

# Sermon Starting points

Deuteronomy 16.11-20

Luke 24.14-21

The churches of Indonesia have chosen as their text a passage from Deuteronomy that stresses the centrality of justice. This is in the wider context of the people of Israel learning to live no longer as slaves in Egypt but as a free people in the Promised Land. But coming to possession of the land is not the end of the story but the beginning and in that sense, it is also a “land of promise” where God’s people must live the ways that God calls them to do. The whole of the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) is the story of the relationship between God, Israel and how they live in the land and how they live in exile when they are no longer in the place of promise.

So, the people of God begin their mission in the land with a call to justice. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus commences his ministry with that same call to justice. The passage from Isaiah from which he reads, it could be said, is the leitmotif of the ministry of Jesus, and therefore justice is also the leitmotif of the mission of the Church.

But how does this relate to our prayers for unity? What our readings point to is that the Bible does not present faith in the abstract, something only with a spiritual dimension, but one lived in the visceral reality of the world as we find it. And because the world contains injustice the church too can become a place that is embroiled in the very injustice that exists today. The divisions of our society – whether it be the example from Indonesia or those in our own contexts – easily intrude into our shared Christian life together. And so often Christian divisions are explained away, excused or placed in the “too difficult” box.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrote: 'We have no right to explain the multiplicity of the churches at all. We have to deal with it as we deal with sin, our own and others', to recognise it as a fact, to understand it as an impossible thing which has intruded itself, as a guilt which we must take upon ourselves....We must not allow ourselves to acquiesce to its reality'

More recently Desmond Tutu has insisted that a divided church was too weak to struggle against the sin of apartheid. So, when we pray for unity, we also pray for a world made whole. When we pray for unity we are acknowledging that unless we end our divisions, the Church is a poor advocate for justice and when we pray for unity we also acknowledge that the injustice in our society also intrudes to our shared Christian life together.