, whatever the political situation we find ourselves in. God used the circumstances of the exile to bring his people back to Himself. He was concerned with their immediate situation, but more besides. Can we believe that God may have deeper priorities that encompass even more than the specific hopes and fears that we may currently have?

- ¶ There is a temptation to become wholly preoccupied with our hopes and fears for the political future of our community. Such a preoccupation with what may or may not happen in the future can distract us from living in the present.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) What implications did the words of Jeremiah in verses 5 - 7 have for the everyday life and sense of well-being of those who received this letter?

- 2) In God's scheme of things was the most important thing for his people that the exile should come to an end quickly?

- 3) Imagine Jeremiah giving us a call to seek and to pray for the welfare of our enemies. Who are our enemies? Can we put a name to them? In what ways could we practically express a call to seek and to pray for the welfare of our enemies in our present situation?

- 4) Take a few moments to imagine your ideal political situation. Now imagine a scenario in which the exact opposite of what you wish for were to take place. What guidance do you find in this passage?

STUDY SIX

THE FIELD

Jeremiah 32:1-15

INTRODUCTION

☞ Zedekiah was the last king of Judah, the fifth that Jeremiah had prophesied under and the seventh he had lived under (32:1). Jeremiah's life spans probably the most troubled century in the people of Israel's history.

☞ Anathoth (32:7) was Jeremiah's home town. The town had a long association with priests (1 Kings 2:26) and Jeremiah came from a priestly family. It was on the direct route of any conquering army approaching Jerusalem from the North or East (Isaiah 10:30); so the Babylonians would have been camping around it while Jerusalem was under siege.

☞ It was important that the land stay in the hands of an Israelite (32:7; see Leviticus 25:24-25.) Obeying this law would be an important demonstration of one's faith in God. But bearing in mind Jeremiah's prophecies of doom, perhaps Hanamel was testing him to see if he still believed enough to exercise this duty.

☞ Buying the field (32:9) is one of many visible, dramatic and symbolic actions of Jeremiah. (See also 13:1ff Buy a linen loincloth; 18:1ff Go to the potter's house; 19:1, 10 Buy and break a clay jar; 27:2ff Make a yoke; 43:9 Take some large stones and bury them; 51:59-64 Throw the scroll into the Euphrates.)

☞ Due to centuries of inflation and the possibility of weights changing over the years it is impossible to relate this figure (32:9) to modern currency. The land was probably seriously devalued because of the war. A comparison with other biblical land prices shows it to be a rock-bottom price. Omri bought the hill of Samaria for 6,000 shekels (1 Kings 16:24); Abraham bought a burial cave at Machpelah for 400 shekels (Genesis 23:15); and David bought a threshing-floor for 50 shekels (2 Samuel 24:24).

1. THE SETTING: ON THE BRINK OF CHAOS AND DOOM

The book of Jeremiah is not presented chronologically. 32:1 shows us that chapters 32 and 33 actually occur during the period described in chapters 37-38 when Jeremiah was at his lowest, as a prisoner in the palace of the King's guard. During the reign of Zedekiah, Jeremiah would suffer much. The people would be deaf to his preaching, the king would ask him for help but not listen (38:14ff), he would be falsely accused of being a traitor and working for the enemy (37:13), he would be mocked and ridiculed and eventually an attempt would be made on his life (38:4-6). For most of the reign he was a prisoner (37:21; 38:13, 28). There we find him in chapter 32. It is a matter of weeks before the end of the siege and the final downfall of Jerusalem (39:1, 2).

2. THE MESSAGE: 'THIS IS THE JUDGEMENT OF GOD'

Jeremiah's message throughout Zedekiah's reign was unpopular, but consistent and uncompromising: "God is bringing his judgement upon the people. The Babylonians will not be defeated, but will burn the city and carry the people into exile. You can do two things: resist and die, or accept it, go into exile and live." (32:3-5; 38:2) Politically, at best, he was bad for morale (38:4); at worst, a traitor in the pay of the enemy (37:13). At one stage it seemed that Jeremiah was wrong. The Egyptians came to Judah's help and the Babylonians withdrew (37:5). However Jeremiah warned his people against trusting the Egyptians rather than listening to God (37:6-10) and, sure enough, the Egyptians disappeared and the Babylonians returned for a final attack (39:1)

3. THE IMPLICATION: CONFLICT

☞ Jeremiah knew all too well that obedience to God would inevitably lead him into conflict with his contemporaries and those in power. Zedekiah's relationship with him was varied. It seems that he didn't particularly dislike Jeremiah and would turn to him at times of trouble.

☞ It was his unprincipled political posturing that brought them into conflict. At a time when the city lived continually on the brink of chaos, Jeremiah showed the only (although unpalatable) way out: surrender to the Babylonians, accept God's judgement and start building for the new spiritual kingdom he outlined in 31:31-34.

☞ Jeremiah also understandably experienced inner conflict. Earlier (15:18; 20:7) he was not beyond despair and questioning, and after purchasing the field his prayer also shows signs of doubt (32:25), although this is balanced by God's reassuring reply (32:26ff).

4. THE PROPER RESPONSE: PERSISTENCE

It was his obedience to God and his outspokenness to those in power that landed him in prison. Yet in chapter 32 Jeremiah is prepared to continue listening to the demanding and seemingly impossible and impractical words of God. It was bizarre that he should buy a field which was currently overrun by the enemy in a country which was on the brink of being captured. Yet Jeremiah listened and acted.

5. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FIELD

An example of what was wrong: the land was precious to Israel. It was the visible sign that God was with them. To lose their land was tantamount to losing their faith. This is why the law of redemption existed - so that the land would stay in the possession of an Israelite. Now the whole country was facing capture. At this time, most people would have said, "Why bother redeeming? We're losing it anyway". The rock-bottom price of property illustrates this. In buying the field Jeremiah was striking at the very heart of the Babylonian threat. Even though they may claim it and rule it for a while, he had the deeds sealed and stored as a sign to the Israelites that their inheritance was not lost. Eugene Peterson writes:

"It was against history, against reason, against public opinion. But he didn't buy the field on

the advice of his broker, but by the leading of God. He was not planning a retirement cabin on the property; he was witnessing an involvement in the continuity of God's promises".

☞ A sign of hope and a symbol of restoration. What on the surface looked stupid and foolhardy was, to the eye of faith, an action of great faith and a sign of hope. If Jeremiah was a true prophet (and he had been proven true thus far at great cost to himself) then this purchase of land was the surest sign that God hadn't finished with his people yet. Doomsday was around the corner, but on the other side would be deliverance and restoration.

CONCLUSION

Although the book is not chronological, the positioning of chapter 32 is significant. Chapters 30-33 have been called "the book of consolation". Chapters 30-31 are great chapters of restoration, culminating in the New Covenant that looks forward to the Church Age. But this New Covenant will be realised through mustard-seed-type acts of faith (Matthew 17:20) in the midst of oppression, suffering and judgement - acts like buying a captured field. Yet that is not the end. Chapter 33 concludes this little book with another promise of restoration; specifically, in verses 15-16, the promise of a righteous Messiah.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) G.K. Chesterton wrote that "It is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength." What are the signs of hopelessness and hope in Northern Ireland today?

- 2) Living in hope means going against the stream when everyone else is hopeless and living in cynicism. In buying the field, Jeremiah was buying into what he believed. How can we do that with regard to Northern Ireland, even if it's costly and against history, against reason, against public opinion?

- 3) As events unfolded Jeremiah was not smug - a detached prophet of doom who was pleased that his forecasts had been accurate. Rather, he looked for ways in which the purposes of God could be made visible to the people in their darkest hour. Peterson writes that acts of hope "are rarely spectacular. Usually they take place outside sacred settings. Almost never are they perceived to be significant by bystanders". Start thinking of the small, insignificant and perhaps ludicrous acts of hope that you could engage in this week in your community.

- 4) Think of the players in the drama:
 - ☞ Zedekiah clinging on to power and the hope of traditional political alliances.
 - ☞ Shephatiah and his friends in chapter 38:1 who disliked Jeremiah because he questioned their traditional politics and suggested that God's purposes might be different from their preferences.
 - ☞ Hanamel selling up and deciding to get out while the going was good.
 - ☞ Jeremiah tenaciously hanging on to the promises of God and living in the world of those promises.

With whom do you identify?

Be Eager to do Good

STUDIES IN THE FIRST EPISTLE OF PETER

The excitement of the early days of faith was now receding. The enthusiasm of missionary expansion was being tempered by the fires of persecution. Here was a new movement learning to stand alone in a world that was growing increasingly hostile to its existence. They had been scattered to the four corners of the empire and deprived of the shelter of an approved religion. Now the first generation of leaders was passing away, and still their Lord had not returned.

Peter was an old man, his memory fading, but the words of Jesus were still fresh in his patriarchal head: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first". For the apostle these words had proved themselves many times in his life. And now, getting ready to join his Lord, he writes to his flock, to encourage them that in their present sufferings they could stand with their Lord Jesus.

Peter's first letter is a call to holiness in troubled times, and a recognition that even suffering can yield fruit in the hands of God. Possibly its most difficult message for Peter's original audience, as well as for us today perhaps, was that the Christian's proper response to pressure was submission. The only weapon we arm ourselves with is the same attitude that Christ displayed when he suffered in his body (1 Peter 4:1). Not much of a comfort, you might think, to those who were enduring the whip and the sword. But such is the way of radical holiness.

His words, however, are more than the depressed musings of a dying old man, for despite (or maybe because of) the central theme of perseverance under suffering, Peter's letter resounds with hope. He opens with praise to God for new and everlasting things, like new birth, a living hope and an incorruptible inheritance. In the grand scheme of things, the trials are only "for a little while" (1:6). He ends by looking ahead, beyond the suffering, to the time when the same God of grace who called them to eternal glory will restore those who suffer. So "stand fast", he says, "in the true grace of God" (5:12).

Just what does that mean in Northern Ireland today?

Many would identify this time as one of great uncertainty and anxiety. Some would even say that we are contending for the faith against those who would seek to destroy us. In a time when the Christian message is at best tolerated and at worst reviled, how should a Christian respond? How much of our struggle is because of our distinctive lifestyle as Christians, and how much of it is because maybe we are no longer as distinct as we should be? When does joyful endurance become obstinate sullenness? An exploration of this first epistle of Peter may help enlighten us.

STUDY CONTENT

These studies are designed to stimulate thinking and reflection on some of the key themes of

BE EAGER TO DO GOOD

1 Peter. It is not a commentary, although we will consider the book as a whole and some help is given on the more relevant passages. Nor do we propose to present an exhaustive study of Peter's first letter. We will however follow one of the major themes - that of the imperative of doing good in times of upheaval.

STUDY OUTLINE

¶ A brief introduction to the epistle. This includes a look at the audience and the particular life situation which they faced. Some of the main themes of the book which are relevant to our subject are outlined. You may want to explore these themes as well as the specific study materials, so some guidance will be given here too.

¶ The study series has been divided into four major sections:

- Study 1 Called to Holiness
- Study 2 The Personal Dimension of Holiness
- Study 3 The Social Dimension of Holiness
- Study 4 The Community Dimension of Holiness

Whilst there is a logical progression these can also stand as distinct units, giving the maximum flexibility for use.

¶ Each study section contains some introductory notes on the passage, outlining the structure and main themes. These could stand as suggested notes for handling the passage in a sermon. There is also a series of questions or activities after each main section to aid further reflection and application. These could also be used as a framework for a small group Bible study.

¶ Prayer is an important aspect of our Christian witness in a divided society. The prayers included in Section 5 are relevant to this study and may be used in congregational worship, privately in small groups or local prayer groups.

¶ The final section comprises songs/hymns for worship. Our thanks to Denis Metrusterly for composing a new song especially for this series.

CONCLUSION

It is our hope and prayer that this material will facilitate a fresh reading of the biblical text and open our hearts and minds to the challenges presented by a society in conflict with itself.

References for Further Study:

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- A. M. Stibbs and A. F. Walls, *1 Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Leicester: IVP, 1983
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The First Letter of Peter in Context

PETER'S AUDIENCE

It is generally accepted by scholars that Peter was writing to Gentile Christians that he had never met in the region of Asia Minor. It is interesting however, to note how he addresses these believers:

- ☞ Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout (1:1)
- ☞ Live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear (1:17)
- ☞ Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world (2:11)

This is the kind of language used, for instance, to describe Abraham in the land of Canaan (Gen. 23:4). But given that the place of origin of the letter is Babylon (5:13), the exile and the subsequent trauma it engendered is generally thought to be the dominant image of the book. Above all the audience is perceived to be a people who are out of step or not at home with the ways of the world. Peter also uses many descriptions of this special people that are reminiscent of the names given to ancient Israel (1:14, 18; 2:9, 10, 29).

The clear impression given is that these people are God's people in an alien environment. Nevertheless Peter views them as a peculiarly blessed people. Despite their unwanted and alien existence in Pontus and surrounding areas, as far as Peter was concerned they had been chosen by God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ (1:2). They were the recipients of a living hope (1:3) and an imperishable inheritance (1:4). This was the kind of thing that angels longed to know about (1:12), but now it was their possession.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING

These people really needed to hear that. They weren't living in the urban centres of power and sophistication in the Empire, they were living in what has been called 'the backwoods of the Empire'. And under cover of the distance from Rome many abuses happened without official sanction.

So it was that these Gentile Christians were enduring low level forms of persecution. These persecutions were not the officially sanctioned ones under Emperor Trajan, but were discriminations and abuse on a local level which may or may not have involved local collusion with the authorities. This situation was characterised by growing intolerance, verbal abuse, slander and accusation (2:12; 3:16; 4:4). Though it wasn't part of any defined policy just yet, the authorities tolerated the maltreatment of the unpopular Christians and local groups of residents took it upon themselves to make their lives miserable.

KEY THEOLOGICAL THEMES

In this atmosphere of rising tension and growing intolerance local Christians needed instruction on how to react when reviled. After all, their faith had taught them to respect authorities and to live in peace with all people. They couldn't understand why they were so unpopular and why they were suffering. Peter offered little new by way of theology, but restated what they would have already known, tailored for a situation of unjust suffering.

Some of his key themes include the following:

- ☞ An eschatological focus: Peter saw the present circumstances as but a prelude to the final

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revelation of Christ from heaven and the judgement that would follow. These sufferings witness to the coming revelation of Christ, are a sign of the presence of the Spirit in them and evidence of the judgement of God beginning with the people of God (1:6,7, 13, 17; 2:12; 4:7, 12, 13, 17; 5:4).

☞ An expected hardship: Peter cautions the Christians not to be surprised by their painful sufferings (4:12), for far from them being something 'out-of-the-blue', they may be part of the will of God (3:17). As such they will not be meaningless; indeed suffering is dignified by having a share in the sufferings of Christ (4:13).

☞ A holiness orientation: In the face of such suffering, therefore, Peter calls believers to holiness. The holiness described has three dimensions:

1. a personal dimension (1:13-2:10)
2. a social dimension (2:11-4:6)
3. a community dimension (4:7-5:13)

The motivation for holy living is two-fold: in imitation of the Lord Jesus Christ (2:21; 3:18-4:2) and because of the threat of judgement (4:12,17).

☞ A hope-full foundation: Hope is mentioned five times in the letter, which is surely significant when one considers that the primary focus is on holy living in a time of suffering. Hope functions as the foundation for holy living and is the only thing which saves the reader from drowning in a sea of moroseness and self-pitying endurance. In Christian hope, the future eschatological appearance of the kingdom intersects with the here and now of radical living and enables the Christian to anticipate blessings to be experienced at the future appearing of Christ. This hope functions also as an evangelistic tool since it is so remarkable for those who don't have it (1:3, 13, 21; 3:5, 15).

So, Peter encourages the suffering believers not to bemoan their situation nor to adopt the tactics of their persecutors. Rather they should build a holy community upon a foundation of hope in the future appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ and the blessing that would follow.

STUDY ONE

CALLED TO HOLINESS

1 Peter 1:1-12

INTRODUCTION

I suppose when it comes to persuading people to pursue a particular course of action there are at least two methods of approach - the stick or the carrot. The stick uses force, coercion, arm-twisting, pressure (emotional and physical) or even nagging as the persuaders. The carrot, on the other hand, is often more subtle. In this case Peter uses the latter: By reminding people of their true status in the eyes of God he tries to spur them on to good works and holy living.

To achieve this end Peter opens the epistle by reminding them of some fundamental truths. It is these fundamental truths that will be the basis for his call to holy living.

OUTLINE

- Introduction
- Who are we?
The believer's identity
(1 Peter 1:1-2)
- Where are we going?
The believer's destiny
(1 Peter 1:3-5)
- Triumph in suffering
The believer's hope
(1 Peter 1:6-9)
- The envy of angels and prophets
The believer's privilege
(1 Peter 1:10-12)

1. WHO ARE WE?

The believer's identity (1 Peter 1:1-2)

It was their different religious beliefs and practice that caused the growing persecution between these believers and their neighbours in the towns and provinces in which they had made their homes. With every obscenity fired at them and every stone hurled in their direction they sensed their alienation. They didn't fit in; they weren't wanted and they knew it.

It is significant then that Peter, addressing a group of people who were experiencing not just the spiritual condition of alienation from the world but the physical reality of it too, should begin his letter with a profound statement of theological identity.

When one is torn from age-old attachments to place and when one's familiar connections to community are being shredded, it is no wonder that one begins to question issues of identity. (Such dislocation was familiar to Peter, the one who left his nets to become a fisher of men and women (Matt 4:18,19)).

So even as he names physical locations on a map as the earthly lodgings of these people, he also sets up an alternative identity. These estranged people are in fact God's elect, chosen by the foreknowledge of the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ.

The world may have disowned them (as we will shortly read) but here is a theological foundation for their identity, born of the work of the Trinity, extending way back beyond the dawn of time itself. And as Peter extends grace and peace in abundance to them in the midst of their struggles, the resources to help them cope are already in place - the redemptive work of God in Christ and the redeemed community of strangers to the world thus established.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) Thinking ahead and trying to anticipate what might be forthcoming in the letter; how might such truths excite persecuted and reviled Christians?
- 2) Spend a moment reflecting on these verses. What does it mean to you to be chosen in such a way?

2. WHERE ARE WE GOING?

The believer's destiny (1 Peter 1:3-5)

It was one thing for these believers to know that God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit had been active in their past to set them apart for obedient living. (I'm sure they were grateful for Peter's prayer for grace and peace in abundance.) Outwardly, however, they were aware of growing community tension that threatened their very existence. Peter, as the wise pastor, reminds them of the scope of their redemption. Having reminded them of the theological basis of their identity, he then gives them a theological perspective on their destiny.

Peter's mention of the foreknowledge of God may have caused a few hackles to rise in the congregations, since God's foreknowledge presumably extended to knowing about their trials. So here Peter praises God for his mercy extended to them (v 3). But this mercy was not an empty gesture. The nature of the mercy extended to them through the power of the resurrection was new birth to a living hope (v 3). More than that, however, the mercy of God to these hopeless and disinherited people also extended to giving them an imperishable inheritance (v 4).

A people living in such dangerous and precarious circumstances needed this kind of encouragement:

- ☞ They needed to experience mercy from any quarter; given that the rest of the community was against them and the authorities were turning a blind eye.

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☞ They needed to resurrect hope from the ashes of their homes and the prospect of further persecution.

☞ They needed the assurance of a future, given that many sought their destruction.

They found all of this in the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus proved God's mercy, resurrected hope and kept safe their inheritance in heaven, whatever might become of them on earth.

This power of God, demonstrated in the resurrection, also promised to shield them until the final revelation of their salvation (v 5). The Greek word for shield is the same one that Paul used in Phil. 4:7 when he spoke of the peace of God guarding their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

PRAYER POINTERS

☞ Recent events in Europe have reminded all of us of what it looks like to be a refugee. To be cast upon the roads with only what you can carry, to be at the receiving end of merciless abuse, to live helplessly and hopelessly in a refugee camp and to have no way out to the future. This might be an appropriate place to pause for prayer for displaced persons all over the world, that they might experience mercy, receive hope and enter a more peaceful future.

☞ Pray also for those who bring aid to refugee camps. There may even be someone you know who is working overseas with refugees. Pray that they will be sustained as people of hope and mercy.

3. TRIUMPH IN SUFFERING

The believer's hope (1 Peter 1:6-9)

In the work of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit there is security of identity in a dangerously uncertain world. There is also the assurance of a secure hope and future and the resources to persevere in a world which is growing increasingly insecure. With these theological foundations laid Peter is ready to address the real life situation of the believers.

In doing so Peter does not deny the reality of their suffering. He does not tell them to rejoice in their sufferings, he tells them to rejoice in their hope of a future inheritance and the promise of God's shielding power. It is this hope for the future that is the basis for consolation in the midst of real suffering.

Peter draws a series of contrasts between the present and the future:

THE PRESENT

- you suffer now (1:5b)
- you are embattled now "guarded by God's power" (1:5)
- your faith is being tested now (1:7)
- you cannot see Jesus, whom you love, now (1:8)

THE FUTURE

- you will rejoice (1:8b,9)
- you will be victorious (1:7,9)
- it will prove itself purer and more precious than gold (1:7)
- you will see him in all his glory (1:7)

J. Ramsey Michaels in the Word Biblical Commentary on 1 Peter writes this about these verses:

When Paul goes so far as to tell his readers that they, and he, already "rejoice in our sufferings" (Rom 5:3 NIV), he explains carefully what he means. They "rejoice in the hope

of the glory of God" (Rom 5:2), and suffering is what finally leads to hope (5:3, 4). James tells his readers to "consider it pure joy" when they face "trials of many kinds" (James 1:2 NIV), but he too explains that this is because "the testing of your faith develops perseverance" which must "finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:3, 4 NIV).

Neither Peter nor Paul nor James know of the paradox of joy in suffering. Suffering produces sorrow, while joy is the result of vindication. In the present passage, suffering and sorrow belong to the present, while vindication and joy, although very near, belong to the future. Peter's vision transcends the limitations of the present, yet he never denies the hard reality of present suffering or calls it something it is not. In this respect he is true both to the message of hope that is the theme of his letter and the assumptions he feels compelled to make about the life situation of his readers (pg 37).

We know that amongst the early church there were those who saw glory in martyrdom and sought it out for its own sake. Such practice was condemned by the early church fathers. There is no glory in seeking suffering, nor is suffering a necessary endorsement of holy living; sometimes it can be because of disobedience.

There is, however, glory beyond suffering. It is this glory that fired Paul, James and Peter: It is the prospect of this certain glory that Peter recalls to summon his readers to great feats of perseverance. The salvation he reminds them of is not just a 'skin of the teeth' escape from the world, but an inexpressibly glorious joy in the presence of the revealed Christ when they realise that their faith has resulted in praise, glory and honour to Him.

Peter's understanding of living in the present in the light of the future is little different from that of both Jesus himself and of Paul (Matt. 5:4; Rom. 8:18).

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) Peter says that in their grief they are receiving the "goal of their faith". How could this be true?
- 2) Why is faith so valuable?

4. THE ENVY OF ANGELS AND PROPHETS

The believer's privilege (1 Peter 1:10-12)

As if to underline their special position before God, and their glorious hope, Peter reminds them that what they are currently rejoicing in is the very same salvation that the great prophets of the past sought diligently for.

In a strange way even the prophets are outsiders of a kind, compared with the inside track they had been given. They were, in a sense, served by these great prophets of the past (1:12); the prophets existed for their benefit.

More than that, even the very angels long to investigate these things, the very things that they can rejoice in.

They are, truly, the envy of angels and prophets.

POINT FOR REFLECTION

Peter hints in this chapter that persecution is to be expected. If the world does not bother to persecute us (unless we behave in utterly obnoxious ways), then maybe we need to ask ourselves what is the matter with our witness and lifestyle.

STUDY TWO

THE PERSONAL DIMENSION OF HOLINESS

1 Peter 1:13-2:10

OUTLINE

- Introduction
- Tuck your coat into your belt!
Be ready for action!
(1 Peter 1:13-16)
- Live as reverent strangers
Holiness motivated by true relationship with the Father
(1 Peter 1:17-21)
- “No mere mortals”
Love one another - the horizontal dimension
(1 Peter 1:22-2:3)
- A house made of rejected stone
Rejected by people but chosen by God
(1 Peter 2:1-10)

INTRODUCTION

Peter has set before these beleaguered people an extraordinary vision of their salvation. At the centre of this vision is the work of God the Father in his Son Jesus Christ. In him alone rests their hope. It is this hope of glory beyond their present sufferings that will inspire and empower them by the Holy Spirit to live in the world.

Having praised God for this living hope, Peter then reminds them of their responsibilities, which do not lessen because of their present trials. But in doing so, he doesn't move far from his theme of hope.

1. TUCK YOUR COAT INTO YOUR BELT!

Be ready for action! (1 Peter 1:13-16)

There is no room for equivocation here. Peter says, “Set all your hope on the grace to be given you in the revelation of Jesus Christ”. (1:13)

Now, we all know of people who are so heavenly minded they are of no earthly use, but that's not what Peter means here. Setting all your hope on the grace to be received at Christ's coming means two things:

- ☞ To be prepared for action
- ☞ To be self-controlled

“Being prepared for action” is literally translated “gird the hips of your mind”, and refers to the practice in the ancient Near East of tucking up their long tunic into their belts to leave their legs free for work or running or battle. So Peter is urging them to have their minds ready for active work (cf. 1 Kings 18:46; Jer. 1:17; Luke 17:8; John 21:18; Acts 12:8).

To be 'self-controlled' means literally to be 'sober' as opposed to being intoxicated. It is used figuratively in the New Testament, meaning to be free from every form of mental and spiritual excess and confusion, being self-controlled, clear-headed, self-possessed, ready to make clear judgements.

Daily life in such a 'pressure cooker' environment can easily distract from the prime focus of the Christian: that of the imminent return of Jesus. The only antidote is to keep your wits about you, and as Jesus himself said in Luke 12:35, “Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning”.

The practical impact of such living is stated both negatively and positively in the verses that follow:

- ☞ Don't live the way you used to, before you knew about this wonderful hope (1:14)
- ☞ Do live according to the ways of God (1:15,16)

The holiness demanded in verse 15 is not about a separated, cultic or ritual holiness, but a holiness demonstrated in their life-styles. Interestingly enough, the word which is translated “all that you do” is literally “your manner of life” or your “life style”, and it's used almost as often in Peter's letters as in the whole of the rest of the New Testament put together (1 Pet 1:15, 18; 2:12; 3:1, 2, 16; 2 Pet. 2:7; 3:11). It is also a holiness demanded by the character of God.

Holiness is active and engaging, and motivated by two things:

- ☞ Future grace (v 13)
- ☞ God's character (v 15)

It is distinctively different from what we once were: the new birth (v 3) results in a qualitatively different life. The foundation for this teaching Peter sets in the Old Testament in Lev. 19:2. If you claim to be an obedient child of God, says Peter, then imitate your Father.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) Note how Peter links the themes of hope and obedience in verses 13 and 14. How might these be linked for us today?
- 2) How might pressure and persecution 'intoxicate' us so that we are not thinking straight?
- 3) Can you think of examples of this kind of 'intoxication' in the context of the strained relationships in Northern Ireland?
- 4) Future grace and God's character demand holy living of the Christian. How would they transform the situations identified above?

2. LIVE AS REVERENT STRANGERS

Holiness motivated by true relationship with the Father (1 Peter 1:17-21)

Here Peter gives other reasons for obedience, once again in the context of relationship with the Father. If they claim God as 'Father', they must remember that he is interested in how his children turn out! This means two things for Peter's audience:

- ☞ There is a judgement, when their actions and lives will be scrutinised (1:17). The consciousness of having God as Father should not allow over-familiarity with him to influence their behaviour negatively. Peter exhorts them to fear his judgement more than that of their persecutors; to embrace the status of stranger here on earth and not to get too attached. Recognising the ultimate nature of God's judgement and the temporary nature of their present life will motivate them to live now in the light of the kingdom.
- ☞ Their salvation was costly (1:18-21). Just as they were chosen according to God's foreknowledge (1:2) so was Jesus (1:20) who made it possible for them to be children of God. God's Passover Lamb was precious to him, yet deliberately chosen to effect their redemption, and now revealed to them. Now through God the Son they have been enabled to believe and to put faith and hope in God. Whatever happens to them here in this life they can know with complete assurance that God has raised their Redeemer from the dead and glorified him. Because of this they can live holy lives.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) What might it look like for God's people to "live as strangers in reverent fear" in Northern Ireland?

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2) How might increased awareness of judgement on us influence our behaviour towards those who are different from us?

3. "NO MERE MORTALS"

Love one another - the horizontal dimension (1 Peter 1:17-22 – 2:3)

Peter hints here at a theme he will return to later in the letter; that of loving one another. In verses 13, 15 and 17, the responsibility of the believers has been directed upwards towards God, and it has been characterised by hope, holiness and reverent fear. But there is another dimension to their life, a horizontal dimension characterised by love for sisters and brothers in Christ. The theological bond of faith and hope in God (1:21) is reflected in the practical bond of love for the community of faith.

In verse 22 Peter recalls his opening statement to them in this letter - they have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood (v 2). This has resulted in purification. Peter is not telling them to 'be purified' but reminding them that they already have been purified.

The implication of this purification is the mutual love of the members of a family or a community. And since the express purpose of their purification is to display genuine love and affection for one another, they should get on and do so.

Their lives together should be characterised (to the outside world) by unremitting love, which is enduring, constant and unshaken by adversity.

People react differently to pressure and stress. Is it assuming too much to imagine that under the pressure of growing persecution the believers were falling out, when what was needed more than anything else at that time was mutual support and encouragement? In the light of their wonderful salvation, and as a consequence of their responsibility to live holy lives, they must first of all love one another without reservation.

In loving one another they are loving those who have been born, not of human seed which perishes, but of "imperishable seed" through the word of God which endures (v 23).

C. S. Lewis wrote in *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may, one day, be a creature which if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are in some degree helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.

The eternal word of God gave birth to these new creatures, therefore love them.

In 2:1-3 Peter builds on the birth theme of verse 23. There has been new birth, but as with new baby there is a natural process of growth to maturity. He states this process of maturation in relational terms.

From a negative point of view there is the call to be rid of attitudes and behaviours which destroy relationships, namely deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander. It is not hard to imagine how each of these could be present in a community under pressure, particularly if that pressure gave rise to a desire in any individual for personal security at the expense of others. This or the desire for personal advancement can damage community cohesion.

Instead they should crave the “good milk” that enables them to grow up into their salvation (2:2). In place of the image of a disintegrating community, Peter presents the image of a mother and baby secure and at rest as the baby takes milk from the very body of the mother. The growth that ensues is towards the salvation that is in store for them, waiting to be revealed (1:5, 9).

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) How do you respond under pressure?
- 2) So often Christians in Northern Ireland have responded to political crisis by criticising brothers and sisters in Christ who hold different political positions. How would obedience to Peter’s command in verse 22 transform reactions to crisis? How would it change relationships?
- 3) What practical things can be done to make our confession of faith and hope a reality on the ground?

4. A HOUSE MADE OF REJECTED STONE

Rejected by people but chosen by God (1 Peter 2:1-10)

In closing this section Peter returns to the opening of the letter in order to encourage a mature response from the believers. But this time he expands a little on the theme of ‘chosenness’.

Throughout the letter Peter has been establishing a series of contrasts. There is the “empty way of life of our forefathers” (1:18) versus the life resulting from the “foreknowledge of God the Father” (1:2). The one is characterised by emptiness, death, evil and ignorance, the other by purpose, life, mercy, imperishability, hope and love. One comes by way of natural birth, the other by way of spiritual rebirth (1:3,23). One is fading fast and perishing, the other is being revealed with ever increasing glory.

In the actual experience of the audience to whom Peter writes, one life is characterised by persecution and rejection. The other, as Peter tries to tell them, is characterised by mercy and ‘chosenness’. And lest they doubt in any way that this is true, Peter reminds them of the experience of Jesus.

- ☞ Remember that he was rejected by people, but chosen by God, and precious to him (2:4).
- ☞ Remember that he was discarded by the world as useless, but now has a pivotal role in the ushering in of the Kingdom of God (2:7).

And though this world, and the kingdoms of this world, may reject these believers, there are two reasons to be encouraged:

- 1) They did it to Jesus first
- 2) They are still part of God’s plan

Thus in God’s plan these persecuted and rejected people have purpose and meaning (2:5) and a secure identity (2:9,10).

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POINTS FOR REFLECTION

☞ The meaning and identity offered by God are first of all spiritual. All earthly allegiances are subject to the heavenly one. Rejection by the structures of the world is often a sign of this spiritual belonging. In what ways do we crave earthly acceptance and approval rather than the heavenly?

☞ Imagine a political outcome in Northern Ireland that is the opposite to what you would normally desire. How would Peter's words above provide comfort?

STUDY THREE

THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HOLINESS

1 Peter 2:11-3:7 & 3:13-4:6

OUTLINE

- Introduction
- Life amongst the pagans
(1 Peter 2:11-12)
- Life with the State
(1 Peter 2:13-17)
- Life amongst the powerless
(1 Peter 2:18-25)
- Life with an unbelieving spouse
(1 Peter 3:1-7)
- Follow the leader
(1 Peter 3:13-4:6)

INTRODUCTION

Peter called the believers to holy living because, fundamentally, they were in relationship with God. This relationship held out the prospect of future grace, it promised judgement and was won at a price. However it also carried responsibilities to lay aside the previous lifestyle prior to their new birth, to imitate God in his holiness, not to get too attached to this world, and above all else to nurture relationships of mutual love amongst the believers. In all of this their example was that of Jesus.

His unjust rejection by the world was not used as an excuse for him to adopt the standards and tactics of the world. Through it all he remained pure and holy, knowing that God had a much bigger plan in mind, to create a whole new nation of people. These persecuted believers to whom Peter wrote were a part of this greater plan.

Peter begins (from 2:11) to address more directly the situation that faced his audience. In these sections in particular he is concerned about how Christians are to live on the interface with their persecutors.

1. LIFE AMONGST THE PAGANS

(1 Peter 2:11-12)

One writer describes these verses as the sketch of Peter's battle plans for the engagement with the enemy. He describes the believers as "aliens and strangers" (a familiar theme cf. 1:1, 17) "among the pagans" (2:11, 12). The direct implication of being part of the chosen people of God, a holy nation, is that they are strangers and aliens on the earth.

Peter's basic strategy for life among the pagans is for the Christians to live good lives (the content of such lives is spelt out later). He is realistic enough to know that living good lives will not make them immune from accusation. In fact, given that believers are part of a heavenly kingdom, they may even expect to be accused of doing wrong according to the world's values, when they are actually living according to Kingdom values.

However this inevitable conflict with society is not won by aggressive behaviour but by good

conduct. There will come a day when what is being portrayed as wrong will actually be seen to be right. But the victory may not be until "the day of visitation" (2:11).

Peter also knows that such a call to be different is not easily answered. For there is a strong instinct towards self-preservation and survival which seeks accommodation with the pagans. Thus he urges them to fight this war within their own souls also. For victory in that inner battle is the key to a resolution in the external one.

QUESTION FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

Peter is keen to emphasise that we are aliens and strangers here on earth. In what ways should the value system of the heavenly kingdom conflict with that of the earthly kingdom?

2. LIFE WITH THE STATE

(1 Peter 2:13-17)

Peter now moves on to give a series of examples of how this 'good life' might look in a variety of relationships. The first example of public morality is the relationship to the state.

The general character of this relationship (as with all the relationships that are discussed) is, "submission on account of the Lord" (v 13).

Now this verse is a little more complex than it might look, and some points need to be made:

1) The submission is voluntary, not compulsory. The verb used is imperative in form, indicating that the submission is a matter of choice and not of nature or necessity. Peter recognises that his readers are free agents (2:16) and this submission is to be voluntarily chosen "for the sake of the Lord" not because the state requires it.

2) The submission is directed, literally, "to every created human being". In classical Greek the phrase is used of the founding of a city (though not abstract ideas like institutions). In biblical Greek, however, it is used seventeen other times in the New Testament with reference to the world and all creatures (cf. Rom 1:25; Col 1:23). The inclusion of the adjective 'human' indicates that Peter had in mind here "submission to other people". Given that, and the particular form of the verb used, the verse implies that the believers should "defer to" or "respect" all other people.

3) The emperor and his governors are given as the first examples of people to whom they are to pay respect, perhaps because in a context of persecution they might be perceived as among the hardest people to respect.

4) Submission to people, and especially the king and his local magistrates, is "for the sake of the Lord". Submit to people because you ultimately submit to the Lord.

The implication of this verse for a people undergoing persecution is profound in very practical ways.

Christians, because of their commitment to God, are to pay proper respect to everybody, including those who persecute them, even to the political powers, who either sanction the persecution or turn a blind eye to it. They are to give up efforts to gain power and authority over other human beings and instead pursue the good of everyone they meet.

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Again, it is useful to remember the real life situation of the people who received this letter. However difficult it may be to respect the geographically distant emperor, it must have been virtually impossible, when you were being abused, to respect and honour the local governor appointed by the emperor to maintain public order! Never mind having to seek the good of those who actually did the abusing, whether verbal or physical.

The believers are to respect and honour everybody, including their persecutors, since even they are creatures of God, made in his image and thus worthy of respect. Since this is a key element in his battle plan Peter is forthright and allows no ambiguity: "Submit to them"!

The nature of this submission is spelt out in verses 15-17. The command of verses 13 and 14 is "God's will" and God's will may involve the suffering of Christians (3:17). If this is the case it is far better to suffer for doing what is right than for what is wrong (4:19).

Doing good involves not just obeying the law of the state but also doing "good works" as described in 2:12. By eagerly doing good the believers will ultimately silence the slander of ignorant and foolish people. The ignorance he talks about is literally "a lack of religious experience" i.e. the ignorance of people estranged from God, and who therefore see good as evil and vice versa. They will be silenced, if not by the state, then on the "Day of visitation" (v12).

The freedom Peter talks about in verse 16 is not political or social freedom, it is the freedom that comes from being "a slave to God" (v 16). It is thus a freedom from sin, the law and the world which releases a person to the service of God. It is not freedom that releases them from their obligations to the state. Such an attitude would be disastrous since it would bring dishonour to their profession of faith.

As slaves of God, therefore, Peter gives his readers a four-fold command, at least three of which are familiar in Northern Ireland. This command is comprised of two pairs with "honour" at either end.

- 1) The first pair points to a distinction between respect and love. Everybody (virtually repeating the "all human creation" v 13) is to be honoured and respected. But Christian brothers and sisters are to be loved (1:22). This is not to negate the command of Jesus to love one's neighbour (Matt 5:43-46), but points to the fact that fellow-Christians, as part of a new family, have a call upon a Christian's love in a way others do not.
- 2) Peter also makes a distinction between the respect and fear due to God and that due to the emperor, which is appropriate given that the believers are slaves of God. God is to be revered and feared, and part of fearing God involves honouring the emperor - perhaps an echo of Jesus' words in Matt. 10:28.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) The Christian, "for the sake of the Lord" and as a "slave to God", voluntarily chooses to respect and honour even those who might be considered enemies and who might abuse. How might this impact strained relationships in Northern Ireland?
- 2) Peter's focus in all of this is that by doing good there will be vindication, either from the authorities or ultimately on the "Day of Visitation" (v 12). If vindication is placed in such a "future" context, can you see ways in which political relationships could be changed?
- 3) We probably all find it difficult to love those who abuse us. Can you suggest ways in which we might begin to grow in the discipline of love for our enemies?
- 4) Reflect upon Peter's four-fold command in verse 17 in the context of Northern Ireland and then pray.

3. LIFE AMONGST THE POWERLESS**(1 Peter 2:18-25)**

Peter chooses the experience of household slaves to illustrate the proper response of believers when they are victims of an abuse of power. In doing so, he introduces to his readers the possibility that they may have to suffer for their faith. This is difficult teaching and must be interpreted with careful attention to the context in which it was written.

Given that he has already addressed the believers as slaves of God (2:16) it is appropriate to widen the application to all believers, using the household servants as stand-ins. In this way he subtly introduces the idea of persecution without directly accusing the state of abuse.

The word order in verse 18 is important. The original Greek translates "household slaves, submit yourselves in all fear to your masters". The word translated 'fear' is a word that Peter reserves exclusively for reverence or fear directed towards God. Therefore servants are urged, out of reverence for God, to honour and respect their masters. Their motivation is respect for God who receives their service as if done to him.

This is crucial to Peter's argument since if the service is done primarily to God it means that their performance is not determined by the actions of their masters. So regardless of how their masters behave, they are to honour them as if they were honouring God. Those who bear up under such harsh treatment because of their reverence for God please God by their actions (2:19). Peter writes this in order to ensure that whatever the Christians in Asia Minor suffer at the hands of the government or the people may be undeserved and not a punishment for wrong-doing (2:20).

This is unpleasant teaching and so Peter offers an argument in the example of Christ. He did not yield to sin despite the unjust treatment he received. Peter makes it clear that following the way of Christ may also mean a share in his destiny on earth, which was death, so he tells them they should "follow in his steps" (v 21). Not a pleasing prospect, but part of the pattern left for them by their Lord. The pattern of Christ's life is also offered as an encouragement to them, that in their suffering they are identifying with Christ, and they like him can trust it "to him who judges justly" (v 23).

In the context these people faced the use of words like death, life, wounds and healing (2:24) must have sounded acutely poignant.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

1) Unfortunately, not all the abuse that Christians attract is unwarranted. Our behaviour and lifestyle is to be such as will attract only undue abuse or criticism. Even then it is to be accepted without retaliation nor resorting to the tactics of the abusers. What lessons can we learn from the experience of Jesus and his trial and crucifixion that might help us?

2) What are the civic implications in Northern Ireland of "entrusting...to Him who judges justly" (v 23)?

4. LIFE WITH AN UNBELIEVING SPOUSE**(1 Peter 3:1-7)**

Peter continues his discussion here on life at the interface between believers and the world. This time he considers those in marital relationships with unbelievers. But it should be noted that just as in the discussion on household slaves, and particularly in the discussion on Christian wives, the instructions

BE EAGER TO DO GOOD

given are more generally applicable wherever Christians find themselves in direct contact with the world. Their lives should be characterised by purity and reverence, with the inner beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.

In such a society it was expected that the wife would adopt the religion of her husband. It is interesting to note that Peter's instructions to a wife to honour and respect her husband do not extend to giving up her status as a member of God's family and one of Sarah's daughters.

Peter continues in his optimism that society can be turned on its head, that by his wife's behaviour and quiet faith her husband will break all the stereotypes and societal expectations and adopt the faith of his wife. But he is also realistic that this may not happen. Nevertheless the woman must persist both in her faith and in her respect for her husband, whatever comes her way.

Once again the wider application for all the believers is obvious. Behave in such a way as to achieve the conversion of everyone you meet. If this is not achieved, and you attract suffering instead, behave that way anyway!

The expectations for the Christian husband of an unbelieving wife are no less onerous within that society. It would be likely in that world that a wife would already share the faith of her husband, since even a Christian husband could compel it. But in this case, even if she doesn't, the husband must continue to respect and honour her, because she is God's creation. He must resist the desire to oppress her or bully her and learn how to live with her.

If, as is likely, she is already a believer, he must treat her as an equal in the community of faith. Again, this is profoundly counter-cultural in his world. When husband and wife do not respect one another their prayers are hindered and empty.

POINTS FOR ACTION

- ☞ Conversions are to be achieved through reverence and respect for fellow human beings. People are to be won over by quietness of spirit and inner beauty, and also by our reluctance to use the aggressive and oppressive behaviours of the world.
- ☞ Reflect on ways in which the message of the Gospel has been tarnished by the aggressive behaviour of Christians.
- ☞ Seek wisdom from God on how to act in the public arena in ways which make the gospel attractive.
- ☞ Individual/group exercise: "I've got a right to..." Complete each statement below by imagining how a person (not yourself) might finish them:

"My boss doesn't pay me enough, I've got a right to..."

"My parents don't listen to me, I've got a right to..."

"The tax law is unfair, I've got a right to..."

"My church doesn't view women as real persons, I've got a right to..."

"The residents' group doesn't recognise my right to walk, I've got a right to..."

"The lodge doesn't recognise my right to live free of intimidation, I've got a right to..."

From 1 Peter 2:13-3:22 how should Christians respond? How might Peter respond?

5. FOLLOW THE LEADER

(1 Peter 3:13-4:6)

Peter has made no secret of the fact that there is a strong likelihood of suffering if Christians seek to live according to the values of the Kingdom. He is also very clear that however difficult the circumstances there is no let-up in the responsibility to do good, whether that is in obeying an abusive political regime, honouring neighbours who slander or family members who are oppressive or bullying.

Wherever Christians interface with the world they are to be guided by the principle established in 2:12:

“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”

Peter makes it clear that the conversion of a society may result from the behaviour of its Christians, but the more likely outcome is persecution.

His words in 3:13 therefore, from which we get the title of this series, may seem a trifle naïve or ironic: “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?” Yet, when set in the context of what follows (3:14-21) they sound a glorious eschatological truth.

In the ultimate scheme of things no-one can harm us for doing good! Oh yes, they can damage the body, even kill us, but for those who have set apart Christ as Lord, who have this hope that Peter talked about in his opening lines and repeats here, there is vindication.

Because of this, no matter what the reception we may receive, we may consistently do good, even rush to do good to those who persecute and revile us, and in this way puzzle and confuse those who seek our ruin. For by being eager to do good, by honouring the government which persecutes, by honouring and respecting neighbours or family members who abuse we witness to a hope beyond this world. Such behaviour will open opportunities to speak of that hope. But even when our enemies become ashamed of their behaviour we must treat them with gentleness and respect. There are simply no circumstances where bad behaviour should give the world cause to malign the Lord Jesus Christ.

STUDY FOUR

THE COMMUNITY DIMENSION OF HOLINESS

1 Peter 4:7-5:13

OUTLINE

- Introduction
- Sticking together to the end
(1 Peter 4:7-11)
- Faithfully facing trials
(1 Peter 4:12-19)
- An appeal to leaders
(1 Peter 5:1-5)
- Closing encouragement to stand firm
(1 Peter 5:6-13)

INTRODUCTION

Peter has outlined to his audience the responsibility on each of them to live holy lives in the light of the glorious salvation that is theirs. He is also concerned to ensure that in every possible relationship where they interface with the world they are not to give offence to non-believers. By the sheer goodness of their lives and the beauty of spirit they can seek to win unbelievers to the cause of Christ.

But even if society is not won over in its entirety, as Peter hints is quite likely to be the case, they are still to live this way and therefore cut out from under their persecutors any pretext of just cause.

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His third concern for his readers is that they would continue to live holy lives in their relationships with one another. He is concerned above all that the community should stick together in the face of suffering. His reasoning is that individual Christians stand much less chance of surviving with their faith intact than those who are secure in community.

1. STICKING TOGETHER TO THE END

(1 Peter 4:7-11)

The prospect of the imminent inbreaking of God's final kingdom and rule conditions all New Testament teaching; it is also clear that this impending end is often associated with suffering and deliverance (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; Mark 1:45; Lk. 10:9, 11; 21:28; Rom. 13:12; Phil. 4:5; Heb. 10:25; Jms. 5:8; Rev. 1:3; 22:10), so Peter is on familiar ground here.

If this end is just around the corner, it is imperative that Christians live accordingly. Peter's concern is that they should not become so focused on the coming of Christ that they fail to recognise their responsibilities in the present. They should be "sane and clear-headed" at the prospect of the nearness of the end of all things. These words have been used by Peter before in 1:13 and in 5:8 when he urges them to "be sober and not intoxicated". "Clear-headedness" was commanded in 1:13, so that they do not get too distracted by their struggles and lose sight of the imminent return of Christ. Here they are urged not to lose sight of their responsibilities on earth by being too focused on "the end of all things".

Once again Peter is concerned with proper balance. Seeing this life correctly, that is, in the context of the end, should lead to prayer (cf. Matt. 24:41-42). The alert and praying believer is alive to the most urgent necessity for the Christian community, that of remaining constant in their love for one another, and thus echoes 1:22 and anticipates 5:5. We can presume that the love of these believers for one another was being tested by the trials they faced (cf. 1:6; 4:12 and the prediction of Jesus himself in Matt. 24:12).

There are a number of possibilities for interpreting Peter's use of the citation of Prov. 10:12b (4:8). One plausible interpretation is that genuine love for the believers will forgive or overlook the faults of others in the church, a condition necessary for community solidarity in the face of persecution.

As in 2:11 Peter's practice is to state a general principle and then to illustrate what this principle would look like in real life. The kind of love he commands is given practical example in situations familiar to every reader or hearer:

1) Offer hospitality without grumbling (4:9).

The practice of Christian hospitality is a familiar one in the New Testament (e.g. Matt. 10:11-13, 40-42; Luke 10:5-7; Acts 16:15, 32-34; Rom. 12:13; 1 Tim. 3:2; Heb. 13:2). Travelling preachers, prophets and evangelists received free room and board whilst they were legitimately in an area. Giving hospitality was a qualification for eldership or for being enrolled as a widow, people even gave their houses up for the meeting of local churches. It was a costly commitment, given that many Christians themselves lived from hand to mouth.

In the context of this letter, however, it may very well be that local believers were receiving those who had been evicted from their homes because of the persecution. There was no quick solution here. Whilst travelling preachers would move on in a relatively short period, those who had lost their homes had no immediate prospect of moving on since they had nowhere to go.

The community should offer very practical, loving service by offering hospitality to fellow believers and should do so without grumbling. This kind of love bound believers together:

2) Exercise spiritual gifts in service to others (4:10).

Believers cannot control what gift the Holy Spirit gives them but they can control how it is used. Such gifts are not for self-glorification or personal development (cf. 1 Cor. 12:5) but for service in the body of believers (cf. 1 Cor. 14:3-5; Eph. 4:12).

What could be more damaging to the unity of the community than for individual members to try and profit themselves or their reputation at the expense of their suffering sisters and brothers?

3) Exercise spiritual gifts for God's glory (4:11).

From the general statement of verse 10, Peter moves to more concrete examples, that of the speaking gifts and serving. Speaking covers the whole range of such gifts including glossolalia, prophecy, teaching and evangelism (or preaching). Serving probably includes those deeds one Christian does for another such as administration, care for the poor and sick (including giving and distributing funds), healing and similar acts which express the love of God.

Speech can be used for tearing down, as these believers were only too aware (cf. 2:1, 12, 15, 22-23; 3:9, 10, 16), or for building up. If a Christian speaks he is to do so with an awareness that he speaks the very words of God for the building up of the community.

Serving others is to be done in God's strength so that he is glorified and not the server. How easy in such a pressured environment for people to burn themselves out in meeting the very necessary needs of suffering fellow-believers. Peter urges that they serve one another in love in the strength God provides. Thus all acts of service to one another are the works of God and also acts of worship to him.

In the earlier part of the letter Peter was concerned that Christians were engaged in doing good to their enemies. Here he addresses the context out of which this energy for doing good is generated. If Christians are to face their persecutors with humility and gentleness then they need a loving, supportive and ministering community behind them. Only with such a community can they face the prospect of the end of all things.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) How can we balance anticipation of the return of Christ with a proper concern for the world?
- 2) Why is cohesion in the Christian community so important in helping Christians cope with a hostile world?
- 3) In a culture with so many Christians, how do we build Christian community in Northern Ireland?
- 4) In a context like Northern Ireland, what might obedience to Peter's commands in 4:9-11 look like?
- 5) Service that builds up the community of faith is glorifying to God. Presumably the reverse is also true, that we denigrate God when we engage in acts that break unity or tear down the community. How have both of these principles been proved in Northern Ireland?
- 6) Being eager to do good to fellow-believers with whom we disagree can be very difficult. In what practical ways can we grow in understanding this discipline?

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2. FAITHFULLY FACING TRIALS

(1 Peter 4:12-19)

With great tenderness Peter turns once again to address the painful trials his friends are suffering (4:12). Perhaps what is most striking here is Peter's emphasis on the sovereignty and initiative of God, even in the midst of their suffering.

Earlier the apostle had promised that there would be vindication which would outweigh the judgement of those who had blasphemed God by slandering his people (4:4-6). Here he ascribes all judgement to God who has no favourites and who will therefore begin judgement on his own house first, and then the rest of the world. This suffering is inevitable (1:6) and nothing can prevent it (1:17) and therefore they shouldn't be surprised by it (4:12). After all, not even Christ himself was spared (4:13). But these sufferings, which they are at present undergoing, are simply their share in the sufferings of Christ (4:13).

The elect, however, are still the elect, and though they might be barely saved, they are still saved (4:18). And God will be glorified, not only in their acts of ministry and service towards one another, but also in their daily encounter with the slander, prejudice and downright hatred of the Roman society in which they live. Their hope of ultimate vindication rests not in a free ticket out of this world. Rather, they should be aware that God has something to teach them first and he can do that through their suffering, which will perfect their faith (1:6-7).

Faith enables them to trust their present (and future) circumstances to their creator God and thus strengthens them to continue doing good whatever their plight. More than that, faith makes it possible to rejoice in the prospect and reality of trials and persecution (4:13) and even experience in advance a taste of the glory of Christ for which they wait (4:14).

FOR REFLECTION

What lessons could God have been teaching his church in Northern Ireland through the trials of the last three decades?

3. AN APPEAL TO LEADERS

(1 Peter 5: 1-5)

In situations of trial those in leadership in the church have particular responsibilities. Pressures on any social grouping, which could cause it to disintegrate, put strains on the leadership. Instead of being reluctant leaders (5:2), or being in it for financial gain (5:2), or taking to themselves greater and greater 'emergency powers', they must serve in such a way as to be examples to the flock under their care (5:3).

The real reward for such leaders comes at the appearing of Christ (5:4). This reward is in direct contrast to the rewards of this world.

Those who are younger in the church must submit themselves to those who are older. Again, there may be an eerie echo of our own circumstances here in Northern Ireland which often sees young people at the forefront of violence. Peter counsels them to submit to those who are older and not, perhaps, to take radical action against those who persecute the church.

PRAYER POINTERS

Pray for leaders in Northern Ireland, both religious and political. Pray also for the leaders of both governments.

4. A CLOSING ENCOURAGEMENT TO “STAND FIRM”

(1 Peter 5:6-13)

As if trying to crush in a series of closing exhortations, Peter delivers a series of short instructions. The image dominating the passage is that of warfare (2:11, 12). The believers are at war, not in this instance with their persecutors, but with the devil (5:8). As such they must pay attention to their ‘commanding officer’ (5:8). The resistance offered to the devil is not that of fighting with their human enemies, rather it is to do good to them. In this way their enemy, the devil, will not be able to devour them.

Furthermore, they should know that they stand with a world-wide community of God's people who are experiencing similar trials. Their commanding officer has not abandoned his troops, for the battle here is only temporary. If they resist by continuing to do good they will receive, from the hand of God himself, their rightful reward. He will strengthen them and place them on a firm foundation, for he wields ultimate power (5:10, 11).

Therefore he could say to them “cast all your care on him, for he continues to care for you”, even in persecution (5:7). And this care does not necessarily mean a release from suffering, but the working out of his purposes for each believer in the midst of suffering.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) Winning a war by doing good to our enemies is not a natural strategy. What are the practical implications in Northern Ireland?
- 2) Is it possible to discern any heavenly purpose in the conflict of the last 30 years here?
- 3) How can the prospect of “eternal glory” spur us on to good works?

PRAYERS

A Prayer of Thanksgiving

Lord Jesus,
 In a world of selfishness, greed and power,
 We thank you for the way you have overcome the world.
 Expecting you to come in displays of strength,
 We find you in the weakness of a baby.
 Expecting you to demonstrate your glory,
 You come concealed in the flesh and bone of a man.
 Expecting you to assert your power,
 You submit to insult and humiliation and
 hang meekly on a cross.
 In you we see the nature of God
 and learn the power of compassion
 and the strength of weakness.
 Help us to live in the light of your life and
 your ways in the world.
 Teach us to serve rather than expect service
 and show us the freedom of following you
 That the world may believe.
 AMEN

BE EAGER TO DO GOOD

A Prayer for Holiness

Gracious God,
Through the redeeming work of your Son,
You have given us a great salvation.
We thank you that through the work of your Holy Spirit
You strengthen us to live lives worthy of this gift.
Yet, we confess that at times we have neglected your help
and harboured thoughts and attitudes
unworthy of your love for all people .
We have spoken harmfully against our neighbour
and nurtured division and distrust in our hearts.
Help us to walk in holiness and humility
in our relationship with you and others.
To be gracious as you have been gracious to us;
To be forgiving as you have forgiven us;
To open our homes and hearts to those in need
As you have done for us.
In the name of Christ
AMEN

A Prayer for Forgiveness

Holy God,
You have called us to live holy lives
in all our relationships,
and especially among those who are our enemies.
We thank you for the example of Jesus who,
though he was shamefully abused,
did not retaliate or offer threats
but trusted himself to your justice.
Forgive us for those times
when we have dishonoured the Gospel
by meeting insult with insult,
or abuse with abuse.
Forgive us for believing the worst about our enemies
or bearing false witness against our neighbour.
Forgive us for being apathetic in the face of injustice
and silent when we should have spoken out.
Teach us how to live as a holy people
and to walk as peacemakers
in our violent world.
AMEN

A Prayer for Unity in Holiness

(To be used as a prayer and response)

Leader: Our God, we stand together as a people forgiven and unified under the care and protection of one God and we affirm together our faith in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

RESPONSE: With joy let us praise the God of our salvation.

Leader: We believe in the church, the community of believers called to action and service in the world.

RESPONSE: We are part of that community, called by the gracious action of our God to be disciples of Jesus.

Leader: Our hearts are sad as we recall the ways we divide ourselves from one another. For our harsh words towards our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ:

RESPONSE: Forgive us O Lord.

Leader: For our jealousies which harden our hearts towards one another:

RESPONSE: Forgive us O Lord.

Leader: For loving political ideologies more than Christ and His church:

RESPONSE: Forgive us O Lord.

Leader: For walking in the ways of the world more than the paths of heaven:

RESPONSE: Forgive us O Lord.

Leader: In awareness of our coming King and His Kingdom, we commit ourselves afresh to loving our brothers and sisters. And as we love one another, we pray that under the guidance and wisdom of your Holy Spirit, we may be part of communities which are open and loving towards those who are on the outside. We pray that by our love for one another people will know that we are disciples of Jesus.

For Jesus Christ's sake, Amen.

WORSHIP

CHOSEN BY OUR SAVIOUR

written for ECONI Sunday by Denis Mestrustery

©1999 Anastasia Music

Melody: Trad: Nicaea

Holy, Holy, Holy

Chosen by our Saviour;
Made a holy nation;
We now worship Jesus,
Proclaim His truth to men.
He has made us righteous
For this holy calling:
Showing His goodness
So that God is praised.

Glory held within us
From the world is hidden,
But it is our calling
For our bright light to shine.
We are on a hill top,
All who look may see us:
Showing His goodness
So that God is praised.

Everyone, our neighbour;
Sent forth to serve them,
Showing love and mercy
In our great Saviour's name.
Though they may revile us,
Shun and ignore us:
We show His goodness
So that God is praised.

Jesus, Lord and Master:
You are our Panem;
Though scorned and rejected
You prayed 'Forgive them, Lord'
Let us know Your power;
Let us taste Your mercy:
Showing His goodness
So that God is praised.

METRICAL-STYLE HYMNS

Christ is Alive	ICP 12
Christ is the world's true light	HTC 323
Church of God	GTG 75, HTC 504
Crown him with many crowns	HTC 174, MP 109, SH 21
For the healing of the nations	GTG 111
Hail to the Lord's anointed	HTC 190, MP 204
Lord bring the day to pass	GTG 117
Lord of our Life	MP 441
The Kingdom of God	GTG 126, HTC 333, MP 651

Other Worship Songs

All earth was dark	GTG 109, MP 8
All I once held dear	SH 97 no. 2
All the ends of the earth	GTG 108
Counter to the culture	SH 20
From heaven you came	GTG 79, ICP 23, MP 162
Great is the darkness	SH 42
He has showed you	MP 205
Heart and soul	SH 50
Here I am, wholly available	MP 229 (MP2 393)
I will cry mercy	SH 67
I will speak out	SH 70
Jesu, Jesu,	GTG 115, ICP 46
Let there be love	MP 411,
Make me a channel	GTG 56, HTC sup.19, ICP 57, MP 456
Men and women, partners	SH 95
My peace I give unto you	MP 477
Restore, O Lord, the honour of your name	MP 579 (MP1 196)
We want to see Jesus lifted high	SH 97 no. 141
When I needed a neighbour	ICP 97
Who can sound the depths	GTG 128, MP 766
Would you walk by?	ICP 100

Abbreviations:

GTG	<i>Glory to God</i> (Presbyterian Supplement)
HTC	<i>Hymns for Today's Church</i>
ICP	<i>Irish Church Praise</i> (Church of Ireland Supplement)
MP	<i>Mission Praise</i> combined music edition
SH	<i>Spring Harvest Praise</i> 1996 edition

A Time to Heal

THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF PEACE, JUSTICE & RECONCILIATION

“A time to heal...”

The challenge for Christians in a divided society is to articulate a vision of healing and transformation that is faithful to God’s redemptive plan for our world and practical in its application to the divisions in our community.

We are therefore inviting churches to explore the themes of Peace, Justice and Reconciliation and to consider the contribution that Christians can make to the healing of our society. Our resource materials will focus on the nature of these biblical imperatives and their centrality to our Christian witness. In the light of the political changes in our country, this is an important time for people of faith to explore these issues.

OUTLINE OF CONTENTS

These study notes contain four sections under the following headings:

- Study 1 - The Church as a Community of Peace
- Study 2 - The Church as a Community of Justice
- Study 3 - The Church as a Community of Reconciliation

An outline page introduces each of these sections, highlighting the various options and summarising the headlines under each title. Each study offers Old Testament and New Testament options.

Each study includes a number of Questions for Study or Application - these are designed to focus the user’s mind on where the implications of the material are particularly pertinent to the Northern Ireland situation.

Prayer is an important aspect of Christian witness in a divided society. Included in these study notes is a series of prayers that may be used in congregational worship, privately, in small groups or local prayer groups.

The final section includes songs/hymns for worship.

Finally, included with this introduction page is a list for further reading (some of these have been referenced in the studies).

THE STUDY MATERIAL

The material has been laid out so that it can be used in a variety of ways:

- ☛ As a series of eight group Bible studies
- ☛ As a series of three group Bible studies covering the three major topics with options to

- choose from in each topic
- ☛ As a series of group Bible studies on the issue of Peace, Justice or Reconciliation
- ☛ As sermon outlines covering one to eight weeks

This flexibility is deliberate. If the material is being used by a preacher for sermon preparation, it will of course need to be adapted to suit the situation into which he/she is preaching. The paragraphs of notes act as a commentary on the text with particular emphasis given to aspects of the text and background which are relevant to the theme. Depending on the preacher's context, there will probably be more material here than is required for any one sermon. This again allows for flexibility. In some cases one of the subheadings of the study may be sufficient for an entire sermon.

FURTHER READING

For following up some of the issues mentioned in the studies, the following commentaries are recommended, some of which are referenced in the studies.

Hosea and Micah:

Thomas McComiskey (Hosea) & Bruce Waltke (Micah) in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* (2 vols.) (edited: T. McComiskey), Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993.

Matthew:

D. A. Hagner, *Matthew* (2 vols.) *Word Biblical Commentary*, Texas: Word, 1995.

C.L. Blomberg, *Matthew - New American Commentary*, Nashville: Broadman, 1992.

Romans:

J. Dunn, *Romans* (2 vols.), *Word Biblical Commentary*, Texas: Word, 1988.

J.R.W. Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, Leicester: IVP, 1994.

1 Peter:

W. Grudem, *1 Peter Tyndale Commentary*, Leicester: IVP, 1990.

P. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* NICNT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.

OTHER READING:

Available from ECONI -

lion&lamb, 18 (Autumn) ECONI, 1998 (focuses on peace, justice and reconciliation themes).

Action Packs: Peace; Justice; Reconciliation - (three of ten titles in the ECONI Action Pack 1992).

For God & His Glory Alone, ECONI, 1998 (2nd ed).

A Future with Hope - Biblical Frameworks for Peace & Reconciliation, ECONI, 1998 (2nd ed).

A TIME TO HEAL

STUDY ONE

THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF PEACE

OUTLINE

The Church as a Community of Peace offers three options:

1A The Culture of Peace

Micah 4: 1-5

“ALREADY” AND “NOT YET”

1. A Dynamic Picture (v 1-2b)

Micah sees the people swarming to Zion to learn from God
Movement upwards - Movement towards - Movement away

2. Hunger on the Streets (v 2a)

Peace begins with a spiritual hunger

3. Transformation in the Factories (v 3)

Peace involves turning away from violence and death

4. Security in the Fields (v 4)

Peace involves a freedom from fear

CONCLUSION

Things don't have to be the way they are

A message of transformation; a universal message

A message of obedience; a message to be proclaimed

1B Unexpected Hope

Micah 5:1-6

1. A Present Crisis (v 1)

Micah mocks a city reliant on (para)military activity

2. Unexpected hope from an unexpected place (v 2)

Micah introduces the concept of salvation through the insignificant and weak

3. Unexpected hope at an unexpected time (v 3)
Micah reminds the people that deliverance and peace come after judgement
4. Unexpected hope through an unexpected person (v 4)
His function, methods, results and influence
5. Future Crises (v5-6)
The Prince of Peace at a time of war

1C Overcome Evil With Good

Romans 12:14-21

1. A call for no revenge (v 14, 17, 19, 20)
Leave room for God's methods
2. A call for identification (v 15, 16b)
Forget your personal agenda; rejoice with those who rejoice
3. A call to peace (v 16a, 18, 21)
Don't let differences become divisions

STUDY 1A

The Culture of Peace

Micah 4:1-5

This passage, which is repeated by Micah's contemporary, Isaiah (Isaiah 2:2-5), gives an eschatological (end-time) vision of peace and prosperity. Isaiah's prophecy is slightly shorter and doesn't contain the promise of security (Micah 4:4) or as comprehensive a commitment to action as Micah 4:5. This, plus the relevance of this prophecy to Micah 3:9-12, make it likely that Micah's is the original prophecy adapted and borrowed by Isaiah.

'ALREADY' AND 'NOT YET'

Christian eschatology is a tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet'. Already we have the supernatural power that comes from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; not yet are we free from the temptations and effects of sin. Already we have access to the Father through Christ; not yet can we see face to face or enjoy complete fellowship. Already we see the signs of the Kingdom of God among us; not yet do we experience it in its totality. The role of the church is to live out the reality of the 'already', while still being conscious of the 'not yet' - the continued fallenness of the created order; and the still pernicious presence of sin.

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The period predicted by Micah illustrates this. Chapter 4:1-5 describes an end-time scenario, but it is an end-time vision which the church, as the eschatological people of God, must endeavour to live out now by the power of the Spirit. These verses do not just describe society as it can be and will be, they describe the church as it is! Even if they seem unrealistic and idealistic, these verses encourage us to live out who we are and enable our communities to strive towards what they may become. That is the way to “walk in the name of the Lord our God” (v 5).

1. A DYNAMIC PICTURE (V 1-2b)

Micah sees the people swarming to Zion to learn from God

This prophecy is a series of pictures. It would be helpful (if rather anachronistic) to see it in terms of a movie, with the camera telling the larger story through short cameos. First of all, the camera begins with a wide-angle shot to take in the big picture, and the first thing to strike the viewer is that it is a scene of dynamic activity. Three movements in particular can be noted.

☞ **Movement upwards:** God's mountain is Zion, the symbol of the presence of God, God's residence. It is “raised above the hills”. This is a figure of speech referring not to physical height, but to importance and significance. The hills were particularly seen as the abode of the gods. At idolatrous times in their history, the Israelites erected shrines “on every hill and under every green tree” (2 Kings 16:4; 7:10). This movement upwards describes the elevation of God's house above all other shrines and his superiority to all other gods.

☞ **Movement towards:** There is also a centripetal movement as “peoples stream to it”. It was not uncommon for there to be pilgrimages of people to major centres of population, or the forced relocation of peoples to the capital of the empire. Some years after Micah's era they would be streaming to Babylon (Jeremiah 51:44), but here Micah foresees droves of people travelling along the spokes of a wheel to Zion, the hub. This is a different pilgrimage, a voluntary relocation as peoples re-orientate themselves towards God and choose to go in his direction. It is an example of the verbal commitment mentioned in verse 5 being lived out by many nations.

☞ **Movement away:** There is also a centrifugal movement. As the people move towards the centre, the Law and the word of God go out from the centre (2b). “The Law” was concerned with lifestyle issues - it gave guidelines for living; the “word of the Lord” referred usually to specific prophetic words spoken into a contemporary situation.

These three movements are inter-dependent. Because of the superiority of Yahweh over all other gods (movement up), the people walk in his direction (movement towards) and God, in turn, meets them as they come, through his word (movement away).

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) What idols do we erect for ourselves, and over what other modern gods do we need to claim the Lord's sovereignty?
- 2) Micah foresees a massive parade from a variety of nations and cultures excitedly marching together to the house of God. Is our worship and lifestyle attractive to outsiders? Are we doing anything which unnecessarily prevents them from wanting to join with us to worship?

- 3) As we go to meet God, his word meets us. Are we being constantly confronted and challenged by his word? If not, are we walking in the right direction?

2. HUNGER ON THE STREETS (V 2a)

Peace begins with a spiritual hunger

As the camera pans in to take its three cameo shots, it stops first at the street corners. People are standing and talking. The roving microphones pick up snippets of conversation. There is excitement and enthusiasm in the voices. There is a spiritual hunger as people encourage one another in their desire to be near the Lord. The words betray an urgency: "Come, let us go". This spiritual hunger shows itself in three desires: a desire to worship "let us go to the house of God", a desire to learn "that he may teach us his ways", and a desire to change "that we may walk in his paths".

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) In Northern Ireland, is our high church-going population evidence of a national desire to worship or is our religiosity mixed with other motives?
- 2) What prevents us from having a similar excitement about encountering God in worship?
- 3) Given the continued divisions in Northern Ireland in spite of high attendance at worship, where is the dynamic mentioned above (worship-learn-change) breaking down?
- 4) To what extent is the root of our problems a lack of a real spiritual hunger?

3. TRANSFORMATION IN THE FACTORIES (V 3)

Peace involves turning away from violence and death

The next cameo is of industrial life. We enter the factories and see an amazing transformation. The industry of war has made way for an industry of agriculture; weapons of destruction have become implements of construction; instruments which take life have been replaced by instruments which give life; a culture of death and destruction has been left behind and a culture of peace and productivity embraced. "They will beat their swords into ploughshares". The Hebrew word for 'beat' actually implies to 'pulverise beyond recognition', in this case to make something completely new out of the old.

An interesting parallel is found in Joel 3:1-16 where the opposite command is given. "Beat your plough-shares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears". Joel 3 is a chapter of judgement; God is encouraging the bloodthirsty nations to go ahead and prepare for war, for he will judge them for their warmongering. Micah 4, on the other hand, is a chapter of hope for the people of God. Joel 3 may be the reality of our world, but Micah 4 is our destiny and the Christian's standard.

While acknowledging the different roles and modus operandi of church and state, this verse shows how the people of God have already been disarmed to promote a culture of life rather than a culture of death. If we live according to Joel 3:10, we must expect the judgement of Joel 3:13. However, if we practise Micah 4:3, we will achieve the security of Micah 4:4.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) Are we personally and as a church community living according to Joel 3 or Micah 4?

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- 2) The church has been disarmed to do spiritual battle with spiritual weapons (2 Cor. 10:3-4). What do we still need to decommission in our lives, personally and as a community?
- 3) Think of some creative ways in which the decommissioning debate could be enlightened by this passage. How could the warmongering of the past not just be abandoned, but actively transformed into something positive and productive for the future?

4. SECURITY IN THE FIELDS (V 4)

Peace involves a freedom from fear

The third cameo takes the camera from the factories into the fields. The hectic movement of the earlier verses seems to have settled down, and the image is now of people relaxing and at peace. Even though the swords and spears have gone, they are totally secure, for there is none to "make them afraid". Significantly, we see that they are sitting under the vines and fig trees that they planted themselves. Throughout the Old Testament prophets these trees symbolise prosperity and well-being (Zechariah 8:12; Malachi 3:11; Haggai 2:19) and their loss is a sign of disaster or famine (Isaiah 7:23; Amos 5:9; Habbakuk 3:17). This phrase also recalls a famous time in Israel's history - the last time they could have been regarded as truly prosperous: "During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree" (1 Kings 4:25).

But Micah 4 takes us a significant step further beyond prosperity to peace: "no-one will make them afraid". Solomon's Israel was never secure, as subsequent history shows, and his prosperity came at the high price of increased taxation and popular discontent. Prosperity, even absence of conflict, is one thing; peace is another. This verse recalls a much earlier hope of Leviticus 26:6: "I will grant peace in the land and no one will make you afraid".

This freedom from fear is one of the most liberating promises of this whole passage. Throughout their history the people of Israel were afraid. They were vulnerable to disruption, disturbance and displacement. The irony is that freedom from these fears comes when the weapons of war have been abandoned, and when there is contentment with enough: "each is under his own tree". An important component of this peace is the mutual trust whereby each knows that he or she is safe from the greed and covetousness of others.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) What fears do we still need to be liberated from in order to experience the security outlined in these verses?
- 2) These verses concern the prosperity, peace and contentment of the people. As Christians we are already prosperous with the spiritual riches of Christ (Ephesians 1:7,18). But do we experience the security of those who were "relaxing under their own vines"? What things are still making us afraid, or causing us to be distrustful and discontented with what we have?

5. CONCLUSION (V 5)

Things don't have to be the way they are

This is a message of transformation, following immediately after Micah 3:9-12, the story of corrupt and unjust Israel being judged by God. It promises several significant changes:

- in 3:9 the leaders of Israel are corrupt; in 4:1 Zion itself becomes the leader or 'chief' of the mountains;
- in 3:10 Zion is built with bloodshed; in 4:3 war is over;
- in 3:9 the leaders withhold justice; in 4:3 the Lord dispenses justice far and wide;
- in 3:12 Zion, the temple hill, is levelled; in 4:1 it is exalted above all others.

¶ This is also a universal message. It is not narrow or sectarian in its focus. There is a progression of language from 'peoples' (v 1), through 'many nations' (v 2), 'many peoples' (v 3), 'far off nations' (v 3), to 'every person' (v 4). This speaks of a missionary God whose love and vision encompass people of every tribe and tongue. The vision of Micah 4 is that all nations, cultures and tongues be united, not in pluralistic syncretism, but under God's word, which comes from his temple.

¶ This is a message of obedience. The people of Micah 4 display a desire to obey and to re-prioritise their lives. They want to walk in his 'paths' (a word which is used figuratively throughout the Old Testament for moral choices, Proverbs 3:6). As they learn from the Lord who is teaching them his ways (v 2), the flipside is that they are no longer learning war "nor will they train for war anymore" (v 3). The word 'train' denotes learning a skill and internalising it, making it 'second nature'. As we live the vision of Micah 4, our natural reactions become re-orientated away from conflict and violence and towards the way of the Lord. People who previously spent their energies on devising strategies for power, expansion and conflict, will now divert those energies and channel them into learning and acquiring the skills for godly living.

¶ Finally, this is a message to be proclaimed. To achieve the security promised in verse 4 we need a commitment to the actions that bring about peace (v 3). To achieve that commitment we require repentance (v 2), and that only comes about when "the law emerges from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem". As the word goes from Zion, the world comes to Zion, not because of military expansionism (like the Babylonians) but by a voluntary pilgrimage, the 'streaming of the nations', due to the inherent attractiveness of God's people.

'Already' and 'not yet'

As the church, these are the paths in which we must walk, even if no one else is walking in them (v 5, see Introduction). The message which is to be proclaimed is the gospel of Christ. For before we can go to the mountain of the Lord (v 1) we need to be clean (Psalm 24:3 & 4), and only Christ can cleanse us (1 John 1:9). Before the promise of security (v 4) can be experienced, we need to be free from fear, and only Christ can give us this freedom (1 John 4:16-18).

The vision ends at verse 4 with the 'Amen' of many prophetic speeches: "the Lord almighty has spoken". Verse 5 leaves us with a stark choice: we can be like the culture around us and set our gods on every high hill, or we can walk in the paths of our God whose kingdom will be exalted above the hills. By joining in the confession of verse 5, we commit ourselves to a radical path (v 1-4). Thus the nations from whom we are differentiating ourselves (v 5) will, in time, see the glory of the Lord and come into the fold (v 2; see also Matthew 5:16).

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) If Northern Ireland has, at times, appeared to suffer the judgement of Micah 3:9-12, what hope can we take from the images of restoration and transformation in chapter 4?

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- 2) Does our vision for the church in Northern Ireland match the breadth of God's vision? Are we happy sharing Christian community with those from whom we are culturally or politically different?
- 3) Has this passage highlighted for you areas in which you are not "walking in his paths?" How can some of the energies and resources, which we have devoted as a church to our own agendas, be redeployed for the wider good of neighbour and enemy?
- 4) How attractive to the wider community is the message we are proclaiming ?
- 5) Verse 5 is a profoundly counter-cultural verse. How courageous are we in Northern Ireland not to succumb to peer pressure, but to stand for the ways of God regardless of what is culturally acceptable or politically correct?

STUDY 1B

Unexpected Hope

Micah 5:1-6

As far as we can gather from history, from the development of Micah's prophecies, and from the language he uses, this prophecy concerns events during the reign of Hezekiah, the third king mentioned in Micah 1:1. In this first chapter Micah had prophesied against Samaria, and it had since fallen. Now he turns his attention to a comparable crisis facing the southern kingdom. There is a military crisis - a siege so serious that three other biblical books mention it (2 Kings 18-19; 2 Chronicles 32; Isaiah 36-37). Sennacherib the Assyrian king captured Jerusalem's outlying towns (as prophesied in Micah 1:10ff) and laid siege to the capital itself. Micah speaks into this situation with an unexpected message of peace.

1. A PRESENT CRISIS (V 1)

Micah mocks a city reliant on (para)military activity

Micah often identifies with his people in their need (1:8; 7:1). So too here in chapter 5:1, he includes himself among the besieged. But the tone is ironic. He calls on the people, "Marshal your troops". 'Troops' is a word which usually refers to a small band of guerrillas or paramilitaries (2 Samuel 4:2; 2 Kings 5:2). There is a contrast here to the puniness of Israel's forces against the might of the Assyrian battalions.

Moreover, he calls them in the Hebrew "daughter of troops" ("city of troops" NIV). In Hebrew the phrase 'daughter of' can denote the main characteristic of someone or something. So Micah is here telling a city, which has been characterised by militarism, to marshal its puny troops, knowing they will be ineffective to save. He goes on to describe a radically new form of deliverance in verse 2ff.

The people are not only besieged, they are insulted. Their king is humiliated. Everything the people held dear was being stripped away. They were in danger of losing their land and culture and even their identity. To see exactly what the besiegers were shouting look up Isaiah 36:18-20. Striking on the cheek was a grave insult (1 Kings 22:24). In the light of the rest of chapter 5, it is significant that Jesus too was struck on the face for us (John 19:3).

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) In what ways do we feel besieged? What do we rely on at such times?

- 2) Do we rely even subconsciously on militarism? Even if we don't, in what other ways could the evangelical community in Northern Ireland be likened to a 'daughter of troops'?

- 3) Are we obsessed with worldly means of power and influence? Are we more interested in winning battles than winning people? Are we more determined to use the gospel as a weapon to put others in their place, rather than as a cure to heal broken lives?

- 4) Think of the way we feel when our culture, religion, identity or values are publicly insulted and demeaned. What are our prevailing emotions?

2. UNEXPECTED HOPE FROM AN UNEXPECTED PLACE (V 2)

Micah introduces the concept of salvation through the insignificant and weak

Verse 2 begins the remarkable prophecy which shows God's people the way to deliverance and peace. Verse 2 should be in quotation marks (as NIV) because, as the phrase "out of you will come for me" shows, it is God himself speaking here. The language of the verse implies a birth (see God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:12). This promised arrival will be 'for God' or 'on his behalf', to establish truly God's kingly rule.

He will come from an unexpected place, a backwater. In Joshua, where entire chapters are given over to naming the clans and regions of the Promised Land, Bethlehem is not even mentioned. The text says it is 'small', an understatement. The Hebrew word implies 'weak and insignificant'.

But Bethlehem did have a history, told in the book of Ruth. The book of Ruth gives us the context for the life of David, Israel's greatest king. 1 Samuel 17:12 refers to David as an "Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah". By using all three terms here in verse 2, Micah is fixing the idea of David firmly into his hearers' minds. As in previous generations when Bethlehem received a visit from a man of God to announce a new king in Israel, so too Bethlehem will again become the place from whence a new king will emerge to take over where David's line failed (Matthew 2:1-6).

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) How is God's choice of the small and weak reflected in what we count as important? Since this prophecy is a promise of peace, is there a correlation between peace and powerlessness?

- 2) "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given". How might we be looking for peace in the wrong places?

3. UNEXPECTED HOPE AT AN UNEXPECTED TIME (V 3)

Micah reminds the people that deliverance and peace come after judgement

If Israel's hope was for immediate deliverance, they were going to be disappointed. There was first a period of abandonment, while Israel were judged for their sins and learned to rely on God alone and not on their history or tradition. They believed in 3:11 that no disaster could come because they had a history of God's presence among them. In 3:12 Micah pointed out that a religious history, even

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a good one, was no guarantee of God's present pleasure or future presence.

Deliverance would come when "she who is in labour gives birth" and "the rest of his brothers return". It would be unwise to read the specifics of the Christmas story into this passage. Micah in the previous chapter (4:10) has told us that the woman in labour pains is a picture of the people of Israel. Rather than a prophecy of Mary, the emphasis is on the Messiah coming out of the remnant of faithful Israel. The "rest of his brothers" returning is a picture of the Gentiles, once excluded, becoming adopted into the family (Ephesians 2:11-13; Romans 11:17), and of unfaithful Jews themselves returning to the new Israel (Romans 11:25-26).

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) Peace comes through Messiah, after judgement, and when those who were alienated have returned to Christ and to each other. What relevance do the issues of judgement and reconciliation, as seen in this passage, have for us in Northern Ireland?
- 2) In what ways might we be guilty of resting on our traditions and committing the sin of Micah 3:11?

4. UNEXPECTED HOPE THROUGH AN UNEXPECTED PERSON (V 4)

¶ *His function:* Micah looks now at the specifics of the rule of Messiah. Specifically he concentrates on the image of shepherd. He could have used the common words of 'king', 'govern', 'rule', but by employing the shepherd image he continues the deliberate connection with the era of David begun in verse 2. As well as the common function of feeding the flock, the shepherd also leads with his staff (7:14, Isaiah 40:11). When the Old Testament speaks of a shepherd leading, or ruling, it is in reference to David, God, or Messiah.

¶ *His methods:* His method of ruling is also radically different, not by militarism or expansionism or selfish power, but in "the strength and majesty of God", and therefore in accordance with the very nature and values of God. This is a benign authority, the ultimate benevolent dictator.

¶ *His results:* This will be a rule that will bring peace. The shepherd not only feeds and leads, he also protects, warding off wild beasts and marauders, letting the sheep feed in safety, be nourished and truly live. The NIV "live securely" is an interpretation of the Hebrew word 'to live', because our English word has been devalued to mean 'exist'. The image here is of a peaceful and truly secure existence under the rule of Messiah, emphasised in the first phrase of verse 5, "He will be their peace".

¶ *His influence:* This is no localised ruler. The phrase "the ends of the earth" is another Messianic phrase (Psalm 2:8; Psalm 22:27; Psalm 72:8; Isaiah 52:10; Zechariah 9:10). He is greater than David. He will be king of the whole earth. This prophecy should have sounded the death-knell for any narrow nationalism on the part of Israel's Messianic hopes.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) If Messiah rules according to the nature of God, how do our actions, and whatever influence or authority we exercise, reflect the values of the God of justice?
- 2) How secure are we? Does our insecurity betray a lack of trust in our Good Shepherd

who has promised us the security of living under his rule?

3) Do narrow national issues preoccupy us, or contaminate our Christianity? Would the things that are dear to our faith make sense “to the ends of the earth”, in other countries where Messiah is acknowledged? If not, how important are they?

5. FUTURE CRISES (V 5-6)

The Prince of Peace at a time of war

We tend to finish reading after the first phrase of verse 5. It rounds the Christmas reading off nicely, and the NIV has followed this pattern in its sub-division of the chapter. However, to stop after the word ‘peace’ does an injustice to the original text. Verses 5 and 6 are carefully structured, each phrase having its mirror image: “and he will be their peace” mirrors the “he will deliver us” at the end of verse 6.

Because of his ability to bring together and reconcile enemies, and to do so “to the ends of the earth”, he is truly “the one of peace” (see Isaiah 9:6). Furthermore, verses 5 and 6 belong to what goes before. Micah began with a present crisis, and having outlined the hope of peace through Messiah, he shows how this will help the people live through coming crises.

Jerusalem survived Sennacherib, but there would be future crises which would be met through a strong unified leadership, under-shepherds who take their authority from the Chief Shepherd. A previously fragmented and discordant people gain unity and strength from Messiah and are fortified for battle. Under the New Covenant, this is spiritually fulfilled in the church, whose leadership is to fight against the evil that threatens its faith and unity, gaining their strength and authority from Christ the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:2-4; Romans 12:3-8; Ephesians 4:7-13; Titus 1:5-9). The rule of the sword (v 6) has been replaced by the rule of the two-edged sword, the word of God (Matthew 26:52; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12).

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) We are asked to live out the reign of Messiah in an imperfect world of continuing crises. Our motto for such times is to be the first phrase of verse 5, “He will be the one of peace”. Since Christ has borne the insults and mockery for us, how should we respond to similar situations? What might change in Northern Ireland if we gave Messiah the freedom to shepherd us according to his Word and values?

- 2) What is needed for the Northern Ireland church to become a community of peace?

STUDY 1C

Overcome Evil With Good

Romans 12:14-21

These verses constitute about two thirds of a list of some twenty-nine commands or instructions beginning at verse 9. Verses 9-13 deal with a variety of characteristics that should typify a Christian’s behaviour within the fellowship: love, zeal, joy, patience. From verse 14 Paul turns his attention to wider issues of relationships outside the fellowship, particularly with those who are actively antagonistic

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towards us, and whom we would count as our enemies.

Many of these verses are a reiteration of Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5:43ff.). Coming towards the end of a letter brimming over with high theology, they are yet another reminder of the practical ethical implications of living as people who have been justified by grace through faith. Paul begins Romans 12 with the image of a living sacrifice, preparing his readers for the fact that the instructions which follow, and the values which lie behind them, cannot be adopted without a degree of personal cost, even death to oneself.

The instructions in verses 14-21 could be summarised and grouped together in the following way:

1. A CALL FOR NO REVENGE (V 14, 17, 19-20)

Leave room for God's methods

In verse 14 Paul echoes Jesus' words in Matthew 5:44 and asks us to do what is totally unnatural. The human tendency will be at best to tolerate or bear quietly the persecution, at worst to strike back at the persecutor. The instruction here goes totally against our natural human instincts; it asks us actively to bless our persecutors. That will involve forgiving them, praying for them, seeking their welfare. There is no indication here that we are to wait for a change of heart on their part. The text is clear: bless, don't curse them.

In verse 20 Paul expands this through a quotation from Proverbs 25:21-22. The aspect of blessing, which involves actively seeking the welfare of the person, is spelled out in two specific examples: give him food and drink if he requires it (see Matt 5:39-41). If we imagine that 'loving our enemies' is an abstract albeit difficult thing to do, this verse shows that it involves much more than emotions. It requires action. The totally surprising and unnatural character of such actions will have a profound effect on the enemy. "Coals of fire" are probably a symbol of repentance, in keeping with ancient eastern custom (see Dunn's commentary [Word]). This quotation, coming at the end of the chapter, reminds us of the radical nature of this lifestyle. It's unnatural, no one expects it, it's going against the flow.

The alternative is to seek revenge, and so Paul specifically rules this out, first in verse 17 and then he expands it in verse 19 with theological justification and scriptural back-up. We are not to take revenge because that is God's task, as stated in Deuteronomy 32:35. We are to "leave room" for God's wrath. Since the next chapter refers to the governing authorities as God's agents of wrath (13:4), it is clear that Paul is encouraging individuals to leave personal injuries either for God himself to judge or for the authorities, as his agents, to dispense justice through the normal processes of jurisprudence. The idea of 'leaving room' for God's wrath implies that for us to take revenge inhibits true justice from taking place. God knows all the facts and his justice is not contaminated by personal vendetta or partiality. In removing all opportunity for personal revenge and putting justice squarely in the court of the authorities, Paul is reiterating the ethic of Christ in Matthew 5:38-42. The individual is not to usurp the role of the state, but in his or her personal relationships is to show mercy and seek reconciliation and peace.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) Who are your persecutors? What would be involved in your 'blessing' them?
- 2) Our enemies may not be starving or dying of thirst, and we may not be asked to give them food or drink, but in what ways could we repay the harm they have done us with good? How could we actively help our enemies?
- 3) Have we ever wished for revenge? Is it possible that through our consuming bitterness

or anger we are not 'leaving room' for God's wrath? If our enemy is never brought to justice by the state, do we then have a reason to take the law into our own hands?

2. A CALL FOR IDENTIFICATION (V 15,16b)

Forget your personal agenda; rejoice with those who rejoice

If the call for no revenge deals with our actions towards others (don't retaliate, but bless and seek their good), verse 15 goes yet another step further and asks us to identify emotionally with others. Although Paul doesn't single our enemies out for specific mention here, this whole section from verses 14-21 is framed by references to our enemies. Therefore, while verses 15 and 16 may refer to a broader constituency, they certainly include those who have wronged us.

We are to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. If one asks, "Why does Paul need to say this?", we come back again to the relevance of this in dealing with our enemies. As Jesus reminds us in Matthew 5:46-47, if we only do good to those who do good to us, what benefit is there? Even the pagans do that. Similarly we don't need to be told to rejoice when those we love are rejoicing, or grieve when our friends are grieving; that is natural human behaviour. The real test comes in whether or not we can emotionally identify with our enemies. Can we rejoice at the good fortune of those who, naturally, we wish to see suffering? Or can we mourn and grieve for them when all our instincts tell us to celebrate their downfall?

Again this highlights the revolutionary nature of the Christian ethic. We are being asked to do the unreasonable, almost the impossible. We are being asked to rise above our personal injuries and emotions and look at people, not from a worldly point of view, but through the eyes of Christ. The reminder in 1 Corinthians 13:6 that "love does not rejoice in sin" is the only qualifier to this command. We are not told to rejoice in the sinful actions of others or to rejoice when they are rejoicing at sin, but rather to rejoice with them in the normal celebrations and successes of life when our natural tendency is to be begrudging and resentful. In summary, we are to put ourselves 'in their shoes'.

The second half of verse 16 tells us not to be conceited or proud or snobbish, but to associate with "those of low position". In any society there are groups from whom we are divided or alienated. Divisions of class can be as strong as divisions of creed, race, age or gender. Christians should be no more guilty of snobbery than they are of racism or religious sectarianism. They need to associate freely with the 'tapeinois' - the lowly or poor (the word used in Mary's song in Luke 1:52). They should identify with them when social structures encourage division and exclusion. Such friendships are not a matter of duty. The Greek verb translated 'to associate' is an unusual word, implying an 'uninhibited wholeheartedness' (see Dunn).

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) How does the command to rejoice in verse 15 apply to us when a terrorist repents; when political decisions don't go our way?
- 2) How does the command to mourn affect our attitude to the death or suffering of opponents, including terrorists?
- 3) Do we still tend to rejoice in the suffering of the other side and mourn their successes? How much of this is due to a righteous sense of justice and how much to personal resentment?
- 4) Aside even from terrorist related incidents, how can we begin to identify with the joys and sorrows of normal life as experienced by our opponents? What would it mean for us to put ourselves in the shoes of 'the other'?

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- 5) Verse 16 encourages us to identify with those whom social structures seek to alienate. How does this apply in the Northern Ireland context? What can we do to 'freely associate' with those whom others in our community may despise?

3. A CALL TO PEACE (V 16a, 18, 21)

Don't let differences become divisions

Running like a thread through all of these twenty-nine commands is the call to peace. It was present in verse 10 and appears here in verses 16, 18 and 21. We are to live in harmony, live at peace and overcome evil with good. The phrase "live in harmony" literally means "be of one mind" (Philippians 2:2). Interestingly it was also used of 'being on the same side' or 'of the same party' as someone. This is not a plea for bland uniformity. The idea is that whatever our differences in small matters there is a common purpose and mutual respect. While this is an absolute imperative for the Christian community, there is no indication in the text that it does not also apply to other relationships outside of the church, for example in business, the home and community relations generally.

The instruction in verse 18 to live at peace has two qualifiers: firstly "if it is possible" and secondly "as far as it depends on you". Notice also that the object of the verse is 'everyone'. These qualifiers both refer to instances where the other party clearly has no wish to be at peace. In such circumstances true peace is impossible due to the non-co-operation of one side. However our responsibility does not end there. In accordance with Hebrews 12:14 we are to "make every effort" towards peace. This is a continual duty, not to be abandoned at the first signs of rejection or non-co-operation. It is not up to us to decide that the other has no interest in peace. We must continue the effort so that 'as far as it depends on us' the opportunity for peace is always there.

The final verse leaves us with a contrast. By following the commands of this section and living the radical Christian ethic we will overcome evil with good. Alternatively by living as the world lives, mirroring its attitudes of revenge, resentment, bitterness, snobbery and mutual hostility, we will actually find that we have been overcome by evil. Unrealistic though the commands may seem, the choice is stark, and the alternative leaves us without God and without hope.

The key to understanding this whole passage lies in the first two verses. The unreality of the following commands and the impossibility of our ever succeeding in achieving them are dealt with by the presentation of ourselves to God as "living sacrifices" whereby he enables us by his Spirit to do his "good, pleasing and perfect will". It is this perfect will that is then described in verses 9-21.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) Have we learned to 'live in harmony' - to accept difference without letting it grow into division?
- 2) Do we live at peace "as far as it depends on us"? What have we actively done to promote peace in recent days?
- 3) How can we avoid being "overcome by evil"?
- 4) Read again this whole section as a unit. Isolate three areas where the church in Northern Ireland is going to have to change if it is truly to become a community of peace.
- 5) What is lacking in our church communities which would enable us to live this type of spirituality?

STUDY TWO**THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF JUSTICE****OUTLINE**

The Church as a Community of Justice offers three options:

2A Rotten From the Top Down

Micah 3:1-12

1. Corruption in the courts (v 1-3)
The judges are deaf to the oppressed, so God is deaf to them
2. Corruption in the church (v 5-7)
The prophets won't bite the hand that feeds them
3. Corruption everywhere (v 9-12)
Religious clichés will not avert the judgement of God
4. The marks of a true prophet (v 8)
Prepared to stand alone for justice
Power - Spirit-filled - justice - might

2B What Does the Lord Require?

Micah 6:1-8

God's displeasure (v 1-2)

1. The people's unreasonableness (v 3-5) - God says: "What have I done?"
His works of salvation, guidance, protection, faithfulness.
2. Looking for a loophole (v 6-7) - The people say: "What shall we do?"
3. The answer (v 8) - Micah says: "You know right well what to do"
 - a) Act justly
 - b) Love mercy
 - c) Walk humbly

2C Major on the Majors

Matthew 23:23-24

1. The hypocrisy of the Pharisees
We look on the outside, but God looks on the inside

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2. The neglect of the Pharisees

Religious zeal counts for nothing if the essentials are forgotten

3. The blindness of the Pharisees

Those who should be pointing the way are leading astray

STUDY 2A

Rotten From the Top Down

Micah 3:1-12

Chapter 2 has finished with a wonderful Messianic prophecy of a king who would break through the enemy's defences and lead his flock like a shepherd (Micah 2:12-13). There is then an amazing contrast between this expected leader and the corruption and inefficiency of Israel's current leadership.

Chapter 3 contains three prophecies of roughly equal length (1-4, 5-7, 9-12) interrupted by the magnificent verse 8, so that the structure is leaders - false prophets - true prophet - leaders. This chapter in its entirety could well have been the famous words of Micah quoted in Jeremiah 26:18 (the only example of an Old Testament writer being directly quoted by another). Jeremiah was prophesying in the temple court, and it is possible that Micah too publicly uttered these words there (see his reference to the temple area in verse 12).

The historical context of Hezekiah's repentance illustrates that if a nation repents the Lord can save them from the seemingly inevitable (2 Kings 19:14-20; see Jeremiah 18:8-10). Even to those who have committed the vilest deeds, God offers hope if repentance is present.

1. CORRUPTION IN THE COURTS (V 1-3)

The judges are deaf to the oppressed, so God is deaf to them

These verses concern those in civil authority, particularly the magistrates and judges. Micah is blunt in describing the horrible mutilating effects their selfishness has on the people. The list of their sins is framed by the use of the word 'evil' in verses 2 and 4. Included among the 'leaders/rulers' would be judges, priests, military commanders, and probably the king himself (see how Hezekiah repents in response to this sermon: Jeremiah 26:19). They are without excuse for, as people given the stewardship of power, they should "know justice".

Instead they actually 'hate good' (v 2), a strong active term implying a deliberate revulsion against conscience. The leaders had abused their power and exploited the weak. The weak person's only recourse to justice was the court, but the magistrates were equally corrupt. In contrast to the Good Shepherd of 2:12-13 (see John 10:11; 1 Peter 5:4) who nourishes and looks after his flock, these leaders were like the wild animals that tore the sheep apart (v 2-3). Such behaviour is diabolical (see 1 Peter 5:8).

Throughout this chapter, Micah uses analogies of food and images of feasting. Here he is saying that the leaders may have been wealthy and able to eat well, but in reality they may as well have been feasting on the flesh of the people who had suffered as a result of the leaders getting rich.

In verse 4 God announces judgement as he does at the end of the other two prophecies in the chapter (v 6-7, 12). God cannot tolerate the intolerable. Here the sentence is silence. When they cried out for deliverance, he would remain silent. They would not be exempt from exile and invasion. They would lose what they sought to retain. Since they didn't listen to the cries of the helpless, God wouldn't listen to their cries. The seriousness of this sentence cannot be overstated. Worse than the anguish of the actual punishment itself (invasion, exile etc) is the absence of God. Those who are chastened can come through it to see the hand and over-riding love of God (Deuteronomy 8:1-5). They can repent and bear the punishment because they know God will be there at the end of it to love them and receive them back with forgiveness (see especially Micah 7:9). But the withdrawal of God is an awesome and terrible thing. It is truly hell.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) Think of some of the sins of which we may be guilty in terms of perpetuating the divisions and suspicions in Northern Ireland. What effects might these sins have had on other people?

- 2) To what extent has the wealth and security of some in Northern Ireland been at the expense of others who are poor and more vulnerable to violence?

- 3) As members of the Christian community, supposedly well-versed in Scripture, we should "know justice". Are we guilty of ignoring the cries of the needy? Are we therefore in danger of coming under similar judgement?

2. CORRUPTION IN THE CHURCH (V 5-7)

The prophets won't bite the hand that feeds them

Not only was there corruption in the civil courts, but it had wormed its way into the religious establishment of the day also. The prophets face the serious charge of leading the people astray. This is the opposite of their true role, which is to be a signpost to God. The prophets led people astray, specifically, through their mercenary behaviour: Instead of rebuking those who used political power and land possession for their own ends, the prophets, in an unholy alliance, joined with them and bolstered up their unfair regimes, giving them religious support and theological justification. The prophets should have been the moral watchdogs of society but they capitulated because this was more comfortable.

Here Micah uses another food illustration. "If one feeds them" (v 5) is literally "who get to bite with their teeth". In virtually all the other Old Testament occurrences, this is a saying referring to the bite of snakes (Genesis 49:17; Amos 5:19), a powerful image showing the deadly effect of what they are doing. One commentator puts it succinctly: "What comes out of the mouth of these prophets depends upon what has been put into it" (Wolff).

The sentence on the prophets was also silence from God, in this case when they cried out for revelation. They would lose their special insight because they did not use their sight and deal with the injustice of which they were so obviously a part. Their policy of assimilation and capitulation to the wishes of the people was a shortsighted one because, in the long term, they would lose both their legitimate means (visions) and illegitimate means (divination, see Leviticus 19:26) of knowledge (v 6). As a result they would suffer shame at the loss of their respect and authority.

Interestingly, they would also suffer the one thing they most feared and which had motivated them not to 'rock the boat' in the first place - ostracism. The covering of the lower part of the face ('face' in verse 7 is literally 'moustache') was characteristic of lepers who had been barred from the

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community (Leviticus 13:45). Ironically the fraudulent prophets would be judged as 'unclean' (Lamentations 4:13-15).

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) To what extent have the churches and their leaders capitulated to popular opinion and put their own economic security ahead of preaching 'the word of the Lord'?
- 2) In Northern Ireland, how has injustice, discrimination and violence been given theological justification? To what extent have Christians, who were meant to be acting as the conscience of the nation, spinelessly supported the status quo?
- 3) How do we respond when church leaders or other Christians speak words which challenge our political or theological presuppositions?
- 4) Do we truly search the Scriptures in an effort to discern the priorities of God? Or do we, by our hostile attitudes and veiled comments, make it harder for our leaders to be true prophets?
- 5) To what extent do we refrain from speaking the word of the Lord into our social and work circles for fear of ostracism or loss of business?

3. CORRUPTION EVERYWHERE (V 9-12)

Religious clichés will not avert the judgement of God

These verses take up several of the themes of the previous two oracles. Addressing all those in civil and religious leadership, whom God holds responsible, Micah mentions again that they "despise justice and distort what is right" (v 9; see last phrase of v 1, and first phrase of v 2). The people's leaders had swapped God's benign authority for their own corrupt form.

Specifically they build Zion, which is the spiritual name for Jerusalem, with the most unspiritual of activities, bloodshed (v 10). This echoes the gory images of verse 3. Great building projects were undertaken in Jerusalem at this time (2 Chronicles 32:27-29), but Micah didn't praise them. He didn't care what the city looked like architecturally to outsiders; he was more concerned with the price the weak had to pay for such ostentation. He was angry at how the powerless had to shed blood for the sake of the powerful's image and reputation.

These leaders were accused of 'wickedness', a Hebrew term often reserved for violent acts (2 Samuel 3:34; Psalm 89:22). The people, even if they never actively engaged in violence, were guilty of it, because the injustice they perpetuated or tacitly supported, or about which they were silent in their condemnation, resulted in the suffering of the innocent. Blood had indeed been shed, and Micah's hearers would have known that under their covenant with God blood was required (Genesis 9:6; 1 Kings 2:32). In the New Covenant the church stands under the blood of Calvary. The death of Christ protects us from the full demands of the justice of God (Romans 5:9).

Verse 11 lumps together all those referred to earlier in the chapter and exposes their mercenary motivations, picking up the earlier accusation of verse 5. Bribes were commonplace in the cultures of the ancient world. They were regarded as a fact of life, even in some places as a form of legal

contract. Scripture, however, specifically and uniquely outlaws them (Exodus 23:8; Deuteronomy 10:17; see also Leviticus 19:15). "Like some modern politicians, this unholy trinity of rulers, priests, and prophets regarded their talents as opportunities to advantage themselves and their offices as prizes they had won rather than as positions from which to serve God and fellow humans." (Waltke [Baker])

The climax of this whole chapter comes in verse 11b. Micah has condemned the injustice which the so-called spiritual leaders have supported. They had been giving the oppressors religious justification for their actions. Now he quotes the exact words these false prophets were saying that further hardened the consciences of those in power. By using a religious cliché, "Is not the Lord among us?", the prophets betrayed a false hope based on a past religious tradition and the current existence in their midst of the outward symbol of God's presence. The people of Jeremiah's day were guilty of exactly the same thing, with the same results (Jeremiah 7:4, 34). Micah's tone is mocking. The people were not of course 'leaning on the Lord' in the true sense. But their professed allegiance to the Lord led him to say ironically: "Yet they trust in God", in much the same way as people today would say "and she's a Christian!" (Compare also songwriter Larry Norman's prophetic critique of his own country's spiritual values in the line, "Your money says 'In God we trust', but it's against the law to pray in school").

The judicial sentence here in verse 12 is not just silence, as earlier in the chapter, but the actual destruction and removal of everything on which they were basing their hopes. The source of their confidence would be taken away - what then? The forested hill ('mound of thickets') was the traditional place of wild (and unclean) animals (Amos 3:4; Micah 5:8). Their holiest places would be desecrated because their hearts, which were meant to be the dwelling-place of God (Deuteronomy 10:16), were already unclean.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) In what ways could we be guilty of 'building Northern Ireland with bloodshed', even if we never engaged in active violence?

- 2) What influence do we have spiritually, socially, politically, financially? Do we see this as an opportunity to advance ourselves, or as a means of service to God and others?

- 3) What religious clichés are we using to claim God's presence among us? In what ways do we base our hope on past tradition or on words or religious forms?

- 4) Think of what you imagine to be the worst possible scenario for the political future of Northern Ireland. How would this affect your relationship with God? On what is our confidence in God based?

4. THE MARKS OF A TRUE PROPHET (V 8)

Prepared to stand alone for justice

In the middle of this sobering chapter of judgement stands an amazing verse of personal commitment on the part of Micah, similar in many ways to what he says in 4:5 and 7:7. It is a verse that looks both ways. "I am filled with power" looks back to the impotent prophets of verses 5-7; and "I will declare... to Israel his sin" describes what he does in verses 9-12. This literary device singles the verse out as one of major importance. It is the interpretative key to the whole chapter. It gives us

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the mark of a true prophet and servant of God. There are four characteristics with which the one who speaks for God can expect to be 'filled':

a) Power

The role of the prophet is counter-cultural and dangerous. This refers to the power that is necessary in order to have the courage to proclaim the message and withstand the opposition arising from it (Isaiah 40:29-31).

b) Spirit-filled

This prevents the prophet's message and ministry being seen as the result of natural charisma, or oratorical gift. The power necessary to engage in the prophetic office cannot come from within. The prophet is given the words of God. In order to communicate them he requires the power of God. This is one of the clearest instances of a developing Old Testament doctrine of the Holy Spirit, made fuller in the New Covenant (1 Corinthians 12-14). Such filling by the Spirit is essential for true ministry and, significantly, results in the recipient being given a sense of justice (Isaiah 11:2-9; 42:1).

c) Justice

This key word links Micah's confession with the rest of the chapter. Verses 1 and 9 describe those who do not 'know justice'. Everything that differentiates the other prophets from Micah can be summarised in the fact that he contends for justice while they undermine it.

d) Might

This is a military word. Micah here introduces the concept of spiritual warfare. The false prophets declare war on those who oppose them or don't feed them (v 5), but Micah now declares war on those who do not seek justice. His methods are spiritual (as he has just outlined) and verbal "to declare to Jacob his transgression". To be effective and fair, justice and power are both essential. Otherwise there is immoral tyranny, or ineffective platitude.

As this verse stands alone in the chapter, so too it seemed Micah stood alone in his desire for justice in his society. This, however, never deflected him from his task. He recognised that it was often the calling of the prophet to do so (4:5). God holds every individual responsible for justice (6:8). Again this recalls the lonely stand of the One on Calvary who, though deserted by friend and foe, suffered alone in the interests of eternal peace, justice and reconciliation.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) Do we wish to identify with the stand taken by Micah in this verse? What is preventing us from embracing these principles and publicly declaring them?
- 2) Name some of the specific opposition we will face if we take a stand for justice.
- 3) How does a lack of courage betray an inadequate life in the Spirit?
- 4) In the New Covenant, all believers are entrusted with the word of God. Are we prepared to speak it in the Spirit and with might?

STUDY 2B

What Does the Lord Require?

Micah 6:1-8

The book of Micah begins with a court case (1:2) as God witnesses against his people for their unfaithfulness. The image of the court returns here, with God the prosecutor and the mountains and hills as witnesses against the people. The charge is once again gross unfaithfulness. While you cannot be jailed for ingratitude or unfaithfulness, it is a terrible crime against the heart of a loving God. The geographical landmarks such as the hills have 'witnessed' God's actions over history. The implicit irony is that they know the goodness and faithfulness of God better than the people. These historical incidents of God's faithfulness are then outlined in the next verses.

1. THE PEOPLE'S UNREASONABLENESS (V 3-5)*God says: "What have I done?"*

These verses outline some major events from the people's history. In the light of what they have been through, their forsaking of God and ingratitude to him are incomprehensible.

Specifically mentioned are his works of salvation in the exodus (Exodus 14); his guidance through the provision of leadership in Moses and Aaron (Exodus 3); his protecting them from their enemies, giving them help from unexpected quarters (Numbers 22:2); his faithfulness in granting them rest in the Promised Land, and fulfilling his promises. This refers to their journey "from Shittim to Gilgal" (v 5). Shittim was the site of a decisive victory over the Moabites (Numbers 22:1) and Gilgal was their point of entry into the new land (Joshua 3:1-4:9). As the church we too are called, through memory, to pay tribute to and celebrate the great acts of God. He brought us into existence, from Bethlehem to Calvary and beyond, through the resurrection and ascension, and into the promised land of the Kingdom of God. As communities and individuals we should have similar stories to tell of his salvation, guidance, protection and faithfulness.

The topography of the area was a witness to what had happened. Yet it seemed that, in spite of this catalogue of blessing, the people felt that God had overburdened them. It was a chore to be a member of God's people (v 3).

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) If the topography of Northern Ireland was to act as a witness, what would Divis and Donard, Erne and Bann have seen of God's blessing to our people? What is our story?
- 2) Specifically what stories of salvation, protection and guidance can we tell? What journeys have we taken to get to where we are today?
- 3) In what ways have we displayed a similar lack of gratitude and regarded our Christian lives as burdensome?

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2. LOOKING FOR A LOOPHOLE (V 6-7)

The people say: "What shall we do?"

Micah puts into the mouths of the people the sort of questions they were asking. Their projected response to God's criticism was likely to be, "OK God. What do you want? Name your price, and get off my case." They were searching for alternatives to obedience, they were looking for loopholes.

Micah's audience was not irreligious. On the contrary, they were content to worship God. In fact how they worshipped was an important part of their national identity, a marker by which others could see who they were. The trouble was they wanted to worship on their terms. They were obsessed with external techniques rather than internal attitudes of the heart or motivations. They offered sacrifices worth thousands of pounds. They even offered the most precious thing they had, suggesting that they go as far as the surrounding pagan nations in sacrificing their children on the altar (2 Kings 3:27; 21:6). All was an attempt to pacify this God. "Name your price, so long as we don't have to change."

Their view of God was all wrong, of course. He was not an unreasonable, insatiable, unpredictable deity who needed to be appeased. There was no way such ridiculous exorbitant sacrifices could be a substitute for what he really desired: the unflinching loyalty and love of his people.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) "We have scorned the truth you gave us, we have bowed to other lords; we have sacrificed our children on the altars of our gods." (Graham Kendrick). What altars have we sacrificed our children on, in an attempt to avoid the demands of obedience and justice?

- 2) In what ways could we still be guilty of engaging in the rituals of worship for ethnic or tribal reasons?

3. THE ANSWER (V 8)

Micah says: "You know right well what to do"

The language of verse 8 is almost one of exasperation. Micah addresses the people directly and points out that they know full well what to do. "He has showed you, O man, what is good." 'Man' is definitely inclusive. It is not even the usual word for male but the more general 'mortal'. Every human knows the Lord's requirements, not superficial religiosity but transformational ethics. He highlights three important themes in the form of three Hebrew couplets packed with theological meaning and nuance:

a) Act Justly, or 'Do Justice'

The Hebrew concept of 'mishpat' (justice) involves more than judicial pronouncements or retribution. It includes instruction for living (especially in Proverbs and Psalm 119) and a wide variety of divine commands and expectations (Deuteronomy 4:1 where it seems to refer to the contents of the entire book). But it is in the writings of the prophets that the term appears most frequently. Leaders were regularly berated for not living justly (Isaiah 59:8-9; Habakkuk 1:4). The corrupt and unfair actions of the leaders included more than bad judgements. They had a wholly unethical and evil way of life (Micah 3:1-3).

Acting justly involves internalising the whole Law of God - civil and moral. The way we speak, act and think is to reflect the spirit of the law. We are to model the impartiality and generosity of our Father God (Deuteronomy 10:17), and refuse to show partiality to anyone

(Leviticus 19:15). Doing justice means putting others' rights before our own. It means putting others' welfare before economics. We add to this Christ's commentary on the Law in Matthew 5-7 and see that it also involves going the extra mile, turning the other cheek and doing good to those who hate us. Doing justice is a lifestyle issue. It is living out our view of God. If we do not act justly, do we truly know the God of justice?

b) Love Mercy

If 'acting justly' is living out our faith in actions, 'loving mercy' is an extension of that to our attitudes. The key Hebrew term here is 'hesed' (mercy, often translated 'loving kindness' or 'faithful / covenant love'). On the human level it is what characterises true friendships such as David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 20:8) or close family ties such as Jacob and Joseph (Genesis 47:29). For those who are in a covenant relationship with God, the whole of life should be characterised by such faithfulness and mercy. We are asked to ensure that the mercy which characterises our relationships with our closest friends, characterises all our relationships. We are to be 'people of hesed', mercy people (see Isaiah 57:1; "devout men" NIV).

This involves an attitude of commitment and love towards others which defies reason, which sticks at it and is unconditional. It is living out our experience of God's mercy in all our relationships. If we do not love mercy, have we truly experienced the mercy of God?

Such attitudes, of course, provoke action. 'Loving mercy' can describe the actions of those who are privileged towards those who are not. Economic privilege would require of us generosity towards the poor; physical privilege would require of us care and protection of the weak and vulnerable; spiritual privilege would require of us evangelism and the sharing of our faith towards the distressed, the doubter, the unbeliever.

c) Walk Humbly or Walk Wisely/Appropriately

This phrase binds the earlier two together and refers to a living out of our faith in the totality of our lifestyle. Most translations have "walk humbly", and humility is certainly the biggest part of what is implied by the Hebrew term 'hasnea'. However a better translation is 'wisely' or 'appropriately'. This saves the possible misunderstanding that a distant 'king-subject' relationship is envisaged. An appropriate walk with God, on the other hand, involves a healthy fear, but also a bold companionship. While this is an Old Testament ideal and was seen in people like Enoch who 'walked with God' (Genesis 5:22) and Abraham who was "God's friend" (James 2:23), it is made clearer and is available to all God's family in the New Testament. Since God in Christ came and walked among us, we have the perfect picture of what it means for us to "walk wisely" with God.

The focus in the last couplet is not on our human relationships but on our standing before God. We cannot act justly if we are not walking appropriately with God. All our natural inclinations are to stand on our own rights. Neither can we love mercy in our own strength. We want to demand our pound of flesh and be merciful only to those who love us and show mercy to us, but a wise walk with God enables us to do what so far has been impossible.

True worship involves doing justice and loving mercy, and these are bound together by a wise walk with God. While it would be easier to perform meaningless rituals and even make expensive sacrifices, that is not the Lord's way. He has 'showed us what is good'!

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) In what ways have we failed to act justly? Is justice simply retributive?

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- 2) In what ways can we be guilty of partiality in our thoughts and actions?
- 3) In what ways have we failed to love mercy? How can we express, in the Northern Ireland context, the mercy of God towards those who are physically, economically or spiritually needy?
- 4) What may dissuade us from the hard task of showing the type of unconditional and unflinching love and mercy which is implied in the word 'hesed'?
- 5) What does 'walking appropriately with God' involve for us as citizens of Northern Ireland?

STUDY 2C

Major on the Majors

Matthew 23:23-24

This is the fourth of the seven 'woes' which Jesus pronounces against the Pharisees. The purpose of these short polemical statements is to show the radical difference between the religion espoused by the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law and that promoted by Jesus. The Pharisees were an influential group within the Judaism of Jesus' day. They were respected for their meticulous devotion to the Law and had a good deal of popular support. They placed equal emphasis on both the written scriptural Law and the oral tradition whereby those laws were handed down and interpreted to cover all areas of everyday life. The Pharisees believed that one fulfilled the demands of the Law by adhering strictly to this oral tradition. So while they were undoubtedly sincere in their desire to seek God, their small and narrow view of God was the focus of their conflict with Jesus. This chapter is the most eloquent example of the conflict. The Pharisees' ethic could so easily lead to lack of love, inevitable pride and most seriously, a disastrous rejection of Jesus.

The verses are really a commentary on several Old Testament passages which the Pharisees had ignored in their zeal to be legalistically obedient, verses such as Micah 6:8; Zechariah 7:9-10. Jesus is simply restating the priorities of passages such as Hosea 6:6 and Habakkuk 2:4. He is probably never seen exercising his prophetic role so distinctly as in this chapter. Just as the prophets chided the people for not having the Law in their hearts, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for the same.

1. THE HYPOCRISY OF THE PHARISEES

We look on the outside, but God looks on the inside

Our common understanding of the word 'hypocrite' as one who says one thing but does another (based on the secular Greek idea of an actor wearing a mask) is not accurate or applicable here. The Pharisees were completely sincere; what they said, they did. Their hypocrisy was not inconsistency, but a totally wrong motivation. Their religion was external, while inwardly they harboured hatred, pride, jealousy, lies and deceit. That is why Jesus likens them to whitewashed tombs and uses the analogy of a dirty cup (v 25-28).

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) In what ways have Pharisaic attitudes surfaced within the evangelical community in

Northern Ireland? What have the effects of these been on the wider community?

- 2) What wrong motivations have we been guilty of in our religious zeal?
- 3) What attitudes have we harboured which would bring us under the same judgement as the Pharisees?

2. THE NEGLECT OF THE PHARISEES

Religious zeal counts for nothing if the essentials are forgotten

Jesus was not so much concerned with the extra rituals and religious practices of the Pharisees as with the more important or weightier matters that they were neglecting. Some commentators have suggested that the phrase “without neglecting the former” is uncharacteristic of Jesus and actually undermines his whole argument here. But this is to misunderstand the focus of Jesus’ conflict with the Pharisees. He never criticises their minute attention to detail and their voluntary asceticism, except where it leads to sin. Therefore he gives them permission to tithe whatever they wish and, by implication, fast, pray and purify themselves however often they wish, so long as they do not neglect the important areas of justice, mercy and faithfulness. He knew that if they adhered to the three core values that lay behind the giving of the Law in the first place, then their religion would be genuine and not hypocritical. The one who embraces mercy does not denigrate others; the one who embraces justice does not shut the Kingdom of Heaven in people’s faces, or place burdens on their shoulders which they cannot bear (see verse 13; Acts 15:10). These core values relate to the effect one’s religion has on other people. The Pharisees were particularly liable to pride and revelled in the esteem and even fear with which they were held by the populace. Jesus exposed such sin. “Live like that if you wish,” he was saying, “but don’t be proud, or look down on others because they don’t follow you in every detail”. The Pharisees’ extra tithing was a personal discipline, a decision that rose above the requirements of the Law. If however they demonstrated justice, mercy and faithfulness, they would then be keeping the spirit of the Law as well as the letter. They would also avoid displaying a proud and judgmental spirit to those less rigorous in their observance, because such a spirit would be incompatible with justice and mercy.

The three words: ‘justice’ (krisin), ‘mercy’ (eleos) and ‘faithfulness’ (pistin) are similar to the trio of virtues outlined in Micah 6:8. They also echo Jesus’ words concerning the greatest commandment, the summary of the Law in Matthew 22:37-40. His message is clear: In contrast to those who wished to major on minors, and in line with the whole corpus of Old Testament literature (law and prophets), Jesus demanded a concentration on weightier matters. A love for justice ensured no one was exploited, even religiously. A preoccupation with mercy ensured that the mercy God had extended to us would be reflected in our generosity of spirit towards others. It was what the absence of these qualities said about the Pharisees’ relationship with God and inner spiritual life that led to Jesus’ fierce condemnations.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) How have we majored on minors in Northern Ireland culture?
- 2) Look at the three core values promoted by Jesus: justice, mercy and faithfulness. Name some of the ways in which we have failed to make the grade in each of these three areas.

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3. THE BLINDNESS OF THE PHARISEES

Those who should be pointing the way are leading astray

There is a pun here. 'Blind guides' (i.e. guides for the blind) was a term which the Pharisees applied to themselves (Romans 2:19). They saw themselves as leading those who were in darkness into the light of the Law. But Jesus says here that they are really 'blind guides for the blind'!

This is followed by another pun. In Aramaic (Jesus' native language) 'gnat' and 'camel' sound very similar. Their blindness was so pronounced that they couldn't see they were swallowing the largest and clumsiest of animals. The fact that a camel was an unclean animal, and they were straining the gnat to avoid uncleanness, just strengthens the point further: Both their hypocrisy and wrong priorities had made them ritually unclean, the gravest insult for a Pharisee.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) The church in Northern Ireland is meant to be a light to a dark society. In what ways have we come under the same condemnation as the Pharisees by actually leading people astray?

- 2) How in our efforts to be pure and clean have we actually become more unclean?

- 3) What are some of the 'camels' we have swallowed over the years? Are there sins to which we have been blind, but of which outsiders have been very aware?

STUDY 3

THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF RECONCILIATION

OUTLINE

'The Church as a Community of Reconciliation' offers two options:

3A A Word from the Edge of the Abyss

Hosea 1:1-2:1

1. The need (1:1-3)

Hosea speaks to a people proud of their history and religion but blind to prejudice.

Cultural and political background

Prosperity - Tokenism - Judgement

2. The signs (1:4-9)

a) *Jezreel*: the child of conflict (v 4-5). Help from God in the past is no guarantee of God's pleasure in the present.

b) *Lo-ruhamah*: the child of separation (v 6-7). We should not presume upon the mercy of God. False hope 1: the land - False hope 2: religion.

c) *Lo-ammi*: the child of divorce (v 8-9). On what do we base our certainty that we are 'the people of God'?

3. The hope (1:10-2:1)

Redefining (v 10) Restoration means the inclusion of those who were outside

Reconciliation (v 11a) Restoration means uniting under the authority of Christ our common leader

Resurrection (11b) Restoration means new life

Reinvestment (11c) Restoration means that old words and slogans can be redeemed

Re-naming (2:1) Restoration means sharing a common name with the alienated and those we once excluded

3B A New Identity

1 Peter 2:9-17

1. Privileges - Chosen and Holy (v 9-10).

Peter shifts the emphasis on identity away from ethnicity and towards what God has done for us in Christ.

A Chosen People - A Royal Priesthood - Called - Recipients of Mercy

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2. Responsibilities - Live good lives, submit, respect (v 11-17)

Peter shows how our identity in Christ impinges on the well-being of others

- a) Aliens & strangers
- b) Free people and servants of God
- c) The commands

STUDY 3A

A Word from the Edge of the Abyss

Hosea 1:1-2:1

1. THE NEED (1:1-3)

Hosea speaks to a people proud of their history and religion but blind to their prejudice. In taking the unthinkable step of marrying a prostitute, the prophet graphically illustrates the depth of the people's spiritual unfaithfulness to their covenant God, in spite of their external wealth and success.

Cultural and Political Background

☞ Prosperity

The Israel into which Hosea spoke was a prosperous nation. They hadn't had it so good in a long time. Jeroboam II had had a long and stable reign. He had extended the borders of the territory, reclaiming many lost towns (2 Kings 14:25). The army had rarely been stronger. The rich were as rich as they had ever been, but with the increase in the general standard of living there developed an economic underclass. We see this, for example, in the simple fact of prostitution. There is no need to see the prostitutes of Hosea's day as religious cult-prostitutes. They were rich men's luxuries, girls probably out to make a living.

☞ Tokenism

Israel may have been decadent, secure and prosperous, but the people were also highly materialistic and immoral, failing in their covenant responsibilities to God. They were guilty, in their religious practices, of tokenism.

The great head of the dynasty, Jehu (the King they all looked back to and revered) had wiped out Baalism and restored Yahweh as the true God to be worshipped (see 2 Kings 9-10). But he was to be worshipped in their way, the Northern way. So the sacred calves remained. It was believed that they were a cultural necessity. They were what marked this part of the Hebrew nation out as different. They couldn't be asked to give up their identity after all. If they got rid of these sacred cow idols they would be no different from those Judeans in the

South. One hundred and fifty years earlier Jeroboam I went as far as changing the date of some of the feast days simply to be different from the South.

☞ *Judgement*

Economically prosperous, militarily strong and religiously secure, yet under judgement! The sobering fact is that Hosea's words came true very, very quickly. As he announced the end of Jehu's dynasty, Jeroboam II died and his son was assassinated after only six months. Hosea prophesied through the reigns of six more Northern rulers whom the editor doesn't even bother to name in the title to the book. They were all usurpers or assassins and only one died a natural death (see 2 Kings 15-17).

Within thirty years, one generation, the nation of Israel was overthrown and exiled. The first chapter of Hosea is a message from the brink of the abyss. Soon the protective film of prosperity would be torn. Soon military strength would not be enough. As long as the religious and moral syncretism continued the nation was on a downward spiral to destruction.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) Hosea spoke into a pluralistic, polytheistic, materialistic, self-satisfied, prosperous, secure context. In what ways does Northern Ireland culture and religion display some of these same tendencies?
- 2) The Israel of Hosea's day relied on economic security and military strength. Are we guilty of similar false trust? How long will we be bailed out economically and supported militarily? How sure are we of the things on which our hope is based?
- 3) It is possible to have little interest in whether or not our religion is honouring to God, but rather to be more concerned that it is outwardly sufficiently different from the 'enemy.' Do we have our sacred cows? In Northern Ireland have things like Bible versions, crosses, liturgies, emblems and tunes, phrases and terminologies, psalms and prayers been hijacked and made the sole property of one side or the other?
- 4) Looking ahead to verse 7, we see that in contrast to the false bases of trust, God's way is different. What would some of the implications be of applying this in Northern Ireland today?

2. THE SIGNS (1:4-9)

In naming the three children Hosea is following the dynamics of any broken relationship, be it marriage, friendship, community strife or above all the God-humanity relationship. The dynamic is conflict, separation, divorce.

a) 'Jezreel' - the child of conflict (v 4-5)

Help from God in the past is no guarantee of God's pleasure in the present.

Jezreel was a byword in Israel, a place of bloody victory where one king defeated another (2 Kings 9:14-37). And Jehu was, of course, in the right. It was a victory for justice and fairness, a victory that marked liberation from the oppression of the previous generations. But Jehu and his descendants could not presume upon the approval of God forever. Simply because he had been with them in the past did not mean that they had carte blanche to do whatever they wished.

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Jezreel, the place of victory, would become the very place of defeat. Several decades later, when Jehu was king, Israel resorted to their traditional route and headed for Jezreel where they fell before the Assyrians. (See 2 Kings 15:10, NIV margin. Ibelam is a town in Jezreel.) The rise of Jehu's dynasty was within the will of God, but so too was its demise. Jehu's dynasty began at Jezreel and it would end there. "I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel" (v.5). The name Jezreel, given to the child (v 4), spoke of warfare, bloodshed and the powerlessness of military might to avert the judgement of God.

It isn't difficult to think of Irish place names that are revered as much as Jezreel was in Hosea's day. We must be careful lest, in looking to the memory of a place for our spiritual security, it does not become the very place of our shame and destruction. Time moves on and circumstances change. Geography, topography, demography all change. Kingdoms rise and fall.

b) 'Lo-ruhamah' - the child of separation (v 6-7)

We should not presume upon the mercy of God

Lo-ruhamah is the child that symbolises separation and the withdrawal of mercy. In the divine context, although ruhamah is often translated 'loved', it can also mean 'shown mercy' and 'pitied' (see Genesis 43:14; Jeremiah 16:5). This is what is meant here. God is not withdrawing his love but his mercy, by which he has prevented his people from experiencing the full implications of their rebellion. There is the hope that yet, through further calamity, Israel would wake up to God's grace. For Israel this was a prediction of exile (see v 11). T. McComiskey's commentary (Baker) has a convincing argument that the best translation of the awkward Hebrew of verse 6b is, "I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel, but I will surely take them away".

False Hope 1 - The land

God is warning the people of Israel that they cannot expect to receive his mercy as long as they continue in their idolatry and spiritual prostitution. Even the land, which they would have thought was theirs, may not be theirs forever.

False hope 2 - Religion

There is also a more serious warning. We cannot rely on outward religion for our salvation or for our spiritual life. That would be as bad as relying on the land. As the Israelites were removed from the land and experientially were removed from the love of God, John warns the Ephesian church in Revelation 2 that their light could be removed! God can distance himself from churches who have lost their calling.

c) 'Lo-ammi' - the child of divorce (v 8-9)

On what do we base our certainty that we are 'the people of God'?

After 'Not-pitied' is weaned, 'Lo-ammi' is born. The Hebrew is literally, "For you are not my people; and I am not your 'I AM'". No more definite form of words could be found to signify God's divorce from his people. God has said through these children:

"You glory in past conflicts? Future conflicts will destroy you."

"You glory in the land? You will be taken from the land."

"You glory in your status as the people of God? That too will be taken away."

There can be no place for pride or superiority, no place for idolatry, no place for disobedience in our relationship with the living God.

As disciples of Christ, he has told us that we are his people. He has assured us that none shall pluck us from his hand. Our eternal security rests in God alone, and it is to be a living, dynamic relationship. But Israel had become static in their relationship with God. They were resting on their history, on their ethnic identity. They were 'the people of God.' "Not so", says God, "Lo-ammi".

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) Are there place names or events in the past which cause our relationship with God to remain frozen and static, rather than living and dynamic, not just nationally, but congregationally, personally?
- 2) How do Paul's words in Philippians 3:20 enable us to get issues of land, inheritance and citizenship into perspective?
- 3) Read the New Testament's comments on Old and New Israel in Galatians 6:16 and 1 Peter 2:9. In what ways has the church in Northern Ireland been guilty of the same mistakes as Old Israel by matching God's name to political or ethnic identities?
- 4) How might God have removed his pity from us? Have we experienced personally or nationally any equivalents of 'the exile'?
- 5) Is it possible to have a religion-steeped history and firm religious convictions, yet not be recipients of God's grace and mercy?
- 6) Could God be looking down at our churches, catholic, protestant, charismatic, evangelical, Bible-believing, and saying, "Lo-ammi - You are not my people."?
- 7) What is our identity? On what is our security based? In what ways might we be guilty of exclusively identifying our communities, denominations, congregations with 'the people of God'?

3. THE HOPE (1:10-2:1)

God's word of judgement through Hosea is a harsh and a sobering word, but the good news is that this first prophecy concludes with a wonderful picture of hope and harmony. We see here five important elements in any process of reconciliation and restoration.

a) Redefining (v 10)

Restoration means the inclusion of those who were outside

First of all there is a redefinition of what it means to be the people of God. Even for Hosea, it meant more than ethnic Israel. It is a picture which is universal in its scope; it is the promise to Abraham fulfilled (Genesis 22:17); it is the picture seen by John of a countless number of every tribe and tongue (Revelation 7:9). Those who were never regarded as the people of God, the Gentiles, are now incorporated into the family of God (Ephesians 2:1-13).

b) Reconciliation (v 11a)

Restoration means uniting under the authority of Christ our common leader

Secondly, this day of restoration is a day of reconciliation. Not only have new people, the Gentiles,

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been incorporated into the kingdom, but the old enemies Israel and Judah have united under the one leader, this Christ-figure (v 11). Hosea is careful not to use the expected word 'king,' lest it be misunderstood as a political unification. He uses instead the word 'head,' 'leader' (ro'sh), a word with much wider implications, including high priest (2 Kings 25:18) and firstborn (1 Chronicles 23:8). This is a unification based around a greater identity than politics or ethnicity. There is something, or rather someone, greater binding these traditional enemies together.

Hosea chapter 1 gives us the basis for unity. It is based solely on the fact that we serve a common head; our leader is the cement which binds us together. All artificial man-made adhesives, be they agreed ecumenical statements or well-meaning cross-community programmes, will fail or be of limited value if there is no common recognition of the authority of Christ as our leader.

c) Resurrection (11b)

Restoration means new life

Thirdly, there is a hint here of resurrection. The NIV reads: "They shall come up out of the land." This at one level looks forward to the return from exile (see comments above on verse 6), but there is a fuller application to our day and to the church. The words could equally well be translated: "They shall come up out of the ground."

Hosea uses a horticultural image and foresees the greening of the land, the revegetation and replenishing of the earth with the servants of God as Jezreel (meaning 'God's planting') blooms once more. This is a beautiful image illustrating resurrection and regeneration, emphasising the fact that what was dead is now alive. Our leader has risen out of the ground and also brought us the hope of new life. We too have the hope of sharing in this as resurrection people (1 Corinthians 15:12-23).

d) Reinvestment (11c)

Restoration means that old words and slogans can be redeemed

Fourthly, old names and terms are reinvested with new meaning. There is a beautiful exchange here. The very place (v 10) where God divorced his people becomes the place where they are now reintegrated into the family and welcomed back. Jezreel first of all symbolised conflict and military might (2 Kings 9:14-37), then devastation, destruction and the end of that militarism (Hosea 1:5). But now, in the new order, "Jezreel's day is great" (v 11). It has a new role to play as it rediscovers its original meaning 'Jezre'el' (God's planting). "Great will be the day of God's planting". This is the revegetation, thousands of shoots rising up. God is populating the land with his people.

e) Renaming (2:1)

Restoration means sharing a common name with those we once excluded

Fifthly, we ourselves are renamed, and we affirm one another in our common identity. To those whom we once excluded from the family we say "you are my people"; to those whom we once despised we say "I love you" (2:1). This is reconciliation. We see lived out in the new kingdom the very things which were impossible under old tribal loyalties.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) In Northern Ireland are there those who, like us, are trusting in Christ alone for salvation, but whom we would wish to disown and say "you are not part of us?"
- 2) If they, like us, are the grains of sand (v 10), living in hope of heaven, how can we seek for ways, here and now, of mirroring heaven and demonstrating our common faith? What

role might dialogue, mutual respect, friendship, or worship play?

3) Though within the Christian community we will still have our differences and a variety of views on political and constitutional matters, how should our common recognition of Christ as the 'head' affect how we do politics?

4) Hosea employs an image of revegetation and replenishment: the day of Jezreel - God's planting will be great. What sort of harvest could come from an obedient reconciling church, living as true resurrection people?

5) Two phrases common on the gable walls of Northern Ireland are 'Tiocfaidh ar la' (our day will come), and 'Quis Separabit?' (who will separate?). In the light of Hosea's message, how can these old divisive slogans be reinvested with new Kingdom meaning?

6) The first verse of chapter 2 foresees a time when those who had once been given names of insult and exclusion could be renamed as 'brother', 'sister', 'loved one', or 'mine'. Is this a prophetic challenge about what could happen in our relationships here? How can we encourage it?

STUDY 3B

A New Identity

1 Peter 2:9-17

While this passage does not specifically mention human reconciliation, its references to relationships within the community, inter-personal respect (v 12,17), and its setting of these commands in the whole context of who we are as the people of God mean that it has important implications for any divided society.

Peter is writing to a vulnerable and persecuted community, mixed in nature, but largely composed of Gentiles. He tries to present their new united status as the people of God as the means by which a beacon of light can shine in the violent and troubled world in which they were living (2:12). They are to be an example of a new humanity (1:23). It is a letter of hope (1:3).

1. PRIVILEGES: CHOSEN AND HOLY (V 9-10)

Peter shifts the emphasis on identity away from ethnicity and towards what God has done for us in Christ. Peter uses a list of theologically loaded terms, thus far only applicable to the Israelites, to describe a people who were, for the main part, Gentiles.

a) Chosen people

The elect nature of the people of God has been Peter's theme from the start (1:1). He is fond of this term because he is at pains to point out to his Gentile readers that they now share in the most coveted title of the Jews. In fact, looking at the immediate context of this

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passage, he is making the bold statement that they even share a term used of Christ himself (2:4, 6).

However; throughout Scripture, the term 'chosen' (eklektos) usually refers to the people of God and, in the majority of cases, to their corporate election. It is not due to merit, but to grace. Therefore we rejoice in the title with humility and thankfulness, not pride, knowing it is in God's nature to deliberately choose the weak and insignificant (1 Corinthians 1:26-31; see Micah 5:2). Often passages referring to election are followed by ethical instructions, showing the close inter-relation of God's choice and our obedience (here verses 11-17 are based on verses 9-10. See also Colossians 3:12).

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) In what ways have we tended to abuse the concept of being 'a chosen people'?
- 2) If weakness, dependence and grace are fundamental to being chosen, what implications does this have for our pursuit and retention of earthly power?

b) Royal priesthood, holy nation

Royal priesthood brings together the important Old Testament roles of king and priest. In the ministry of Christ, Peter saw the roles of prophet, priest and king fulfilled. Christ preached the word (3:19), gained access to God for his people (3:18), and is the one to whom all authorities and powers are in submission (3:21-22). Now we as his people fulfil these roles as a royal priesthood (see also 2:5; 5:4) who also prophetically speak the word of God (4:11). This universal priesthood of believing people has often wrongly been thought of in purely individualistic terms. However, here the emphasis is not so much on our individual access to God, nor even on our mutual intercession or mediation of God's grace to one another, but on our role as a people to be God's representatives to an unbelieving world (v 12).

If there was one thing of which the Jews were proud, it was their nationhood. Now Peter speaks of a new nation, defined in a new way. With its references to priests and nation, this verse is a clear reworking of Exodus 19:5, a pivotal verse in the Old Testament concerning the identity of God's people, occurring just before the giving of the Ten Commandments. This illustrates the major paradigm shift that has taken place between the testaments. To apply such a key verse to Gentiles was revolutionary in the extreme; it struck at the very heart of the fundamental Jewish claim to uniqueness. But Peter, like Paul, is showing that such an application is at the very heart of the Gospel. He is introducing a dimension to nationhood which is built on something other than the generally accepted criteria of territory or blood-line, the criterion of holiness. Only if we fulfil this criterion can we truly be seen as "a people belonging to God".

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) As a royal priesthood, how have we failed in our duty to be God's representatives to the unbelievers in our land?
- 2) How does the concept of being a holy nation affect our political identity and the priority it may have in our lives?
- 3) If the criterion for holding a passport to 'God's nation' is holiness, what may we need to change in our own lives and the lives of our churches to be true to this calling?

c) Called

This word qualifies all the others. Without it the others could be twisted and perverted into reasons for arrogance rather than thankfulness. Terms that Peter applied to signify our inclusion (chosen, a holy nation, God's own people) can so easily be turned into weapons to signify others' exclusion. But Peter reminds us that we are kaleos - called to a distinct lifestyle and ethic. Simply being chosen was no guarantee of one's faithfulness or righteousness or exemption from judgement. In fact he reminds us later that judgement will begin with the household of God (4:17). Therefore we need to live our calling.

The profound implications of being called could not be stated more starkly than "from darkness into light". Peter wishes to show the profound importance of "living who we are." Our new status is not due to cosmetic changes. To use a sports analogy, we have not just put on a clean shirt, we have changed sides.

d) Recipients of Mercy

The idea of changing sides is developed in verse 10. It is significant that this is the climax of Peter's theological reflection on the privileges and identity of the people of God. As he prepares to move on to the ethical instructions in the next section, he concludes with their own experience of God's grace. "Remember what you once were," he says to his readers. The lifestyle he is about to outline for them, with its various civil and social responsibilities, will be motivated not by abstract theological concepts, but by the reality of what has happened in their lives. They show mercy because they have received mercy. They accept outsiders into the family because they too have been accepted into a family to which they had no right to belong.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) How have we used our privileged position as the people of God as a weapon to exclude others?
- 2) In what ways can our attitudes and actions still reflect more of the darkness than the light?
- 3) Why are we still often unwilling to show mercy to others or accept others into the Christian family?
- 4) Think of your own experience of God's acceptance and mercy. How might what God has done for you help to open you up to others?

2. RESPONSIBILITIES: LIVE GOOD LIVES, SUBMIT, RESPECT (V 11-17)

Peter shows how our identity in Christ impinges on the well-being of others.

Peter now moves from a series of terms describing what God has done for us to a series of instructions about how to live in the world. These instructions are also given in the context of a number of other identity-markers.

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a) Aliens and Strangers

In verse 11 Peter takes up another Old Testament image; this time it is 'sojourner' or 'alien', a phrase used of several Old Testament characters (Genesis 20:1; 26:3; 35:27 translated 'stay' in the NIV). Although sojourners lived in the land and enjoyed many of the benefits of residency, they didn't belong. They were not citizens, they had no legal rights. We can see that this is of major importance to Peter. He uses the term in the first verse of the epistle, and he mentions it again later in the first chapter (1:17). Since we call God 'Father,' and since as God's people we have experienced a new birth with imperishable seed (1:23) awaiting an imperishable inheritance (1:4), we should not see this world as our home. Our home is where our Father is.

Therefore, as part of a new holy nation, we should lay aside any rights, identity, or citizenship which would otherwise be ours as members of an earthly nation. Such detachment will have important implications for how we deal with issues such as ambition, materialism and political authority.

b) Free people and servants of God

The apparent contradiction of being 'free', yet 'slaves to Christ' is highlighted in verse 16 (this tension is also brought out by Paul). Freedom is not to be used as an excuse for sin, because it has been gained by Christ at a high cost. Nor does it result in sin, for it is maintained through the Spirit who cannot be the source of sin. The context shows that our freedom is not without responsibility (v 17). The command in verse 17 (taken from Proverbs 24:21) "Fear God and honour the king" is of particular relevance for those who imagined their freedom to allow lawlessness.

If our freedom has ethical implications for us, the resulting good works should affect the behaviour of others (v 12, 15, 17). In keeping with the New Testament emphasis on grace, Peter encourages good works because of the positive effect they will have on others, rather than the negative effect their omission will have on us.

Is this just a form of legalism? No. Good works are only possible if we have God's Spirit in residence (4:14). It is the work of the Spirit that transforms these ethical commands from being a new legalistic bondage into a hitherto unachievable living out of our heart's desires. We don't have to follow this path, we get to follow it where, in the past, we didn't make the grade.

The two images of 'sojourner' and 'free man' are linked. Because this land/this world is not our home, we are free to relate openly and without threat to those who are different from us.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) How might adopting a sojourning mentality affect our attitude to many of the issues which divide us?
- 2) How free are we? Free to forgive? Free to love our enemies?
- 3) Often people complain that it is unrealistic in the Northern Ireland situation to expect people to trust, forgive, love. Is it?
- 4) What are your heart's desires for Northern Ireland? Are you free to pursue them in the strength of his Spirit?

c) The Commands

The commands found in verse 12 (“live good lives among the pagans”), verse 13 (“submit to every authority”), verse 17 (“show proper respect... love... fear...honour”) illustrate that the whole focus of Peter’s teaching here is missiological. He is concerned with the salvation of those who don’t believe. His readers are chosen, but for a purpose. They are a royal priesthood, but priests are to represent God to the people. They are a holy nation, but God’s chosen nation is to be a light and a blessing to the other nations (Genesis 12:3). They are God’s people, so that they can declare his praises (v 9). These are summed up in the simple command, “Live good lives”, with the added reason “so that they may see your good deeds and glorify God” (see Matthew 5:16).

Peter realised how easy it would be to twist the message of grace into a selfish libertarianism, which is why the commands of verses 13-17 concern submission and authority. The true Christian will shun all tendencies towards anarchy, violence, and a selfish disregard for others. In contrast verse 17 demands a progressive esteem - respect, honour, love, fear to be given to four levels of relationships: everyone, the authorities, the Christian community, God. [Since Peter is dealing throughout this passage with relationships with unbelievers, it is better to punctuate verse 17 as the RSV does (four equal commands) rather than following the NIV (which takes the first command as a summary of the other three)].

Furthermore, the word for ‘show respect’ and ‘honour’ is the same in the Greek, giving us a symmetrical list of commands. Our responsibilities to God and believers are framed by our equally important responsibilities towards the authorities and everyone else.

It helps to remember that this letter was written to a suffering and persecuted church (1:6; 2:19-21) whose suffering seems to be directly linked to their faith (4:4,16). It seems likely that the word ‘christian’ was originally an insult. Into this context of a church which was despised and suffering Peter writes and reminds them that they have the same glorious identity which in the past belonged only to ethnic Israel. However this new identity is not to be exploited triumphalistically; that was the mistake of Old Israel. Rather it is the road of rejection and suffering, in which they follow not only the path of the remnant of Israel, but the *via dolorosa*, the way of the cross, of Christ himself. For it is precisely the work of that cross which acts as the basis of their whole new identity.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY OR APPLICATION

- 1) Have the unbelievers in Northern Ireland ‘seen our good works and glorified God’? In what ways have we failed to “live good lives”?

- 2) Bear in mind that this was written to a church which was suffering under a government that was at least passively indifferent to their plight and, more likely, actively participating in their persecution. Have we in Northern Ireland any reasons to exempt ourselves from the command to “submit to the authorities” even when we don’t like what they do?

- 3) Peter says we are to “honour those in authority”. But he uses the same word to describe what our attitude should be to all people. In what ways have we been guilty of lack of respect towards others in our land? In what ways do we need to improve the way we think of, speak of and act towards those from whom we are divided?

- 4) Do we wish to identify with Christ in his sufferings? Is he calling us to take risks, to suffer as we follow his path and act as agents of reconciliation in a divided society?

PRAYERS

THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF PEACE, JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

Pray for our community:

For those in leadership positions in the church, local areas and in political parties. For those who continue to hurt from the violence of the past and the intolerance of the present. To consider how we, the Christian community, might become the answer to our own prayers.

Reflect biblically:

Consider the difficulties facing us in this country and ask how Jesus would respond to these. Reflect on the challenge facing the church to be a community of peace, justice and reconciliation.

Identify with others:

Throughout Northern Ireland many other people will be praying and reflecting on these important issues. Join with them in your prayers and look for practical ways to continue to work with those who are working for peace and healing.

A TIME TO HEAL... PRAYER

"There is a time for everything... under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

Lord, there is a time to be silent and a time to speak
Yet we have spoken words of bitter reaction
 when we should have been silent
And remained silent
 when we should have spoken
 for peace and against injustice.
Lord, there is also a time to heal,
 and that healing must begin with us.
Forgive us for the times when in our own sin
 we have been guilty of violent thoughts,
 bitter words, unfair attitudes
when we have found it more expedient
 to perpetuate the stereotypes of the past
 rather than challenge them.
Forgive us for the times we have thought
 that we were above criticism
 just because we never pointed a gun or threw a grenade;
while all the time we were pointing fingers
 and throwing out words of vengeance and unforgiveness
Enable us today, O God, to see our neighbour,
 our enemy, our country, with new eyes
eyes from which the scales of prejudice
 and bitterness have fallen - the eyes of Christ.
Amen

PEACE

"Let us go that we might walk in his paths..."

"They will beat their swords into ploughshares" (Micah 4:2-3)

Lord, we praise you that your rule knows no borders
and your love no ethnic or tribal limits.
We praise you that through the incarnation of
your son Jesus Christ,
we have the one true Prince of Peace,
and the government is on his shoulders.
Forgive us for the times our words and actions
have reflected the divisions of earth
rather than the unity of the kingdom of heaven.
Enable us to play our part in creating a community of peace
where all can live securely
Help us transform a culture of death and destruction
into a culture of peace and productivity
As we learn your ways
and seek to walk in your paths.

JUSTICE

"Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8)

Lord, forgive us for our detachment from the plight of others,
and our blindness to the sins of our own community.
Enable us to reflect the attitudes of our God
who has no favourites,
And to love those we have been conditioned to dismiss,
For we have not acted justly.

Forgive us for pretending we desire justice
when really what we seek is vengeance.
Enable us to seek the good of those who do us wrong
and to bless those who persecute us,
For we have not loved mercy.

Forgive us too, Lord, for our cultural or spiritual arrogance;
for demanding our rights, while despising the rights of others
Enable us to consider others better than ourselves,
For we have not walked humbly.

Teach us the way of the cross, we pray,
and hasten your kingdom of justice and peace.

A TIME TO HEAL

RECONCILIATION

*"He has destroyed the barrier,
the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:4)*

Almighty God, you stand above all the nations,
you take no side in petty ethnic squabbles,
you are not interested in arguments but in people,
you care not about territory or tradition,
you wish only for justice.

Forgive us Lord for harbouring distrust
and encouraging suspicion,
for dealing in half-truths and lies.

STUDY 4

THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF PEACE, JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

OUTLINE

This section combines the themes of peace, justice, and reconciliation under the following headings:

1. Unexpected Hope of Peace in a Time of Crisis

Micah 5:12

Micah mocks a city reliant on (para)military activity

Micah introduces the concept of salvation through the insignificant & weak

2. God's Standard of Justice

Micah 6:8

We pray for your church,
that we would not be sucked into one side or other,
but be able to stand in the gap
as a living powerful witness
of how Christ the reconciler can bring together
those whom tradition and politics would seek to drive apart.

A PRAYER FOR THE FUTURE

"I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Saviour. My God will hear me" (Micah 7:7)

Lord God, we thank you for how you have brought us
to this point in our search for peace.

Out of darkness and despair, you have given us hope.

In our land,
 where it is easier to glorify the past than build a future
 and where it is more common to despair than to hope;
 where cynicism trips more neatly off the tongue
 than encouragement
 and begrudgerly more naturally than blessing,
 give us power, by your Spirit,
 to be catalysts of change, and agents of renewal.
 Implant within us, the mind and heart of Christ
 and the discernment, flexibility and courage
 to admit mistakes and take risks in the task
 of bringing about peace, justice and reconciliation,
 Above all, O God, give us Hope.

WORSHIP

THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF PEACE, JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

Suggested Hymns and Songs

The following is a list of hymns and contemporary worship songs which may be used to fit in with this theme. Since some of them will not be well-known they are divided into two groups:

- ☞ those that are written in traditional metrical hymn form, and hence for which a variety of tunes can serve
- ☞ those written as ametrical praise songs.

This is merely to give an indication of the style of the song, not to encourage using only one list or the other. Some of the songs in the hymn category have actually been written very recently. Songs written in the last couple of years have not been included since it is assumed that if these are in general use and will fit the theme they will readily come to mind.

Since many hymns bridge the concerns of peace, justice and reconciliation, they have not been divided into three categories, although some will obviously deal more with one of the issues than the others.

LAND OF CONFLICT

written for ECONI Sunday by David Montgomery

Recommended Tune: *Ebenezer (Oh the deep deep love of Jesus) MP 522*

Other possible tunes: *Hyfrydol (I will sing) MP 315; Blaenwern (Love Divine) MP 449*

Land of conflict, tears and trouble,
 Twisted truth and love suppressed;
 Hoping for a fearless future,
 Searching for a trustful rest.
 God, who once the great peace process
 Through the Great Peace Envoy planned,
 By your peace-fruit planting Spirit,
 Bring your peace to heart and land.

Land of beatings, blasts and bullets,

A TIME TO HEAL

Loving evil, hating good;
Land where anger, pride and half-truth
Poison speech and attitude.
At the cross two forms of justice,
Earth's and heaven's, together stand,
God of justice, truth and mercy,
Bring your justice to our land.

Land of doubt, distress, division,
Fractured families, feuding friends;
Land where cynical suspicion
Stifles all that good intends.
Barrier-breaking, curtain-rending
God of Gentile and of Jew,
Reconcile us to each other,
Reconcile us all to you.

Abbreviations:

GTG	Glory to God (Presbyterian Supplement)
HTC	Hymns for Today's Church
ICP	Irish Church Praise (Church of Ireland Supplement)
MP	Mission Praise combined music edition
SH	Spring Harvest Praise 1996 edition

Metrical-style Hymns

Christ is Alive	ICP 12
Christ is the world's true light	HTC 323
Church of God	GTG 75, HTC 504
Crown him with many crowns	HTC 174, MP 109, SH 21
For the healing of the nations	GTG 111
Hail to the Lord's anointed	HTC 190, MP 204

Metrical-style Hymns (*continued from overleaf*)

Lord bring the day to pass	GTG 117
Lord of our Life	MP 441
The Kingdom of God	GTG 126, HTC 333, MP 651
The Voice of God	ICP 85
We cannot measure	GTG 103

Other Worship Songs

All earth was dark	GTG 109, MP 8
All the ends of the earth	GTG 108
Counter to the culture	SH 20
From heaven you came	GTG 79, ICP 23, MP 162
Great is the darkness	SH 42
He has showed you	MP 205
Heart and soul	SH 50
I will cry mercy	SH 67
I will speak out	SH 70
Jesu, Jesu,	GTG 115, ICP 46
Let there be love	MP 411,

The Politics of Holiness

SEPARATION & SHARING IN A DIVIDED SOCIETY

BIBLE STUDY I

Politics - Must Difference Always Divide?

1. THE MEANING OF DIFFERENCE

Any attempt to deny difference is unhelpful and unbiblical. Difference is part of God's creative purpose and its positive outcome can be seen in the varied and complementary nature of creation.

Genesis 1 provides us with an account of God's unapologetic indulgence in creative variety. If everything was meant to be the same then God could have created the world in grey sameness. He didn't. The variety of sights, sounds, smells and shapes which make up our world are God's good idea!

Genesis also makes it clear that God's idea of companionship is not having someone or something the same to keep you company – hence male and female he created them (Gen 1: 27). Companionship is best found in complementary difference.

There is a lot to explore about our attitude to the world, difference and creative variety in these thoughts and passages.

2. THE NATURE OF DIFFERENCE

Difference may not matter or it may serve to distinguish or it may be the basis of disagreement.

☞ The strength of the chillies or herbs in a meal may make it palatable or obnoxious – it's a matter of taste, and difference in taste doesn't matter. The same is true of music, architecture, design, fashion and many other issues. People make a good living out of difference – music and literary critics, politicians, manufacturers, and no one has a problem with the creative use of difference.

☞ Difference may serve to distinguish between what is good and what is bad. You need to know the difference between mushrooms, for some are edible and some are lethal. Places, people, culture, religions and a myriad of things are distinguished by difference. This was the case for Israel. In Exodus 19:5ff God makes the call to be different: "You will be for me a holy (set apart) nation". He

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then provides a whole social and religious infrastructure to serve the purpose of difference within the life of a nation.

☞ Difference can also lead to disagreement that may or may not lead to conflict and division. Different opinions lead to disagreements. Different levels of investment in a project or event can lead to disagreements about ownership, direction or control. Different affiliations or associations can lead to disagreement – political or religious affiliations are a case in point. These differences inevitably lead to disagreement. Whether the disagreement is amicable or violent is another matter. The disagreements that arose between Jesus and the religious leaders of Judaism are good examples.

Luke 22:66-23:25 records for us the inevitable outcome of different and irreconcilable attitudes and approaches. It is worth working down through the passage and observing the way religious truth and empirical events are interpreted very differently and discussing the assumptions, fears, passions which underlie those interpretations.

3. HOW CAN DIFFERENCE BECOME DIVISION?

Disagreement becomes divisive and leads to conflict because of:

Pride	over others
Fear	of others
Arrogance	about others
Injustice	from or against others
Offence	to or from others

In short the difference which creates disagreement becomes conflict because of sin.

1 Corinthians 1:10-17 & chapter 3 are a good study in disagreement and division. There are plenty more: Joseph and his brothers; Jacob and Esau; Moses and Pharaoh; Paul and Peter; Paul and Barnabas. Our fallenness is supremely manifest in the lack of a shared common purpose and allegiance.

Christ calls us to a shared allegiance and identity in God's Kingdom – which is distinctly different from any human kingdom – of which peace and unity are supposed to be the hallmarks:

“...all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

(See also: 2 Cor 5:11-21; Eph 2:11-22; 1 John 3:11-24.)

4. HOW CAN WE PREVENT DIFFERENCE TURNING INTO CONFLICT?

Defusing divisiveness and conflict without denying disagreement and difference requires:

- ☞ A 'sense of the other'
- ☞ Inclusive thinking
- ☞ Good communication

Two of the key passages which raise all these issues are Rom. 12 and Col. 3:1-17. They are recognisable

as passages about 'holy living'. As such they provide the framework and guidelines for a model of behaviour which can cope with difference and disagreement – however critical.

¶ **A sense of the other**

A 'sense of the other' is gained by creating space to learn what makes the other tick and about engagement. The process begins with Rom. 12:3: "not thinking of yourself more highly than you ought" – for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. He proceeds by recognising the positive role of difference: "We have different gifts, according to the grace given to us"(v 6).

It is further developed by implementing a standard of behaviour which is characterised by "Bless those who persecute you" and a commitment to "if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone". Biblical principles such as these create space for the 'other' to be taken seriously and also for a listening process which can promote 'inclusive thinking'. The implementation of such patterns of behaviour must of necessity create listeners whose natural selfishness is kept in check.

¶ **Inclusive thinking**

Inclusive thinking is the opposite of selfish thinking and selfishness is one of the instantly recognisable traits of sin. Rom 13:9 "...whatever other commandments there may be, are summed up in this one rule: Love your neighbour as yourself." Col. 3:12-13 encourages us to "clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" - all essential ingredients of sensitive listening to others, even to our enemies.

¶ **Good communication**

Good communication was once illustrated by the use of a simple formula:

I feel + because = question.

The idea is that instead of making our point in the usual aggressive style which comes naturally in conversations over areas of disagreement, we should step back and begin by being honest about ourselves, stating our case with a measure of vulnerability rather than dogmatism. Providing an explanation rather than leaving the opposition on the defensive following a full-scale assault is a good way to conclude. In this way we strive to communicate rather than dominate.

Col. 3:8ff: "...now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from your lips...Let the word of Christ dwell in you as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom...whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus..."

5. CONCLUSION

¶ While the values outlined in these passages are written in the context of church life, it is obvious that they are not exclusively for, or restricted to, church life.

¶ Engagement in the world of everyday life and politics must be on the same basis as engagement in the life of the church, if there is to be a credible witness to the reality of God's grace. These are the values of God's kingdom to be incarnated as an integral part of Christian witness – not a different set of rules for a religious club.

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☞ While we may not reasonably expect everyone to acknowledge or adhere to such values, we ought to model and aggressively market such values for, just as God has created a rich variety and diversity of life for us to enjoy, God has given us these values by which to live.

QUESTIONS & MAIN POINTS

What turns difference into disagreement?

What turns disagreement into division?

1. Difference is OK:

- Varied
- Complementary

2. Difference may:

- Not matter
- Distinguish
- Lead to disagreement

3. Disagreement becomes divisive and leads to conflict because of:

Pride - fear – arrogance – injustice – offence

4. Defusing division without denying disagreement and difference:

- a 'sense of the other'
- inclusive thinking
- good communication

BIBLE STUDY 2

God Has No Favourites

1. PETER THE MISSIONARY (9:32-43)

☞ Acts 9 and 10 record a pivotal point in the life of the early church. Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, is converted and Cornelius is the first Gentile to come to faith in Jesus. Having told us Paul's story, Luke leaves him in Tarsus (9: v32) and switches the focus to Peter.

☞ Here is an incident in which God deals with the deepest recesses of Peter's character. The theme is not so much the conversion of Cornelius as the remoulding of Peter.

☞ Peter had an active ministry among the saints, preaching and performing miracles (9: v32). Luke's portrait is of an authentic apostle of Jesus - following his example, depending on his power, witnessing to his salvation and all for the glory of Christ.

2. CORNELIUS - OPEN TO GOD (10:1-8)

☞ As Luke left Paul in Tarsus, so Peter is now left in Joppa (v 43). The focus shifts to Cornelius in Caesarea, a Gentile serving as a centurion in this garrison city, which was the administrative capital of Judea.

☞ Cornelius was special. We are told he was devout and feared God, led his household well and practised almsgiving and prayer. He was open to God and so when he received a vision he obeyed.

☞ There was RISK involved. Respected by the Jews he may be, but visited in his house by their leaders - never! He had to confront the prejudices of his world and take risks to obey God.

3. PETER - CLOSED TO GOD (10:9-16)

☞ The focus now returns to Peter. Resting after his busy ministry, he went to pray while waiting for food to be prepared.

☞ Peter was special too. To him had been given the privilege of announcing the good news to the Jews (ch 2) and the Samaritans (ch 8). However Peter was, at this point, closed to God.

☞ Peter receives a vision and disobeys. ("No Lord!" v 14). Spirit filled, miracle working gospel preacher he may have been, but racial and religious prejudice was still a problem.

☞ He had come a long way and was even staying in the home of a tanner; yet three times the vision came and he still didn't get it. He was greatly puzzled (10:17).

4. JOURNEY TO THE OTHER SIDE (10:17-29)

☞ Before Peter can work it through emotionally or think it through theologically, God acts. Suddenly three Gentile servants appear and ask for Peter. They stand by the gate, still keeping a respectful distance.

☞ This time God gives Peter little option but to obey. No hesitation was permitted and with a sense of exasperation God forces his hand (v 19). In this Peter takes three steps to cross the great gulf:

- a) Invites them in (waiting at Gate) - contact on his ground.
- b) Goes with them to Caesarea - enters their territory.
- c) Meets Cornelius - establishes a relationship and discovers a fellow human being.

The puzzle is now solved (v 28 & 29).

5. GOD AT WORK (10:30-48)

☞ While Peter dismissed Cornelius and his like, the God who shows no partiality had heard

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his prayer and remembered his alms even as an unconverted Gentile. The opportunity for the good news was unseen to Peter, blinded by prejudice, but God was at work. The good news is shared (v 44-48) and barriers broken down.

☞ God did not give Peter time to reconsider this 'hasty' action. Before he had time to finish the Holy Spirit fell on ALL who were listening: 'relatives and close friends' (v 24); 'many' (v 27); 'all of us here' (v 33). No chance to make sure they were really the sort of people we want in our church. They were wrapped up IN CHRIST and filled with the SPIRIT.

☞ Those with Peter stood watching (v 45) with growing incredulity.

6. PETER'S BIG GOD

☞ Peter, whose credentials were beyond doubt, had bridged the last great cultural gap for the good news. Peter himself became the bridge as God dealt with his prejudice.

☞ Peter is now able to say "I truly understand that GOD..."(v 34)

...Is bigger than our box and refuses to be put under house arrest. Where we least expect it, in the deepest recesses of our own prejudices, in the world beyond our pale, God meets us.

☞ Peter's testimony is that 'God has shown me...' (v 28)

...about himself, that his prejudice was deep seated and his perceptions of what God could do were limited. He was restricted by tradition, not God.

...about others. No-one is to be dismissed as profane or unclean. Keeping our distance is not a Christian option.

☞ All of us need to face our Cornelius. The encounter may or may not result in their conversion. But it will result in God doing a renewing work in us that will fit us better to help heal the wounds of our hurting world and communities.

☞ Despite such a transforming and intimate experience of God, even Peter continued to struggle with this issue. His prejudice ran deep and the pressures of his culture were always working against him. He stood firm in Acts 11 and at the Jerusalem Council in chapter 15 but caved in later when Paul informs us he gave in too easily to the circumcision party.

MAIN POINTS

☞ God is bigger than our boxes and refuses to be put under house arrest.

☞ Conversion is not the end of remoulding.

☞ Even Peter, the miracle working gospel preacher, was to discover that racial and religious prejudice was still a problem.

☞ Peter must work through his prejudice by being brought face to face with Cornelius. This was a gentile, serving as a Centurion, who was devout and feared God.

☞ Peter observes God at work in Cornelius and is shown that God is bigger than any of our boxes. Keeping our distance is not a Christian option.

BIBLE STUDY 3

Holy Sectarianism (Loving The Darkness in John!)

INTRODUCTION

☞ John's gospel presents us with stark contrasts. Most of these contrasts have to do with the issue of belief in Jesus.

☞ Here there are no grey areas - a person either believes or rejects Jesus.

☞ The starkness of this message has often given rise to the idea that an extreme separation from and an unrelenting hostility to the world mark John's gospel. This, however, is only part of the picture.

1. THEIR DEEDS WERE EVIL (JOHN 3:19)

☞ John reminds us of the uncomfortable truth about our society and ourselves. It is not just the Stalins and Hitlers of this world who are in darkness. It is not just the terrorists and their spokesmen who are in darkness. All of us stand before God as people of the dark whose deeds are evil.

☞ Thus already this gospel challenges the comfortable boundaries we draw between ourselves and others. But there is no distinction, no acceptable level of evil.

2. COMING INTO THE LIGHT (JOHN 3:21)

☞ The immediate contrast is with those who have come from darkness to light. These are those who have been born of God and are now children of God.

☞ To know that we have come from darkness to light is not an occasion to gloat or heave a sigh of relief. Instead, it is an opportunity to fall down and worship, to confess with Thomas; 'My Lord and my God'.

☞ It is an opportunity to recognise that in a literal sense, 'There but for the grace of God go I'. It is an opportunity to challenge and reject the triumphalism - the darkness - that can seep into the hearts of all of us when we see those we consider to be still in the darkness.

3. A WORLD DIVIDED (JOHN 16:18-19)

☞ This world is divided - no matter how comfortable we may be in this world, no matter how accommodating it may be of us.

☞ There is starkness at the heart of the gospel. John's community did not need to be reminded of this, for they faced that stark division and the darkness of the world on a daily basis.

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¶ Many Christians - perhaps most - throughout the history of the church have needed no reminding of this, for they too have faced the hostility of the world to Jesus.

5. YOU ALSO MUST TESTIFY (JOHN 16:27)

¶ What then should this community do? What should we do?

¶ Should they/we withdraw behind the barricades? Seal up the cracks lest the darkness should seep in and corrupt the light? Should they/we fear and despise the world beyond the barricades, perhaps venturing out once in a while, alternating between denunciation of its sin and calling it to believe?

¶ Here is how the disciples must live in a hostile world:

As the Father sent the Son into the world to save the world (3:17) so the disciples are sent into the world (17:18).

As the Father bears witness, or testifies, to the Son (5:37) so the disciples bear witness to the Son (16:27).

¶ And who is this Jesus to whom the disciples must bear witness and in whose name they are sent into the world?

- He is the Son of God who broke down the barrier between God and humanity, bringing men and women into the light through believing in him.
- He is the Son of God who broke down the sectarian barriers between Jews and Samaritans (4:1-26; 39-42).
- He is the Son of God who broke down barriers between the faithful and the compromisers at the court of Herod (4:46-54).
- He is the Son of God who broke down barriers between the faithful and those considered sinners (9:1-2).
- He is the Son of God who crossed the physical boundaries between Galilee, Judea and Samaria.

5. CONCLUSION

¶ In his ministry Jesus challenged and crossed every sectarian barrier that human beings in their darkness had erected. As he was sent, so we are sent.

¶ Jesus also challenged the sectarian barriers between Christians. Even within the community of those who believed the darkness could work its evil. Jesus provided the model of loving service (13:1-17) and challenged his followers to display it in their own relationships.

¶ There is a fundamental separation in John - separation from unbelief, separation from darkness,

separation from evil. In contrast to the world, the community of God's people - sent as Jesus is sent, testifying to their Lord and Master - are to be boundary breakers as he was, both within and outside the church.

☞ It is not possible to be a sectarian people, a people of the darkness, when we hear John telling us that hatred is of the devil (8:44) and that the people of this world are the focus of God's love (3:16).

QUESTIONS & MAIN POINTS:

How do we live in a world that is divided by the gospel and yet be boundary breakers?

- a) The gospel of John presents many of the stark contrasts that belief in Jesus presents us with.
- b) The boundaries we draw between ourselves and others are challenged. All of us stand before God as people whose deeds are evil.
- c) If we have passed from darkness to light we must reject triumphalism over those we consider to be still in darkness.
- d) The challenge is how to live in a world that is divided by the gospel:
 - Should we fear and despise the world from the security behind our barricades?
 - Do we break boundaries to live in the world?
- e) Being disciples of Jesus means living in the tension of a world that is divided, yet being boundary breakers.

BIBLE STUDY 4

Jonah - Patriot or Prophet?

1. SETTING JONAH IN CONTEXT

☞ The book of Jonah is an unusual type of prophecy. It is a story, a narrative rather than an oracle as in "The word of the Lord came to me, saying..." In order for us to hear what God is saying to us we need to participate in the events of the story and to identify with the characters. Our response will be that of the Jews during the Passover celebrations. This book is read in its entirety. The response of the people is 'We are Jonah'.

☞ As Christians we have seen the importance of this book in showing us God's commitment to mission beyond the boundaries of ethnic Judaism and its fulfilment in the coming of Jesus Christ: "A greater than Jonah is here". However it is the context in which God deals with Jonah in his prejudice and

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patriotism which is specifically relevant to hearing God's word for us in Ulster at this time.

☞ Jonah was a prophet, a man of God, and a man of the Word. He exercised his ministry in the 8th century. He followed Elisha and worked in the Northern Kingdom of Israel when the nation was divided.

☞ Nineveh was the capital of the dreaded enemies of Israel, the Assyrians. They had already seized territory from them and were renowned for their barbarity.

☞ In culture, politics and religion Jonah was completely alienated from the Assyrians in general and Nineveh in particular.

☞ When God commanded him to speak his word to Nineveh it was in the context of ethnic prejudice and religious nationalism. Jonah knew that if Nineveh responded to the word of God, they would be spared. The political and social repercussions would mean that Israel would be in danger and that their distinctive national and religious identity would be under threat. Jonah had a choice of being a prophet or a patriot. He disobeyed God and chose patriotism.

☞ We in Ireland, who are 'the people of the Word', have had similar choices to those of the son of Amittai. Our disobedience and God's response parallel prophetically this extraordinary book, for 'we are Jonah'.

2. DECISION TIME FOR JONAH

In the first chapter there are at least FOUR elements that set the scene in which God fulfils his mission and changes Jonah:

- 1) The ship which takes him in the opposite direction from where God wanted him to go.
 - ☞ We need to examine the structures that we have individually and corporately instituted to perpetuate our alienation from those in whom the mission of God is to be realised.
- 2) The storm was apparently a natural phenomenon subject to research and analysis. Yet it was an intervention of God in judgement.
 - ☞ The history of 'the Troubles' is rightly open to academic critique to indicate the factors at work. Nevertheless, we can discern the 'hand of God' in judging his people. It was not only Jonah but also all that were on the ship who suffered.
- 3) The sailors were those who had training and experience as mariners. They did their best according to their understanding. Their task was to keep the ship afloat and to bring it to their destination.
 - ☞ Those in leadership in Northern Ireland have been struggling to fulfil their role and are to be commended. Their responsibility, like that of the sailors, is to discover the root cause and to confront especially the church of God.
- 4) The stubborn prophet who has learnt to accept the unacceptable and sleeps when the storm of judgement is raging.
 - ☞ At last, the anger of a new generation of those in leadership is confronting the church and is seeking to wake the sleeping giant so that we might take responsibility and act.

3. THE CHALLENGE OF JONAH TODAY

In order for the Lord to still the storm, to bring peace, to advance his cosmic mission of salvation and to liberate the 'man of the Word' from his prejudice, the following is necessary:

¶ Evangelism (1:8,9)

We are called to bear witness to our faith.

¶ Sacrifice (1:12-17)

We must embrace the cross and suffer whatever is necessary for the sake of peace. Jesus interprets the experience of Jonah as foreshadowing his own crucifixion and resurrection (the sign of Jonah).

¶ Prayer (2:1-9)

As we die to self and are crucified with Christ we will pray:

- in deep existential pain (v 2);
- with a sense of helplessness (v 2&3; 5&6);
- with an insatiable appetite for the presence of God (v 4);
- in specific repentance for the idolatry which placed patriotism before prophecy (v 8);
- acknowledging God's sovereignty (v 9).

¶ Obedience (3:1-3)

We must go to those from whom we are alienated with the message God has given to us.

4. MAKING JONAH'S CHOICE

God's mission is to bring us all to repentance. In order for us to change we need each other. Nineveh needs Jonah and Jonah needs Nineveh.

¶ Nineveh's repentance (the greatest revival in the history of the world!) comes through the one who has 'the Word of God'. This was not only personal but corporate change (3:5-9).

¶ Jonah's repentance is a slow process because of the depths of his prejudice. It begins in his experience of 'God at work' among his traditional enemies. Jonah's sectarian bitterness and anger are expressed in prayer and in quoting Scripture. Because prejudice is pre-rational, God acts on the emotions of Jonah by introducing him to experiences that challenge how he feels.

5. CONCLUSION

¶ Significantly, there is no evidence that Jonah was set free from his deep-seated hostility to the people of Nineveh. Thankfully, a greater than Jonah is here. Jesus Christ, who has come not only for his own but as the Saviour of the world, can enable us to set aside those things which are ours by right and inheritance so that we can identify with those who are culturally, politically and religiously alienated from us. In this way we share in his plan for these islands and the fulfilment of the prayer which he taught us: "Your kingdom come, your will be done (in Ireland) as it is done in heaven".

SERMON OUTLINE

Jonah - Patriot or Prophet?

1. SETTING JONAH IN CONTEXT

¶ The book of Jonah is an unusual type of prophecy. It is a story, a narrative rather than an oracle as in “The word of the Lord came to me, saying...” In order for us to hear what God is saying to us we need to participate in the events of the story and to identify with the characters. This book is read in its entirety.

¶ Jonah was a prophet, a man of God, and a man of the Word. He exercised his ministry in the 8th century. He followed Elisha and worked in the Northern Kingdom of Israel when the nation was divided.

¶ Nineveh was the capital of the dreaded enemies of Israel, the Assyrians. They had already seized territory from them and were renowned for their barbarity.

¶ In culture, politics and religion Jonah was completely alienated from the Assyrians in general and Nineveh in particular.

¶ When God commanded him to speak his word to Nineveh, it was in the context of ethnic prejudice and religious nationalism.

2. DECISION TIME FOR JONAH

¶ We read in Chapter 1 that God called Jonah to go and prophesy to the inhabitants of Nineveh.

¶ Looking at the history that had existed between the people of Nineveh Jonah could think of many reasons why he would find it difficult to reach out to these people. Jonah had a choice of being a prophet or a patriot.

¶ Jonah knew that if Nineveh responded to the word of God they would be spared. The political and social repercussions would mean that Israel would be in danger and that their distinctive national and religious identity would be under threat.

¶ Jonah had a decision to make: Was he going to act according to God's call or was he going to allow his prejudice to dictate his response?

¶ Jonah made his decision. It was not so much that he was afraid of what God wanted him to do, it was rather that he simply did not want to do it! He decided to run away from God's call. He boarded a ship that was bound for the Western part of the Mediterranean Sea.

3. THE CHALLENGE OF JONAH FOR TODAY

- ¶ We live at a time when our community is deeply divided in terms of culture, politics and religion.
- ¶ It is in this context that we respond to God's call both to "Go into all the world" to preach the good news and to love our neighbour as ourselves.
- ¶ Within our community in Northern Ireland, no section of it should be excluded from the call to love our neighbour and share the good news.

4. MAKING JONAH'S CHOICE

- ¶ There may be many reasons that we can offer as to why we should not include all of our community when responding to God's call. These might include:
 - history
 - tensions caused by the recent years of violence
 - the danger of becoming unpopular with members of our own community
 - fear of the unknown due to the fact that we may not really know anyone from the other community
 - not wanting to be branded 'disloyal' by members of our own community
- ¶ Like Jonah we are faced with choices. Should we be faithful to God's call or make our own decisions as to whom we will reach out to?
- ¶ There are less dramatic, but just as effective, ways for us to run from God's call. It can be quite easy to be so engrossed with the ongoing internal life of our own church community that we have no time or energy left for those beyond. It is also possible to insulate our lives from other sections of our community so that meaningful contact need not even be considered.
- ¶ In our own way we each have decisions to make that are similar to the one that faced Jonah. Is it to be prophet or patriot?

BIBLE STUDY 5

Paul - Author of Conflict or Healer of Wounds?

In order to gain holistic understanding of Pauline teaching in this area it is necessary to raise, and then attempt to integrate, a number of different themes. These include:

- ¶ Facets of the meaning of 'holiness' within Paul's writings
 - a) **Holiness and belonging:** a significant strand of meaning underlying Paul's use of 'hagios' and 'hagiasmos' is that those who are holy belong to God and are consecrated to him. Implicit in this use is the view that 'the saints', the 'hagioi', have been separated from sin

THE POLITICS OF HOLINESS

(Romans 6:19-20). As he explains throughout Galatians, belonging to God, and therefore holiness, is not dependant on adherence to 'works of the Law', but on faith in Jesus Christ.

b) Holiness is passive: Paul can refer to the believers as 'saints' because they have been consecrated to God through the work of Christ (1 Cor. 1:30) and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:16; 1 Cor. 6:11). Thus holiness is a state in which the Christians find themselves (Ephesians 1:4). In addition to being a present reality for believers (1 Cor 3:17), there are indications that Paul also sees holiness as a process in which God is at work currently and in the future and which will reach its climax only when believers are presented blameless before God.

c) Holiness is active: Paul makes it clear that there is a need for the Christian to be actively committed to the pursuit of holiness (Romans 6:19; 1 Thess. 4:3). In Col 1:22 he uses the word 'holiness' to describe the believers' goal and reinforces this view with his own testimony in Philippians 3:12-16. There is therefore the sense of a call to be holy (Romans 6:22). Holiness is to do with being at God's disposal; it is task-oriented, to be seen in action (2 Cor 1:12) and in lifestyle (1 Thess 4:3-7; Ephesians 2:10).

☞ Paul and the state: (See Romans 12 and 13).

☞ Paul's understanding of his ministry and calling:

Vulnerability: in 2 Corinthians when Paul's ministry is under attack he develops a view where leadership is seen in weakness and vulnerability.

Confrontation: Galatians 2: 11-21 makes it clear that Paul was willing to confront those, even Peter, whom he believed were compromising the truth of the gospel.

☞ Conclusion

Having reviewed areas such as those mentioned, questions which attempt to relate theology to practice can then be asked:

- Is holiness private, social, political or all three?
- Where should the Christian's priorities be?
- Do politics and theology inter-relate?
- How does Paul's teaching on holiness relate to political theologies as developed by Metz and others?

SERMON OUTLINE

Paul - a Case Study in Galatians

A. THE NEED TO BELONG

☞ A desire to belong is a well-known feature of human personality, illustrated by gang culture, and even perhaps by the divisions in our society.

☞ One strand of meaning underlying the use of the Greek word 'hagioi' - holy in the New Testament - is a sense of belonging to God. Thus the saints, the 'hagioi', are those who belong to God.

- ¶ Paul's letter to the Christians in Galatia can offer insight into two crucial questions:
 - Who belongs to God?
 - What are the implications of belonging?

B. WHO BELONGS TO GOD?

¶ There is a contemporary controversy concerning the place of 'works of the Law', to which Paul refers in Galatians 2:16 (RSV).

¶ One possibility is that when Paul refers to 'works of the Law' he is referring to boundary markers, rules that determine group membership. Thus, for the Jews, boundary markers like circumcision and food laws determine who is inside and outside their group.

¶ In Galatians 2 and 3 Paul is arguing that in Christ boundary markers are swept away.

¶ Holiness, in the sense of belonging to God, is determined not by observation of boundary markers but by faith in Jesus Christ.

C. CONTROVERSIES ABOUT BELONGING IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

¶ Holiness that is determined by faith in Christ was a crucial issue for Paul. His willingness to oppose Peter publicly (2:11-21) is evidence of this.

¶ Acts 10 and 11 make it clear that Peter welcomed Gentile converts into the church. Indeed when he first arrived in Antioch he shared table fellowship with Gentiles (Galatians 2:12).

¶ On the arrival of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, Peter withdrew from table fellowship, not out of theological conviction but as a result of pressure from the visitors. Paul opposed Peter because he believed that his actions had compromised the truth of the gospel in that he had placed a priority on outward observance over faith.

D. ANCIENT CONTROVERSIES, FRESH CHALLENGES

The issues that Paul deals with in Galatians raise a number of challenges for us:

- ¶ What boundary markers or rules do we lay down to determine group membership of the church or the out-group?
- ¶ Do we make idols of our boundary markers, compromising the truth of the gospel?
- ¶ Do we believe or acquiesce with the thinking that holiness is primarily about outward observance, 'works of the Law', rather than faith in God?

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E. THE IMPLICATIONS OF BELONGING TO GOD

☞ Throughout the epistle Paul uses language of slavery or bondage to apply to those who live in accordance with the Law. This is illustrated in Galatians 3:23 and 5:1.

☞ Paul maintains that understanding 'belonging' to be dependent on works of the Law leads to sterility. On the other hand those who live by faith in Christ, and who are justified by that faith, are free (2:16).

☞ This freedom can be expressed in a number of ways. There is a freedom to infiltrate society. Paul's reference to yeast working its way through the whole batch of dough (5:9) picks up Jesus' images of Christians as leaven and salt.

☞ Belonging to a particular group and observing their laws is not what is vital; belonging to God is central. Therefore maintaining the link between holiness and belonging, rather than observation of boundary markers, means that Christians do not need to withdraw from society in order to maintain holiness.

☞ There is also freedom to serve one another in love (5:6). Personal holiness is vital, however Paul is unequivocal about the necessity of that holiness being worked out in love (5:13).

☞ Holiness therefore has the potential and the mandate to be personal, social and political.

F. CONCLUSION

☞ If holiness has to do with belonging to God, then Christians do not need to be sectarian or separatist in order to be secure in their identity as the people of God.

☞ Christians need not feel threatened by the boundary markers of others, for Paul has made it clear in his epistle to the Galatians that these are non-essential.

PRAYER INTRODUCTION

The Politics of Holiness

"Be Holy Because I, The Lord Your God, Am Holy" (Leviticus 19:2)

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

(1 Peter 2:9)

The apostle Peter tells us that as Christians we are 'chosen' as God's 'holy' people to declare the wonderful things God in Christ has done for us.

This 'holy calling' is not an invitation to religious isolation or separation out of fear of 'worldly' contamination. Neither is it a justification for some kind of privatised faith that diminishes the social

and ethical implications of the gospel.

We are called out of the world, as a holy people, that we might be sent into the world as God's people. To be holy is to be set apart for service. Christ calls us and sends us to be radically engaged, as he was, with the brokenness of the world in which we live.

In the context of Northern Ireland, this costly discipleship will inevitably involve us in the protracted alienation and hurt facing our divided community.

In the light of this invitation we pray for the healing of our community.

PRAYERS

Prayer for our witness in a divided community

We ask for God's gracious help to consider ways in which we might: make peace, bring healing, do justice and create hope.

✞ PRAY FOR OUR COMMUNITY:

For those in leadership positions in the church, local areas and in political parties. For those who continue to hurt from the violence of the past and the intolerance of the present. And consider how we, the Christian community, might become the answer to our own prayers.

✞ REFLECT BIBLICALLY:

Consider the difficulties facing us in the country and ask how Jesus would respond to these. Reflect on how issues of land and nationality divide us and how we understand God's will on these matters.

✞ IDENTIFY WITH OTHERS:

Throughout Northern Ireland many other people will be praying and reflecting on these important issues. Join with them in your prayers and look for practical ways to continue to work with those who are working for peace and healing.

Lord God,

As part of the body of Christ in this land
you have called us out of the world as a holy people
that we might be sent into the world as salt and light.
Forgive us that our witness has often lacked credibility
as we have failed to match our words
with our attitudes and actions.

We pray that your Spirit will renew your Church
in its witness to the reconciling love of Christ
in this divided community.

Help us:

To make peace,
as we follow in the footsteps of Prince of Peace.

To bring healing,
as we share the saving power of the Healer of Nations.

To do justice,
as we live under the authority of the Judge of the Earth.

And to create hope,
as we bear witness to the Christ in us
who is greater than he who is in the world.

Amen

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CREATING HOPE

God, you have called us to be a sign of hope
in the face of apathy and despair.
We thank you that you have not abandoned our world
to the chaos and violence of human greed.
But your Holy Spirit continues to brood
over your good creation,
calling us out of darkness
and promising us new life and hope in Jesus Christ.
Help us to discern the small and vital signs
of your persistent presence transforming our broken world.
God, our hope is in you
and you have promised that we will not be disappointed.
Amen

MAKING PEACE

God, as a people set apart for you,
we confess that we have neglected
to follow Jesus in the path of peace.
That our words and acts have at times
perpetuated fear and suspicion
and fuelled our sectarian conflict.
Help us to be peacemakers in our divided community.
To guard our words when we speak.
To overcome hostility with openness and love.
To cultivate skills to resolve conflict.
And to value the gift of peace when we find it in others.
God, let the peace of your Son rule in our hearts.
Amen

BRINGING HEALING

God, as a people set apart,
you have called us to be witnesses
to the good news of your
reconciling love in Jesus Christ.
A love that is both for the healing of our hearts
And the healing of the nations.
Help us to build relationships of love and
trust in our community.
And to overcome fear and hostility
with forgiveness and compassion.
Amen

DOING JUSTICE

God, you have set us apart
as citizens of your Kingdom
in which righteousness and justice reign.
Yet we confess that at times we only see
the injustices against ourselves
and are solely concerned with our rights.
But you require of us the courage
to embrace the hurt and loss of others
and the grace to listen to their story.
Help us to create a space for them,
to act justly and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with you.
Amen

SONG

LORD MAKE US INSTRUMENTS OF PEACE

Chorus:

Lord make us instruments of your peace
Where there is hatred let your love increase
Lord make us instruments of your peace
Walls of pride and prejudice shall cease
When we are your instruments of peace.

Verse 1:

Where there is hatred
We will sow His love
Where there is injury, we will never judge
Where there is striving,
We will speak His peace
To the people crying for release
We will be your instruments of peace.

Verse 2:

Where there is blindness
We will pray for sight
Where there is darkness,
We will shine His light
Where there is sadness,
We will bear their grief
To the million crying for release
We will be your instruments of peace.

(Kirk & Debbie Dearman)

God, Land and Nation

SERMON NOTES

GOD

What follows is an attempt to give an overview of nine common themes found throughout the Old and New Testaments and of how those themes relate to a God who shows no bias towards any one group of people, but is rather the God of all.

It is written to form some points around which a sermon may be constructed. At the end several questions are raised on issues which should be addressed in any sermon which attempts to lay down serious application of those key biblical principles outlined.

INTRODUCTION

Does one tradition, culture or group have a monopoly on God? Are there certain people who experience his compassion and care in ways singular to them? Does anyone have a unique claim to absolute truth?

God is concerned as creator for all his creation. He acts in love towards all men and is therefore concerned with the welfare of all men everywhere. In the Old Testament we see God's providential care for all the nations. God is not a God with a bias, but a God of impartiality in whose sight all men stand equally in need of his salvation. In the Old Testament, God had a special relationship with Israel through whom his glory was to be expressed and shared with all nations. Israel was called to be a light to those nations, whose relationship was qualitatively different from that enjoyed by Israel. God was creator of all the nations but both creator and redeemer of Israel.

In the New Testament, God is also concerned with the lives of all men everywhere, and as creator of all, acts towards all in love. He is however in a different relationship with those who respond to his love in Jesus than with those who do not respond. To the latter he remains in relationship as creator to creature, while to the former he has become father redeemer as well as creator. We must not confuse the act of redemption through which he enters into a special relationship with those who respond to his offer of salvation in Christ with his providential care for all of creation. God is creator of all and so acts in providence and love to all, but, as father, he shares his redemption only with those who respond to his initiative.

This care is evidenced in the divine acts recorded throughout Scripture and definitively in the sending of his Son. There are a number of issues which point to this impartiality of God:

A) REVELATION

Christianity stands alongside Judaism and Islam as being a revealed religion. What we know and understand of God has come from the revelation of God through Scripture and definitively through Christ, the "word made flesh" (John 1:14). It is and remains his word to his world in his time for his purpose and glory. The initiative remains with God. We for our part must avoid speculation or cultural truism as grounds for building a dogma. God is not tied into any culture or tradition to the exclusion of another. We fail to exercise our duties as heirs of salvation if we attempt to construct a doctrine of revelation which is determined by quirk of birthright, culture or tradition.

B) SIN

At root, sin is alienation between man and God, caused by man's disobedience to the law of God. It is not the preserve of one tribal group or culture. This alienation is evidenced in all cultures and traditions in practical ways by man's turning from God, his abuse of privilege, unfaithfulness, oppression of others and idolatry. In some cases it is brought about by the wilful act of man or wilful omission by man, but it may also come through acts of intolerance and injustice. Sin must be understood as first and foremost sin against God, and this action against God, either through omission or commission, becomes sin against his creation, our fellow men. These actions therefore alienate man from God and as a result also alienate him from his fellow man. Sin must also be understood to be universal, and therefore no one is less worthy than any one else in God's sight because of their position in life, cultural background, tradition, denomination or geographical place of birth.

C) SALVATION

God alone brings salvation and all human endeavours, however philanthropic, effect only short term deliverance. In the Old Testament, God looked upon all humanity in love, with this being reflected in his laws. Many Old Testament texts speak on 'justice' themes - *Is. 55:1; Deut. 10:16-19; Ps. 146:7-9*; especially Amos. In the New Testament, salvation is the key with which all men have the potential to enter the Kingdom of God in this life. It is for all humanity, not for the chosen few. Salvation ushers in a 'Shalom' which at root speaks of completeness, wholeness and harmony. It is a peace created by God (Job 25:2) and pledged by God to all men. False prophets saw peace in purely political terms and for that reason are said to be false in comparison to those of Yahweh (*Jer. 28*).

D) GOD'S RELATION TO ISRAEL

Israel stood unique in the ancient Near East as a people whose God acted decisively in history on their behalf and because of this, Israel at times misinterpreted this activity as the deeds of a tribal deity. The amazing thing is that, despite choosing Israel, God does not limit covenantal blessings to Israel; Amos chapters 1 and 2 show God's concern with the way other nations do their business! God's love is supra-national (*Micah 6:6-8*). God's love, as evidenced in the community life of his people, wishes to capture people for himself. It applies to individuals - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob - as well as communities. God is the God of experience and not idle speculation. He intervenes in the affairs of all mankind and delivers. He redeemed Israel from Egypt and by this act Israel became his servant (*Deut. 15:15*). He gave Israel his land, Canaan, which was not to be sold in perpetuity (*Lev. 25:23*) but like Israel was to be redeemed (*Lev. 25:24*). What set Israel apart was not the form of her belief, but rather the content and expression of that belief. She was elected by God, but election spelt responsibility and not privilege. This responsibility had both a national and an individual application. Israel was God's chosen people, and yet the Bible starts not with Abraham but with Adam - with the nations and not with Israel. Even in God's choice of Israel, the reason given was so "all peoples

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on earth will be blessed through you". This seems to suggest that Israel's actions will serve as a witness to others, almost without effort on Israel's part. The idea is repeated in *Gen. 18:18*. Israel never really loses sight of God's universal role, despite the particularity of election (*Ps. 22:27; 117:1*).

In the continuing patriarchal narratives in Genesis, we witness God working in and through Israel... preserving her in the midst of danger; setting her apart as holy to himself. Yet in the middle of this history of Israel, God shows his universal concern when he deals with those other than Israel - Abimelech (*Gen. 20*) Philistia (*Gen. 21*) and the Hittites (*Gen. 23*) to mention a few. Despite the ratification of the covenant coming through Isaac (by Sarah) God does not forget Ishmael (by Hagar a non - Jew) (*Gen. 21:13*). God himself was the example of the love and compassion which Israel was called to exhibit to the nations. God reveals his nature in and through his actions. He is the God of experience and not futile speculation. He elects people not on merit but in grace. In him, both creation and redemption have their source. In creation, God shows his concern is for Israel and for the world. Clauses were included in the Sinaitic covenant to deal with aliens and slaves (*Ex. 21:2-6*). In effect every human relationship was to reflect God's character and therefore never to be understood only in terms of expediency.

E) JESUS VIEW

Unlike all non Christian faiths wherein man reaches up and ascends to God, in Christian faith God descends to man. God took up humanity; Jesus did not take up divinity. Jesus was sent for all men. His gospel is a revolutionary gospel espousing Kingdom values which reverse world values. The first will be last and last, first. Jew and Gentile stand in judgement before God and as redeemed sinners worship God in unity. God has chosen all humanity to have a relationship with him, by faith. The faithful called out from all cultural backgrounds and traditions are entrusted with this gospel and must be good stewards. In the cross we see the extent of God's commitment to all mankind in Christ. God, in Christ, bore our sin, our guilt, upon the tree. He accepted the punishment for sin, he accepted the judgement upon sin, he paid the wages of sin and died for all men.

F) CHURCH'S CALLING

We affirm that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Our call by God in grace needs to be taken as a responsibility, not a privilege, so worship is not our only activity.

1. **God calls individuals to himself.** This is a truth evidenced in the call of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, echoed in Moses and Joshua and through the Judges and Kings. God's call to individuals passes all boundaries made by man.
2. **God calls all individuals** 'out of the world' and 'into' Christ together; and we need to represent this high calling and election before men. We must also evidence the fruits of God's spirit and reflect his love in action in our Christian communities.
3. **God calls us as individuals** out from the world, to himself but into 'Koinonia', fellowship, in the body of Christ. Our unity already exists through the bonding of God's spirit, based upon the rock of Christ and a true understanding of God, man, sin, salvation and hope (*Eph. 4*).
4. **If we have grasped this depth of unity** and brotherhood, then our outreach and approach will be one of partnership in the gospel beyond our traditions. Anything else is a travesty.
5. **The Church must be** both comprehensive (all inclusive of God's elect of every nation)

and cohesive (maintaining a strong unity). It must also show equality in terms of value, and accept within it a diversity of roles, functions and gifts which complement its task of witness.

G) TRANSFORMATION

Kingdom values must invade society. Solidarity is an expression of Christian compassion to those in most need. The goal of transformation must be the Kingdom of God. Justice and mercy belong together in Scripture (*Is. 11:1-5; Ps. 113:5-9*). Our acts of mercy highlight areas of injustice and by association we may be led into a confrontation with an unjust system. Transformation must involve the ministry of reconciliation, but the church must not get so wrapped up in a social agenda that it lays aside the proclamation of the gospel. Just because Jesus is Lord of all does not mean that all belong to Jesus. Our common humanity must not cause us to draw back from our duty to present the truth in love. Our quest for unity must not eradicate the uniqueness of Christ and the precision of our message. Man needs to be first reconciled to God before any lasting, truthful and meaningful reconciliation can be achieved, man to man.

H) LOVE

In summary the Old Testament holds the following understanding of the love of God.

1. **God is love.** Perfect love is evidenced between Father, Son and Spirit and this love is the basis for God's activity in redemption. Perfect love pursues man, not because of some intrinsic worth within man, but rather because God desires that all men enjoy his love.
2. **God loves because he is God** and he acts in love towards his creation, choosing Israel, in grace, as his covenant people through whom others will also see and hear of that love in redemption.
3. **As his chosen people,** Israel must demonstrate this love in actions as well as words (*Deut. 6:5*). If action is motivated from self-seeking desires, it falls short of God's will. God's supernatural love is the basis for man's 'unnatural' expression of that love in the world.
4. **The love of God moves towards Israel,** and through Israel to the world. God demonstrates his love to the world through his activities in the salvation history of his people. God's love is not restricted to Israel, who become some type of exclusive, isolated society. It is rather a love which forms the basis for and gives meaning to the covenant community, which in turn serves as a light to the nations.
5. **God's love cannot remain cerebral or emotional.** It moves towards the world, despite the Fall. It loves the unlovely, for God's own sake.

SUMMARY

In summary the New Testament writers see that the following elements are at the centre of a true understanding of love:

1. **God's love is definitively demonstrated** in the Incarnation, the Word becoming flesh, where this love becomes tangible. Love involves taking a risk, as God did, when he risked

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rejection. Jesus gave all in love for the world, voluntarily.

2. **This love is not manipulative**, but rather seeks the fulfilment of others as its goal. It is selfless and sacrificial in its content.

3. **This love is also supernatural**, and is the basis for our Christian communion, as well as the empowerment for our living. It is only by and through the love of God that we can experience and show this love to others.

4. **We are commanded to abide in love** and love one another as a sign to those outside the Kingdom of the nature of God. Love is a Kingdom ethic.

5. **This love is primarily focused** within the worshipping community, but moves from this base to the world 'outside'. Love has, therefore, a political connotation, in that it is concerned with the upholding of justice and integrity.

6. **This love must also encompass the enemy** and even the persecutor: Such a command is of the new era, and involves supernatural grace given by God. It cannot be enacted by any man unless he is empowered by the Spirit of God. This love is not therefore sentimental utopianism, but is demonstrably costly and practical. Love should be at the centre of all human relationships between Christians, in the light of the new order brought in by Jesus. We therefore forgive each other; and move towards each other in reconciliation, because of what God has done for us in love. Love becomes the mark of the Christian community.

I) KINGDOM PRINCIPLES

The Kingdom of Heaven/God is a motif which is seen throughout Scripture, although more clearly described in the New Testament books. In the Old Testament it was primarily centred upon God's sovereignty over the whole world, leaving no room for dualism (*Job 1:12; 2:6*). God revealed his holiness, law and love to his chosen people, who were to share these concepts with the surrounding nations. For the Jewish mind, the 'Golden Era' lay ahead with the coming of the Messiah who would restore Israel's fortunes once more. In the New Testament we see the king of the world, the Lord Jesus, being rejected by the world who did not understand his view of the Kingdom which he evidenced by his words and deeds. The Kingdom of God is not to be relegated to some future dispensation, but continues to break in to the world now through the call of God. It is evidenced in the lives of believers and the witness of the church, which is in the Kingdom but does not constitute the totality of the Kingdom. Concern for the establishment of the Kingdom therefore should address modern issues and should not be equated with one view of the church or any political ideology, culture or tradition.

Although inaugurated now in the Incarnation, the Kingdom awaits its final consummation. The Kingdom is not to be confused with any geographic area, 'tribal grouping' or denominationalism, but is primarily about the rule of God in the lives of people and in the world. It is therefore contextualised to the situations faced by local churches throughout the world and is concerned with real issues confronting people in those areas. Entry to the Kingdom is inseparable from the new birth, and does not mean entry into the church, which itself is part of the Kingdom. Conversion to God in Christ includes an acceptance of the kingly rule of Christ and leads to obedience to God's will in humble service together with all believers.

Christians, as citizens of the Kingdom who live in the world, are agents for change through the empowerment of the Spirit of God, but this change can never lead to Utopia or perfection on earth.

We are people living as members of the community of the risen Lord, who is our hope and who will return again to restore heaven and earth. We work towards this end in the fulfilment of our obligation and calling. The church will reflect the 'already and not yet' tension of the Kingdom, as it attempts to be an agent for transformation in the present, yet having hope in the coming Lord. This eschatological hope will fuel the desire to share the gospel message, so that others may enter the Kingdom and experience its blessings now.

CONCLUSION

The church is in the world, insulated but not isolated, and must shine as light in the darkness. God is creator and redeemer; Lord of the cosmos and the covenant, of the world and the church, of justice and justification. We must never confuse the two spheres of activity. As Christians we operate under the covenant, through the church. As justified sinners, we are redeemed by Christ to take a message of transformation to a world, created by God, but riddled with injustice and violence, crying out for deliverance that can only come through Christ, but mediated in practical terms by the ministry of his body on earth. Election is a biblical concept - Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Nehemiah and Ezekiel evidence this. Separation, however, is being set apart by God for his work in the world. It is a privilege but also a responsibility. It creates a community that is distinctive and is an instrument for God's use. This community is called out of the world for the salvation of the world. Election is not a call to isolation or to an abdication of responsibility to be stewards for God. It is rather a call to unity of action.

QUESTIONS

1. If we have "all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" how should we be attempting to live out this equality before God?
2. We see that the Bible teaches God has no partiality, that he is a tribal God only in the small minds of those who wish to hold on to him for themselves. How do we continue to see God as some sort of tribal deity?
3. How do we walk the tightrope of speaking the truth in love to those with whom we disagree?
4. What are the key Kingdom principles which we should strive to see practised today?

SERMON NOTES

LAND

INTRODUCTION

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” (Matthew 5:5)

The history of Israel is a history of revelation and redemption in which the relationship between God, land and national identity are inseparable. The land is intricately bound to the pattern of redemption in Israel and never a neutral backdrop to the story. It is the territory where Israel enjoys rootedness and finds identity and security. It is the context in which the new social experiment, guided by the Sinai law, can unfold. It is the place of belonging where the 'cultural mandate' of Genesis - to cultivate the richness of creation - is developed. It is the country where Yahweh will dwell with his people and they in turn will be a blessing to the nations. In the biblical narrative, from the patriarchs to the prophets, the story of redemption and the story of the land are synonymous.

Israel's possession of territory is the fulfilment of a promise given to Abraham (*Gen. 13:14-18*) and made poignant by the cries of an enslaved people in the brickyards of Egypt. It is a response to the need for a home. With the promise of land, Yahweh, the God of history, not only saves and delivers his people, calls them to pilgrimage and tests them in the desert, but also provides a 'place' to sustain and bless them. Israel's identity is forever shaped by journey and wilderness and by the experience of land and law. The latter provides a life-world that is coherent, ordered and meaningful against the chaos that is always threatening (*Jer. 5:22f.*). Land is essential to the profound human need for a safe geographical space in the world and the deep emotional and cultural need for psychological security. As Walter Brueggemann suggests, “Our humanness is always about historical placement in the earth”.

In N. Ireland the search for psychological security and collective wellbeing (meaning and belonging) is intensified by the social alienation and cultural threat ever present in a sectarian society. We should consider how land related issues like border tensions, marching routes, the painting of kerb stones etc. reflect a deep fear of the loss of identity and the profound need for a 'sense of place' in the world.

In the Old Testament land and territory are a prism through which we can understand biblical faith. The Bible is deeply concerned with the central human problem of alienation from God and each other and the resulting homelessness we experience in the world. Issues of faith and meaning cannot be separated from the need for belonging. In a world of ethnic enmity the threat to 'belonging' is a matter of faith and ethics and not just political accommodation, important as this may be. Issues of intimidation, boycotts, traditional routes, urban demographics and economic deprivation not only threaten our security and identity but also invoke questions of trust, forgiveness, obedience, faithfulness etc. By using land as a prism, we can understand the character of biblical faith and discern the radical nature of Christian witness in a broken world.

Land, in the Bible, can be understood as both literal earth, where people can live productive and secure lives, and a metaphor of hope and fulfilment. The latter still holds symbolic force for the church. As we speak of 'possessing', 'blessing' or 'healing' the land we spiritualise its meaning by pointing to issues of social righteousness or religious revival. We also utilise images of land as statements of identity - 'our land', 'the six counties', or 'For God and Ulster'. This symbolic use reminds us that land is always more than territory but, “physical dirt freighted with social meanings derived from historical experiences” (Brueggemann). In N. Ireland the concept of land is invariably symbolically laden. We, like Israel, cannot separate it from history, political ideology, culture, religion and our hunger for meaning.

The issue of land, for the people of N. Ireland, is acutely about “historical placement in the earth”.

How do we live in the land? How do we share it with our neighbour? How should we respond when the land is under threat? The Bible is keenly interested in these questions and answers them by asking us, in the style of Jesus, another question: what does it mean to live in the land in obedience to God? The covenant that ancient Israel had with God may be of help to us. For the covenant that Yahweh makes with Israel cannot be separated from land issues - land as promise, gift, homecoming, temptation and stewardship, and the possibility of land being lost through covenant breaking.

NOTES

The following notes look at land related issues for Israel with a particular focus on the land as gift, covenant and the temptation to forget. There is also material on the relationship between social compassion, care for the alien and stranger, and Yahweh's blessing. You will find a brief sermon outline based on Deuteronomy 26 at the end of the notes.

FULFILMENT AND LOSS

The history of ancient Israel has two distinctive land experiences - Land as promise and fulfilment and Land as possession and loss.

1: Israel receives the promise of land (*Gen. 12:1*) and the fulfilment of that promise (*Josh. 21:43-45*).

This story begins with an unexpected gift (*grace*). Promise comes to a nomadic people (*Gen. 12:1-3*) and comes again to slaves in Egypt (*Ex. 3:7-8, 16-17*). Israel keeps faith with the promise and receives its fulfilment (*Josh. 11:23*). The landless become inheritors. This history begins in faith and ends in fulfilment.

2: The second story is an account of settling and possessing the land (*Judg. 2:6*) and the losing of the land (*2 Kings 24:14-15*)

This story ends with an unexpected loss - heirs become dispossessed (*judgement*). Israel forgets her origins and loses her trust. This history begins in security and ends in exile, (*2 Chr. 36:17ff*).

Israel's land experience presents us with a model of grace and judgement. The land is personified as an agent of God's blessing or curse (*Lev. 18:24-28; 20:22-24*). The land of promise is conditional to faithful obedience (*Deut. 28*) if Israel's days in the land are to be long and prosperous (*Deut. 5:16, 32-33*). The presence of an unfaithful people in the land makes the land sick (*Lev. 18:24-28; 20:22*).

From Israel's history we can learn much about the relationship between people and the land. The experience of promise and fulfilment, possession and loss, grace and judgement, curse and blessing raise important questions about land and wellbeing that are pertinent for us in N. Ireland.

LAND AS GIFT

"The... land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (*Lev. 25:23*). The strength of this verse leaves us in no doubt - the land belongs to God. God is the sovereign owner of all creation (*Deut. 10:14ff*).

Israel is to remember that her land is established by a word of promise, not a political or military campaign (*Deut. 6:10, 18; 7:13; 8:1; 10:11; 11:9*). It is 'given' by God and therefore received as gift (*Deut. 3:18; 5:31; 12:1; 17:14; 19:1, 14*).

Land, as gift, is reinforced in the consciousness of Israel by the concept of land as 'inheritance' (*Deut. 4:21, 38; 12:9; 15:4; 19:10; 26:1*). The implication here is that of a family relationship between Israel and God. Land, as gift, is theologically understood as an expression of God's grace.

GOD, LAND AND NATION

Israel is reminded that promised land is not earned by their righteousness or conquered by numerical strength (*Deut. 6:10-12; 7:7-8; 8:17-18; 9:4-7*). The children of Abraham are to know that the totality of their life is dependant on the word God speaks (*Deut. 8:3; 32:45-47*). Israel has land only because God has promised and God has kept his word (*Josh. 21:45; 23:14*). Therefore existence in the land is one of gratitude and dependency (*Deut. 26:1-10; Ps. 136*) and faithful trusting obedience (*Deut. 28-30*).

Land-gift radically defines the nature of the relationship Israel has with the land and the land giver. Land is not just an object to be occupied but a place in which Israel will have a relationship. It is not the possession of land that makes Israel a distinctive people but Yahweh's presence with them (*Ex. 33:15ff*).

LAND AND COVENANT

Faithfulness to the covenant is a requirement for the guarantee of economic prosperity, physical security and societal peace (*Lev. 26:3-20; Deut. 6:6-10, 20-25*). The gifted land is covenanted land. It is 'safe space' for Israel to be nourished and secure; to enjoy God's blessing and abundant provision (*Deut. 6:10-11; 8:7-10; 11:10-12*). But this celebration of blessing is within and conditional to a strong moral framework of responsibility towards God and others. Therefore the land is not only a 'safe space' of blessing but also a 'sacred covenant place' for stewardship, responsibility, justice and honest land management.

Land management involved: ecological responsibilities (*Deut. 20:19ff*); economic justice (*Deut. 15:3-11*); new governance (*Deut. 16:18-20; 1 Sam 8*); ethical commitment (*Lev. 25:42ff, 46, 53, 55*) and obedience to the covenant (*Deut. 1-11*).

The gift of land makes new demands of Israel. The challenge of self-defining (cultural identity) takes place within the demands of covenant ethically expressed in acts of compassion and justice. Perhaps this is why the book of Deuteronomy provides a thoughtful pause. Israel waits at the boundary before entering the land. The God who provided for them in the wilderness now makes new demands and asks for new fidelity.

Our own situation is a paradigm of standing at the boundary (literally and symbolically) of social, political and demographic change. We too have questions of identity, rights and responsibilities to consider. Our circumstances make new demands of us and call us to new commitments.

QUESTIONS

1. How might land as gift and the place of covenant relationship influence our understanding of land and territorial rights in N. Ireland?
2. How should our dependency on the life-creating word of God affect our behaviour in the public space of a divided society?
3. What does it mean for us, as Christians in Ulster, to live in the land as people living by grace and gift?

LAND AND SOCIAL COMPASSION

“Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt” (*Ex. 23:9; 22:21; Deut. 15:15*).

God's blessing on the land is coupled to how the land and the landless were treated. This emphasis on compassionate responsibility was so integral to Israel's theological beliefs that it is not surprising to find humanitarian and ecological values embedded in the legal code. A study in the following texts cannot

fail to reveal the humanitarian nature of biblical ethics:

Ex. 22:21-27; 23:4-9; Lev. 19:9ff, 13-18, 23-25, 33-36; Deut. 14:28ff; 15:12-14; 20:5-7, 19ff; 21:10-14; 22:1-4; 23:24ff; 24:5ff, 10-15, 17-22; 25:4; 27:17ff.

Speaking of Israel's institutions and laws Christopher JH Wright says, "We come upon a basic moral principle which invades biblical ethics - namely that the service of God and mutual human care are inseparably bound together. God will not be worshipped acceptably by those who neglect justice and compassion... We go a long way towards fulfilling our duty to God when we display responsible, sensitive and sacrificial care for our fellow men."

The landless are defined in the above texts as widows and orphans, the poor, the enslaved, resident aliens, immigrants etc. Respectful and compassionate care is to be given to all who are socially and economically disenfranchised, including the stranger (Deut. 27:19) and even Israel's historic enemy:

"You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother: you shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a sojourner in his land." (Deut. 23:7; see Gen. 21:13-21).

COMPASSION AND THE CHARACTER OF GOD

Compassionate care for the Edomite, the Egyptian, the poor and the landless is motivated by the character of God. The motivation is theological, i.e. this is what God is like. Israel is to treat others in the land in the same way as God treated them. The motivation is theological but the result is humanitarian. Care in Israel is not an emotional response but an ethical command.

"You shall not pervert the justice due to a sojourner. . but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this" (Deut. 24:17-18).

Israel is to recall her own alienation and slavery in Egypt and live in the light of the mercy that heard their cries. The people are to 'remember' that God chose and delivered them that they might be a blessing to the nations (Cf. Gen. 18:18; Gal. 3:8). Their election is not a calling to privilege but vocational responsibility.

The covenant relationship with Yahweh involved the love of God (Deut. 10:12f) and the love of neighbour (Lev. 19:17-18). In the New Testament Jesus takes this principle and radicalises it by affirming our neighbour as the one who is culturally and ethnically different (Lk. 10:25-37).

LAND AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

"Justice and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land which the Lord your God gives you" (Deut. 16:20).

The book of Exodus is emphatic that law is to be applied with integrity, honesty and rigorous fairness. There is to be no favouritism or bribery. These verses from Ex.23:1-3 underline this commitment to justice and are still relevant to the situation in N. Ireland:

"Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness. Do not

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follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd, and do not show favouritism to a poor man in his lawsuit."

This section on commitment to the integrity of the law (Ex. 20-23) is peppered with reminders that, "You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 22:21; see also 23:9)

The above is an expansion of the ninth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour." (Ex. 20:21)

QUESTIONS

1. How do our divided communities 'bear false witness' against each other? Do we make assumptions about what other people believe and think and feel? Do we represent 'the other side' honestly and with integrity when we speak of them?
2. The issue of justice is so integral to the conditions for blessing in the land that Deuteronomy pronounces a 'curse' on those "who remove a neighbour's landmark." (27:16) and, "Cursed be he who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow" (27:19).
3. The image of sojourner (stranger/other) is poignant in our divided society. The experience of the fatherless and widow is all too common in the violent deaths of our conflict.
4. How should we understand the relationship between land and injustice in N. Ireland? How does practising justice influence our hopes for 'blessing' and spiritual revival in our country?

LAND AS TEMPTATION

The gift of land brings new temptations; for possessing is seductive.

Israel's possession of the land holds the danger of memory loss and the arrogance of self-sufficiency that forgets that land is gift and life is grace (Deut. 8:11-20).

The temptation is to forget where one has come from (slavery) and the life and love that made the redemptive journey possible (Deut. 6:12). Forgetfulness is an attempt to bring history to an end, to construct life around a closed system or an ideology. But Israel is a history-making people who are invited to live by the word of promise. Their God is Lord of history who looks for a contingent, open, listening, trusting, obedient people.

Where there is forgetfulness of Yahweh, the land giver, the 'gods' of the land are worshipped (Deut. 6:14; 8:19; 11:16). Idolatry is about social control and the dehumanising of life through ruthless power, aggressive nationalism, self-indulgence, social injustice and ethical neglect. The worship of the land 'gods' results in the tyranny of nationalistic ideology. The God of Israel has chosen his people to be a blessing to the nations, not to be another oppressive tribal kingdom with dominating ambitions.

Israel is to live in the land as a people who live under grace and gift (Deut. 8:1ff.). This is only possible when Israel 'remembers' - to forget is to perish (Deut. 8:17-20).

"The central question...is this: Can Israel live in the land without being seduced by the gods, without

the temptation of coveting having its way? Can Israel live in the land with all the precarious trust of landlessness? All the experience of Israel would answer negatively."

(Walter Brueggemann)

QUESTIONS

There are many implications in this for our Christian witness in N. Ireland. How have we forgotten God's grace and kindness? What tribal gods and cultural self interest have captured our allegiance? How do we seek to control our situation and in so doing miss the word of promise, hope and newness that God is speaking?

SERMON OUTLINE

Deuteronomy 26 provides a helpful framework for our theme. There may be other motifs in this chapter not outlined below but pertinent to the situation in N. Ireland. The sermon notes should be helpful in adding some detailed content to these main points.

- ☞ Israel is to live by grace (26:1). The land is a gift which the Lord 'gives'. It is given through promise and not righteousness (3) and it is to be received in thanksgiving (2-4).
- ☞ The 'memory' of merciful deliverance is to shape Israel's consciousness (5-8) and be recalled with thanksgiving (10-11).
- ☞ Worship (10-11) is to be authenticated and informed by the justice and compassion due to the sojourner (stranger/other), the fatherless and the widow (12-13).
- ☞ God's blessing. Only then can Israel ask, with integrity, for God's blessing on the land (15) and fulfil her divine destiny (19).

SERMON NOTES

NATION

ESTABLISHING THE NATIONS

The harmony of creation is broken by the Fall (*Genesis 1-3*), leading to division, conflict and separation among humanity (*Genesis 4-10*). Humans rebel against God and are subject to judgment; the people are scattered and their tongues are divided - nations are becoming more established (*Genesis 11:1-9*).

Nations have their origin in the Fall. While nations can be a source of stability, good and creativity, they are also marked by evil and conflict. Nations - even the best of them - cannot find their way to God and cannot show others the way to God.

Yet even in judgment there is mercy. The Bible's vision is of humanity united in worship and praise (*Revelation 7:9-10*).

How do we get from the nations scattered and dispersed to the nations united in praise and worship? The nations cannot bear the weight of God's revelation; the nation as human creation has to be rejected, left behind, for it cannot deliver the promise of God.

A new nation is required

- ☞ built on human obedience, not human rebellion
- ☞ built on divine blessing, not divine judgment
- ☞ focused upwards to God - to glorify and bless him; focused outwards to others - to be the vehicle of God's blessing and salvation not on itself and its own glory

ESTABLISHING GOD'S NATION

Abraham is called by God - he is to be the father of this new nation. But this nation is so unique that Abraham must leave his country, people and family in order to fulfil God's plan for him. This new nation, Israel, bears the revelation of God and the promise of God (*Genesis 12:1-3*).

Yet the new nation, created and sustained by the promise of God, living out a faith history, must live among and survive among the nations of the world, living out a power history, sustained by might and force of arms. Sometimes "the battle is the Lord's" (*1 Samuel 17:47*); at other times Israel relies on its own powers (*1 Samuel 4*).

The history of the people of Israel told in the Old Testament is the record of the people's attempts to live out their faith history in the middle of power history. Their record is flawed - badly flawed - yet in the midst of it all is the promise, power and grace of God, who will see established his vision of the nations round the throne in worship.

TRANSCENDING THE NATION

The promise is fulfilled: the offspring who will bless the peoples comes in the fullness of time - Jesus Christ is born, an Israelite, a Jew, a Hebrew. He reaches out to his own people, the people of promise, and he reaches out to and calls men and women from other nations and peoples. In him the territorial and religious limits of the people are transcended and a new nation is born (*Romans 4:16-17; Galatians 3:6-9, 26-4:7*).

The people of God know no borders, customs, international agreements, treaties or boundaries.

- ¶ While these people speak many languages, their languages praise the one Lord.
- ¶ While loyalty to people, family, home is strong it is also conditional, passing, transient.
- ¶ When the nation calls them to do evil they refuse to disobey their heavenly Lord.
- ¶ When the nation tolerates or promotes wickedness, they challenge it in the name of the Kingdom of God.
- ¶ When rulers or citizens make an idol of the nation, its people, its culture, its values, its religion, they refuse to bow down and worship the false god.

IS THIS SO?

So much for the theory - is this the reality?

Or is it not the case that even though in Christ the nation as divine blessing (Israel) and the nation as divine punishment (the nations) are separated, even though faith history no longer occupies the same ground and territory as power history, we are still bound to false models of blessing and nation?

Our nation, like every other, is a consequence of human sinfulness - of our rebellion against God and his scattering of the peoples. We have known his mercy and have so much to praise God for - there is much sin in our nation, but there is much of the blessing of God and many signs of the divine image in our people. But this nation is not given to us by promise; this nation is not kept by the power of God; this nation is not an essential part of the fulfilment of God's vision.

To say that, to preach that, to believe that, is at best to have misunderstood the implications of the New Covenant and at worst is idolatrous.

God will bring his blessing on our people through the obedience of a faithful people - north or south of our border:

As citizens of the heavenly and citizens of our nation how should we respond?

- ¶ We should praise God for his many blessings on us as a people.
- ¶ We should repent of our sinfulness in failing to live out our calling as the people of God placed in this part of his world.
- ¶ We should challenge evil and wickedness wherever we see it.
- ¶ We should denounce the idolatry of the nation wherever it appears.
- ¶ We should live, work and preach for the day when this nation will cease to exist - when the nations will come before the throne in the new Jerusalem, when the nations will praise and honour the Lord, when the Lamb will be all the glory.

GOD, LAND AND NATION

LAND

- A.**
1. What springs to mind when you think of the word 'land'?
Earth / dirt / farm / country?
Romantic or practical thoughts?
 2. When looking through the history of Israel, and looking for the things which are important, land is a key concept.
 3. Think back to the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 13:14-18. [Read] What was promised? Land!
 4. When the children were crying out in slavery in Egypt, what were they thinking of? Their own land!
 5. As the Children of Israel wandered through the wilderness, what were they going towards? Their own 'Promised' land!
- B.**
- Land was not just important to the Children of Israel.
1. There is something about land which is important to all of us.
What is it?
 2. *"Land is essential to the profound human need for a safe geographical space in the world and the deep emotional and cultural need for psychological security."* Walter Brueggemann
 3. Something about land places us in the earth, gives us a sense of identity. It helps describe who we are, where we have come from, and what we are.
- C.**
1. Think again about the Bible's attitude to land. It is seen in two ways:
 - i) As the literal earth: the place where people can live productive and secure lives.
 - ii) Also used to give us a picture of something that is otherwise difficult to describe adequately in words. Living in 'the land' is a way of the Scripture talking about hope and fulfilment.
 2. To get a better sense of this the church sometimes uses 'land' as a symbolic picture to communicate something, i.e. 'possessing', 'blessing', 'healing'.

3. Of course the word 'land' does not just have great symbolic meaning in the Scriptures. It is symbolic in our lives as well:
 - statement of our identity.
 - 'our land which we love'.
 - true for all peoples.
 - something in the gut.

D. 1. Key questions which we want to think about today:

- What does it mean to live in the land?
- How do we live in the land?
 - How do we share the land with our neighbour?
 - How do we respond when the land is under threat?

2. How do you feel as we raise these questions?

[Relate a personal incident where you had to think about an issue dear to your heart – communicate how it made you feel to do so.]

3. The safest way to approach this is to allow our thoughts to be guided by the Scriptures.

E. There are a number of things which we can observe from the Scriptures concerning the subject of the Children of Israel and land.

1. The land was received as a result of a promise from God.

- given to a nomadic people *Gen 12:1-3*
- given to a people in slavery *Ex 3:7-8*

2. Received (*Joshua 11:23*).

3. People took possession of it (*Judges 2:6*). Take possession: as in the way one takes possession of a house (move in/use it etc.).

F. There are certain other things which Scripture tells us about land and the people:

1. They were given the land on the condition of faithful obedience: *Deut. 28*.

2. The land belonged to God: *Lev. 25:23*.

3. The fundamental reason why the people were able to possess the land was not due to any political or military campaign... but because God had promised it to them.

4. If the land was given to the people as a result of God's promise this meant that it was a gift. The land was most important, not in and of itself, but because it was an expression of God's grace / kindness.

GOD, LAND AND NATION

G. What then was to be the attitude of God's people to this land?

1. Attitude of gratitude and dependency: Deut. 26: 1-10.
2. Obedience.
3. Trust: most fundamental reliance was on God's goodness.
4. The land was not to be 'grasped' as theirs. "The ...land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" Lev. 25: 23.

CONCLUSION:

1. What can be learnt here?
2. Do you see how the strands come together?
 - land is a place to enjoy an expression of God's goodness.
 - land is a place to enjoy God's blessing / safety / nourishment.
 - land is not ours: it is God's.
3. Land brings an obligation to obedience.
 - obedience means . . . what?
 - being obedient to God's laws.
4. Obedience in:
 - our attitude to God and what he has given.
 - our attitude to our neighbour.
 - our neighbour is the person who shares the land with us.
5. And so we return to our original questions:
 - What does it mean to live in the land?
 - How do we live in 'the land'?
 - What is our attitude to our neighbour in 'the land'?
 - How are we to react when 'the land' is under threat?

LAND AND LAW

Suggested Reading: Exodus 23:1-9 & Deuteronomy 8:11-20

- A.**
1. The reading today related some of the Law which was given to the Children of Israel.
 2. If you look back through some of the previous chapters of Exodus you will see that the Law was given to the people at Mount Sinai:
 - it was given at a time when they were in the wilderness
 - they had just escaped from slavery in Egypt
 - a very insecure time. They only had what they were able to carry; they had no land of their own
 - it was given to a people who had a hope that they were going towards a promised land, but did not yet have the reality
 3. It was in such circumstances that they received the Law from God
 4. Think of what the Law was. What was its function? Why did God give it?
 - the source of the Law was God
 - it was a tangible expression of how the Children of Israel were to live in accordance with God's will and desires
- B.**
1. In verse 9 we read:
"Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt".
How would you define or describe what an alien is?
 - an alien is a person who owes allegiance to a country other than that in which he lives
 - an alien is a person who comes from another place and is not at home
 - an alien is a person who is in an environment which is not his own
 2. What do you think of when you think of an alien, someone who is an outcast, who doesn't belong or fit in?
 - we are often scared of such people; we may not like them; we may want to stay away from them
 3. What does it mean to oppress?
 - to subjugate by force
 - to afflict or torment
- C.**
1. Read Exodus 23:9: Remember the situation of the Children of Israel when this particular law was being given.
 2. The Children of Israel themselves were aliens:

GOD, LAND AND NATION

- they were in the wilderness, a place where they did not belong
- they had just come out of slavery in Egypt, from a country where they very definitely did not belong
- they themselves had just been oppressed in Egypt

3. Those feelings of being aliens and oppressed were very fresh in the mind.

4. The point of that particular law was this:

- you know how it feels, you have been there
- make sure that you have thought for the people you will meet who will be in a similar position
- be careful how you treat them

D. 1. If one is to consider the Law, and its being given to the Children of Israel, there is something which underlies it.

2. God is bringing these people to a new land. He will bless them. In return he wants their obedience.

- the appropriate response to the Law is to obey it.

3. Looking at this particular command, and leafing through others, shows that there is a very strong element of compassion involved. A lot of the Law is concerned with how one treats other people, particularly those who are in a different position to ourselves.

4. For example: Read Ex. 22:21-27; Lev. 19:9-10, 13-18

"We come upon a basic moral principle which invades biblical ethics - namely that the service of God and mutual human care are inseparably bound together. God will not be worshipped acceptably by those who neglect justice and compassion... We go a long way towards fulfilling our duty to God when we display responsible, sensitive and sacrificial care for our fellow men" (Christopher Wright).

In other words a lot of obedience is tied up in how we treat other human beings - including the widow, orphan, poor, enslaved, alien, immigrant!

E. 1. The Law continues with something even more radical...and...unexpected.

2. Edomites and Egyptians had been oppressors and enemies of the Children of Israel.

[Briefly explain]

3. Deut. 23:7 "You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother; you shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a sojourner in his land".

- quite phenomenal!
- just exactly what is being said here?
- the impact of the Edomites and Egyptians would be fresh in the mind of the people: yet the Law is explicit!

- F.**
1. So what have we established so far?
 - source of the Law is God
 - given at a time when the people are in a vulnerable position; only appropriate response to the Law is to obey it
 - much of the Law deals with the treatment of other people. This is particularly true of the way the alien and the vulnerable are to be treated, and includes enemies.
 - put another way: much of what it means to be obedient to the Law involves compassion for other human beings.
 2. Much of obedience is measured in terms of compassion.
 3. We live in a very religious country, a place where much store is placed by many on being obedient to God's word: to his precepts.
 4. If the level of our obedience is to be measured in a biblical way, how do we do?
 5. Think of all the types of people to whom God says the people are to show compassion. Now convert that into terms which we can understand in Northern Ireland.
 6. The widow, the poor, the alien, the outsider, the enemy - what do they look like?
 7. Remember the key measure of obedience: our compassion and treatment of these! How are we doing in terms of obedience?

CONCLUSION

1. There was going to be a temptation for the Children of Israel - the temptation to forget!
2. Forget what?
 - where they had come from
 - what they had come from
3. Forget that they themselves had been:
 - aliens and slaves
 - oppressed
4. Forget that land which they had was not the result of their efforts or ownership:
 - forget that it was a 'gift' – a gift from God
5. If they forgot where they came from:
 - it would change their attitude to others in the land
 - their attitude to... their neighbour, the widow, the powerless, the alien ... their enemies
6. Once they forgot then they would cease to be obedient
7. The temptation will always be to forget!

SERMON OUTLINE

The Rainbow People of God

Ephesians 2:11-22

Martin Luther is reported to have said that if we preach the gospel in all points except the point that addresses the needs of the day, then we have not preached the gospel. In a similar vein John Stott says that often the world does not so much reject the gospel as our inadequate presentation or truncated version.

The issue of today is how, in a world of five billion people with all their differences and variety, are we to live together? **A world of resurgent nationalism and ethnic conflict. A world of 80 wars since 1945.**

In Northern Ireland, with our history of conflict and our historical differences, how are we to live together? It is a sharp choice - separation or sharing? compromise or conflict?

Ephesians speaks directly into this context with a powerful biblical vision of God's way for his people.

1. RECALL THE CONFLICT

The vital issue of the ancient world was alienation. Not just political and economic but cultural and racial. The word 'nations' (ta ethne cf ethnic) was used in a derogatory sense of the outsiders. For Jews it was used of Gentiles as outside the covenant. For Greeks it was used for those who were outside their cities. For both it was a deep-rooted conflict in which no love was lost and in which relationships were marked by hostility.

The validity of Christianity was brought into question. Just try and imagine the impact of Jesus saying to a good Jew 'GO to all nations'. No wonder the disciples took their time. And only time would tell whether it would work.

While the gospel highlights our essential alienation from God, the implication is that the reconciliation that Christ effects in this relationship is profoundly demonstrated by the transformed relationships that we have with our fellow human beings, and especially those who share faith in Jesus.

Ephesians is known as the epistle of the church. In chapter 2 verses 1-10, the emphasis is on the individual. In verses 11-22, the focus of our study, the communal dimension is stressed.

The ability to address the fundamental alienation of human society remains at the heart of the gospel and the effectiveness of God's people in our world today.

2. REMEMBER YOUR CONDITION (v 11 & 12)

Paul calls on Jew and Gentile to remember their condition without the transforming effects of the gospel.

By birth Gentiles were:

- ☞ Without Christ - Separate from Christ
- ☞ Without Citizenship - Excluded from citizenship in Israel
- ☞ Without Promise - Foreigners to the covenants of the promise
- ☞ Without Hope - Hope is based on promise, which they didn't have
- ☞ Without God - No true knowledge of God

In the Body, Jews:

v 11 reminds the Jews, before they could boast, that what was indeed theirs by birth was valueless. They were the uncircumcised (nickname) whose only circumcision was of the body and not of the heart.

It does no harm to remind ourselves that most of us in Northern Ireland are Gentile by birth. Even where there has been a rich spiritual heritage it is of no value to us if it is cultural and formal and not of the heart.

The willingness of Christians to relate to all people, without favour due to their cultural or religious heritage, is the test of a genuinely biblical witness.

3. REFLECT ON CHRIST (v 13 - 18)

Paul brings us back to Jesus, but now in Christ Jesus - a person, not a philosophy; a relationship, not a programme; a historical event with historic impact:

- ☞ Shedding his blood - Fellowship - brought near
- ☞ Abolishing in his flesh - Equality - destroyed the barrier
- ☞ Creating in himself - Unity - made the two one
- ☞ Reconciling in his death - Peace - he himself is our peace
- ☞ Preaching in person - Access - through him to the Father, by one Spirit

The presentation of Christ in the fullness of his reconciling work on the cross is the authentic biblical remedy to the world's alienation.

4. REJOICE IN THE CONSEQUENCES (v 19 - 22)

Paul provides three pictures which show that we are no longer foreigners and aliens but:

- ☞ a KINGDOM - in which God's people are equal
- ☞ a FAMILY - to which God's children belong
- ☞ a TEMPLE - in whom God dwells (see Rev 21: 1-5)

The demonstration by the people of God of these models of God's new humanity in their common life and witness is the credible evidence that the good news of Jesus works.

THE RAINBOW PEOPLE OF GOD

Dr John Stott - *God's New Society* - IVP Bible Speaks Today - pg 111 - 112

"I am not saying that a church must be perfect before it can preach the gospel, but I am saying that it cannot preach the gospel while acquiescing in its imperfections.

We need to get the failure of the church on our conscience, to feel the offence to Christ and the world which these failures are, to weep over the credibility gap between the church's talk and the church's walk, to repent of our readiness to excuse and even condone our failures, and to determine to do something about it. I wonder if anything is more urgent today, for the honour of Christ and for the spread of the gospel, than that the church should be, and should be seen to be, what by God's purpose and Christ's achievement it already is - a single new humanity, a model of human community, a family of reconciled brothers and sisters who love their father and each other, the evident dwelling place of God by his Spirit. Only then will the world believe in Christ as Peacemaker. Only then will God receive the glory due to his name."

Christianity, Culture and Identity

CALL TO WORSHIP

You are worthy, O Lord our God:

to receive glory and honour and power:

For you created all things:

and by your will they existed and were created.

You are worthy, O Christ, for you were slain:

and by your blood you ransomed us for God.

From every tribe and tongue and people and nation:

you made us a kingdom of priests to serve our God.

To him who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb:

be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever. Amen.

from Revelation 4

PRAYER

God of creation, we rejoice in the gifts of creativity and culture that you have given us.

We acknowledge you to be the source of all that is good and beautiful in the richness of our cultures in Northern Ireland.

Let the nations be glad and sing aloud for joy.

God of righteousness, we confess that in our rebellion against you we have corrupted what is good and allowed a sectarian spirit to distort our sense of identity and belonging. Allow your word to search us with its truth.

You judge the nations justly and guide the people of the earth.

God of the nations, who has no favourites, we pray that at this time of peacemaking you will enable us by your Spirit to affirm the value of all in our community and make this a place where all feel at home.

Let the peoples praise you, O God, Let all the peoples praise you.

Aliens and Strangers?

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CHRISTIAN CITIZENSHIP

SERMON RESOURCES:

Three sets of notes and a suggested approach on relevant themes to be adapted as appropriate:

Resident Aliens (*Hebrews 11*)

Aliens and Strangers (*1 Peter 2*)

Christ and Caesar (*Various*)

SERVICE RESOURCES:

Ideas Sheet - suggested hymns, readings and ideas to help focus the theme.

Service Sheet - printed sheet for congregational distribution and use in discussion groups.

Draft copy enclosed.

SERMON RESOURCE ONE

Resident Aliens

Hebrews 11:8-10, 13-16; 12:1-3, 12-14; 13:12-16

INTRODUCTION

God's saving purpose for humanity involves the calling out of a people - a community among whom God would dwell as their God and who would live as his people (*Revelation 21:3*). The story of the Old Covenant (*Old Testament*) is the account of God's calling of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants as a people set aside for his glory and purpose in the world (*Genesis 12:1-3*).

With the coming of Christ a fuller understanding of God's activity emerges. Having spoken to the ancestors of Israel, God now speaks in the person of his Son, the heir and Christ who is above all things. This Christ has dealt decisively with the one thing that blocked our relationship with God, namely sin, and has made it possible for men and women from every nation to enter into the covenant people of God (*Hebrews 1:1-4; Revelation 5:9-10; 7:9-10*).

The letter to the Hebrews was written to a group of first century Christians who had experienced this New Covenant with the living God. Times were hard. There had been persecution. They were in danger of giving up. The message of Jesus had taken root, yet the reality of living as a distinct people

ALIENS AND STRANGERS!

in a rebellious world was taking its toll.

The writer sets out to instruct, encourage and warn. The concern is for "those who have faith and so are saved" (*Hebrews 10:39*). After teaching and reflection from the religious ritual of the people of Israel, there is teaching from the example of their ancestors in the faith - a nomadic desert people of no fixed abode. Who they are and the nature of their faith is the theme of Hebrews 11.

In this chapter we can see three aspects of their faith, and from this we are presented with three consequences that pose significant questions to us as we live as God's people in a fallen world.

A) THE FAITH OF RESIDENT ALIENS

1. SAVING FAITH

The chapter begins not with a definition of faith but with some observations as to what significant features of faith are relevant to the situation of the readers.

a) Assurance 11:1

The sovereign purpose of God

Future - that what is currently a hope will be realised.

Present - conviction that there is something more than what is on offer in this world.

b) Approval 11:2

The 'warm commendation of God' - this is what matters most to the people of faith.

c) Acceptance 11:3

The powerful word of God - this is the creative power at work in the world.

2. ANCIENT FAITH

The faith of the ancestors of Israel is marked by two characteristics. They were:

a) Risk Takers 11:8

The example of Abraham as one who obeys without regard to personal security or material prosperity.

b) Resident Aliens 11:9-10

While promised a land Abraham lived in it as a foreigner; for he saw beyond the earthly inheritance to the city of God. Both Isaac and Jacob followed this pattern.

3. CONFESSING FAITH

At verse 13 the writer interrupts the flow to make a comment. Faith is something that is consciously confessed. The ancestors of Israel did this in two key areas:

a) Identity 11:13-14

Their nationality is derived not from allegiances on this earth but from their covenant of faith with the living God. Here they acknowledge they are 'resident aliens.'

b) Inheritance 11:15-16

Their homeland is not to be found in this life or on this earth. They desire a better country, a land that is of eternity.

B) QUESTIONS FOR RESIDENT ALIENS**1. IS GOD ASHAMED?**

In 11:16 the result of such faith by the ancestors of Israel is seen in the remarkable statement that God is not ashamed to be called their God. This indeed became God's calling card to Israel - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

They knew their true allegiance. They saw that nation and land in this world are only temporary. Their identity and their inheritance were in their God alone. This was biblical faith. Is it our faith? In the clash between Christian faith and national commitment, has God lost out? Has our national allegiance become an idol? Are we in danger of seeking to gain this world at the risk of losing our soul? Is God ashamed to be called our God?

2. IS THE COST TOO HIGH?

The readers of Hebrews were tempted to give up. The pressures of being distinct, of not belonging to this world, were too much. 12:1-3 points to the great example of their ancestors and ultimately of Christ "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith".

Christ, for our sake, went outside the camp to suffer. We are called to follow as those who on this earth have no lasting home (13:12-15). Are we prepared to pay the cost of loyalty to Christ over loyalty to earthly nationalisms, whatever they may be?

3. ARE HEALING AND PEACE OBTAINABLE?

In a land where wrong choices have been made concerning our willingness to live out the values of resident aliens, is there a way forward to a new community? 12:12-17 indicates that new roads need to be built, straight paths on which what is broken and lame will find healing.

Paths built by:

PEACE - pursued with everyone

HOLINESS - set-apart-ness of the resident aliens of God, free to act as healing agents

GRACE - the source of life and action

Paths destroyed by:

BITTERNESS - which brings trouble and defilement

BIRTHRIGHT - selling what is eternal for the temporary

SERMON RESOURCE TWO

Aliens and Strangers?

1 Peter 2:11-12

1. PURPOSE

To highlight:

- a) the Christian's unique sense of identity which makes us 'Aliens and Strangers'
- b) how as 'Aliens and Strangers' we work out our citizenship in Northern Ireland

2. DISCOVERING OUR TRUE IDENTITY IN CHRIST

Christians are:

- ☞ Chosen and set apart by the grace of God and the death of Christ 1.2
- ☞ Built together as:
 - a spiritual house 2: 5
 - a holy and royal priesthood 2: 5,9
 - a chosen people 2: 9
 - a holy nation 2: 9
 - the people of God 2: 10
- ☞ We share this identity with all those who are in Christ even though we may be of different cultures, languages and generations (Galatians 3:26-28).
- ☞ Remember Peter's experience: "I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35).
- ☞ This identity therefore transcends and makes subordinate any ethnic, political or cultural identity.

3. CHOSEN FOR A REASON!

- ☞ Reborn and kept by God's power for his praise, honour and glory 1:3-9
- ☞ Built together for a reason: "that you may declare the praises of him" 2:9
- ☞ Chosen and set apart as obedient followers of Jesus 1:1-2,14

Our citizenship and politics must correspond with God's purpose in setting us apart - to glorify God and demonstrate obedience to Jesus.

A commitment to following Christ's example and living lives of obedience to him provide a sound basis for a lifestyle which repudiates bigotry and prejudice.

4. LIVING AS 'PEOPLE SET ASIDE'

Aliens and strangers are not defined by their isolation from the world but rather by the manner in which they live in the world:

- ☞ Living such good lives 2:11-12
- ☞ Submitting to authority 2:13-17
- ☞ Following the example of Christ 2:21-25
- ☞ Witnessing to Christ in all situations 3:13-16

An acknowledgement of Christ's Lordship will be demonstrated in an unwillingness to allow fear to be a basis for political action.

In *1 Peter 3:14* Peter quotes from *Isaiah 8*. Isaiah lived in a time of political uncertainty when there was a great threat to the continued existence of Judah as a nation.

God's instruction to the prophet had remarkable relevance to Christians in the uncertain world of the first century. It is equally relevant for Christians contemplating the uncertain future of Northern Ireland.

SERMON RESOURCE THREE

Christ and Caesar

With the coming of Christ the people of God were no longer identified with one particular national group. Instead, the new community of God's people had to live, work and worship within a non-Christian society.

As a result, the New Testament tells us a great deal about how Christians are to live as aliens and strangers among those who have political authority over them and those who are their neighbours.

1. BASIC PRINCIPLES

Christians are citizens of another Kingdom, serving another Lord (*Philippians 3:20; 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11-12*). Therefore, all other identities and attachments can only be temporary and relative.

The order of this world is temporary. When Christ returns all authority will be his, all kingdoms will be his. Even now Jesus is "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (*Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 2:8; Revelation 1:5; 17:14*). Our nation, our country will pass away. Only God's Kingdom remains and it demands our absolute and unconditional allegiance.

While we live as citizens on this earth we are commanded by God to live as good citizens (*Mark 12:13-17; Romans 13:1-7*). Consequently, the duties and obligations set down in Scripture must be taken with the utmost seriousness.

ALIENS AND STRANGERS!

2. CHRISTIANS AND THE GOVERNMENT

The basis for Christian citizenship is set out clearly in Scripture:

- ☞ All authority is ordained by God (*Romans 13:1-2*). To fail to be subject is to be in rebellion against God's ordinances.
- ☞ The authorities praise the good and punish the evildoer (*Romans 13:3-4; cf Acts 16:22; 2 Corinthians 11:23; Romans 8:28*).
- ☞ The social stability maintained by government assists in the work of the gospel (*1 Timothy 2:1-4*).
- ☞ Christian citizenship is part of the "spiritual act of worship" we offer to God (*Romans 12:2*).

The requirements of Christian citizenship are also laid down:

- ☞ Respect (*Romans 13:7; 1 Peter 2:17*). Sometimes respect for authorities may involve challenging the authorities to behave in a way more appropriate to their office.
- ☞ Obedience - of the government, its representatives and the law, inasmuch as this does not involve disobeying God (*Titus 3:1*).
- ☞ Disobedience - when the state challenges the Lordship of Christ (*Acts 4:19; 5:29*).
- ☞ Payment of taxes (*Mark 12:13-17; Romans 13:6-7*).
- ☞ Prayer (*1 Timothy 2:1-2*).
- ☞ Witness - Christians should witness to the authorities in preaching, life and service (*Mark 13:9*).

3. CHRISTIANS AND THEIR FELLOW CITIZENS

The Bible also instructs us in how we are to treat our fellow citizens:

- ☞ They are made in the image of God and valued by God (*Genesis 1:26-30*). Consequently, there is no justification for treating any as second class citizens in word, thought or action (*James 3:9-10*).
- ☞ They are our neighbours whom we are to love and serve unconditionally (*Luke 10:25-37*).
- ☞ They should be shown respect - even when they are hostile (*Romans 13:7; 1 Peter 2:17*).
- ☞ They should see in Christian people the virtues of goodness, peaceableness, consideration and humility (*Titus 3:1-2*).

4. CHRISTIAN CITIZENSHIP IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Implications

- ¶ We have a responsibility to be good citizens toward all our neighbours, not just those with whom we share a political, cultural or religious tradition.
- ¶ Christian citizenship means supporting the authorities in their action against those who do evil.
- ¶ Christian citizenship means that we will not turn a blind eye on those occasions when the authorities exceed the limits God has set for them.
- ¶ No one cultural tradition or human nation is 'Christian'.
- ¶ Christians involved in political life need to distinguish clearly between the language of the Kingdom of God and the language of political discourse.
- ¶ Both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are passing entities - only the Kingdom of God remains.

Challenge

- ¶ How do we measure up against God's standard?
- ¶ Is our heavenly citizenship the absolute priority which determines all other priorities in our lives?
- ¶ Is our behaviour towards the authorities marked by the values of Scripture?
- ¶ Is our behaviour towards our fellow citizens marked by the values of Scripture?
- ¶ Are we shaped by our traditions?
- ¶ Do we reflect the prejudices, suspicions and fears that are all too common in our community?
- ¶ Has our Christian citizenship been accommodated to our earthly allegiances?

Aliens and Strangers?

IDEAS SHEET

HYMNS AND SONGS:

The numbers in brackets refer to Mission Praise (MP) or Glory to God (GG).

All Hail the Lamb (MP 12)
All hail the power of Jesus' name (MP 13)
All my hope on God is founded (MP 16)
At the name of Jesus (MP 41)
At your feet we fall (MP 45)
Christ triumphant, ever reigning (GG 8, MP 77)
Church of God elect and glorious (GG 75)
Come and see the shining hope (MP 86)
Come let us praise the Lord (MP 92)
Crown him with many crowns (MP 109)
For the healing of the nations (GG 111)
Give to our God immortal praise (MP 171)
Glorious things of thee are spoken (MP 173)
God of Glory we exalt your name (MP 191)
God of grace and God of glory (MP 192)
Jesus is King (MP 366)
Jesus shall reign where'er the sun (MP 379)
Lord for the years (GG 116, MP 428)
Lord the light of your love is shining (GG 118, MP 445)
Make way, make way for Christ the king (GG 91, MP 457)
Name of all majesty (GG 21, MP 481)
O Lord our God how majestic is your name (MP 507)
O Lord all the world belongs to you (GG 121)
O the valleys shall ring (MP 523)
O worship the king all glorious above (MP 528)
Restore O Lord the honour of your name (GG 124, MP 507)
The kingdom of God is justice and joy (GG 126, MP 651)
The Lord is King (MP 656)
This earth belongs to God (GG 27)
We've a story to tell to the nations (MP 744)
You are the king of Glory (MP 796)

READINGS:

Old Testament: Psalm: 2, 21, 28, 115; Isaiah 12;

New Testament: Mark 12:13-17; Acts 4:13-31; 5:27-31; Romans 13:1-7; Revelation 4:13

IDEAS:

Congregational Survey: Why not help people reflect by use of a simple survey of two or three questions in your church bulletin or magazine? Questions could include:

1. What do you consider to be your national identity?
Options: Irish, British, Northern Irish, Ulsterman/woman

2. What do you consider to be the root cause of the Northern Ireland conflict?
Options: religion, politics, mainly religion with political implications, mainly politics with religious implications.

Congregational Forum: Why not set up an after church meeting or mid week at which the congregation could get to meet local civic and political figures? Invite councillors, local MP, local police superintendent, magistrate, headmasters, business leaders, civil servants.

In particular you could set up an event where members of your congregation who are involved in civic life or active in political parties could share their concerns and motivation. Many Christians are involved at different levels and need our prayers and pastoral support, that they may be salt and light for God's Kingdom.

BIBLE STUDY

1. Read *Mark 12:13-17; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; Titus 3:1-2; 1 Peter 2:13-17*

What basic principles of Christian citizenship are enshrined here?

2. Read *Acts 4:19-20; Acts 5:29; Acts 16:35-39*

In what circumstances do the dictates of the Kingdom of God override our loyalty to the state?

3. Read *Matthew 5:13-16*

What pattern for citizenship is implicit here?

4. Read *1 Peter 2*

How does Peter express the relationship between the death of Christ, our heavenly citizenship and our responsibilities as citizens of earth?

What are the implications for Christians in Northern Ireland?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. "I vow to thee my country all earthly things above
Entire and whole and perfect the service of my love
The love that asks no questions, the love that stands the test
That lays on the altar the dearest and the best
The love that never falters, the love that pays the price,
The love that makes undaunted the final sacrifice."

Cecil Spring-Rice 1859-1918

Can a Christian justify such sentiments or is this taking good citizenship too far?

ALIENS AND STRANGERS!

2. Under what circumstances can patriotism become idolatry?
3. How do we reconcile submission to authority with the biblical call to challenge injustice?
4. How far should Christians get involved in politics and the democratic process?
5. If Christian citizenship entails a responsibility to all our neighbours, what does this say about our attitude to those from whom we differ politically?
6. If our real citizenship is in heaven, what room does this leave for us to display specific political loyalties in Northern Ireland?



For the past ten years ECONI has been producing study resources to help congregations explore the nature of Christian witness in a divided society.

Thinking Biblically - Building Peace is our latest publication and is designed to provide a comprehensive range of biblical material for those committed to the integration of peace, justice and reconciliation in the life of their church and community.

Based on material commissioned for our popular ECONI Sunday events, these seven studies offer a theological overview, practical study outlines, reflective questions and a fresh perspective on the issues and attitudes that have maintained the sectarian climate in our community. Clergy, Bible study leaders, Sunday school teachers and anyone involved in a teaching role will find this an envisioning and practical resource.



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