

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2022

*We Saw His Star
in the East...*



Gwelsom ei seren ef ar ei chyfodiad / Chonaiceamar a réalta ag éirí...
Chunnaic sinne a rionnag anns an àird an ear

18-25 January

www.ctbi.org.uk/weekofprayer





The story of the Magi visiting the Holy Family in Bethlehem is one very familiar to us. Indeed, we have recently celebrated Christmas; the Feast of Incarnation and Epiphany. The Magi have sometimes been seen as a symbol of the world's diversity – different religions and cultures – that comes to pay homage to the Christ-child. The story might therefore represent the unity of all created that God desires. The Magi travel from far-off countries, and represent diverse cultures, yet they are driven by the same hunger to see and know the new-born king and are gathered into the little house in Bethlehem in the simple act of giving homage. In this we can find a metaphor for Christian unity: that is, of different Christian peoples drawn together in their common search to recognise Christ, to know him and to worship him and witnessing to wider need for unity and to overcome injustice.

This text has been chosen by the churches of the Middle East, the history of which was, and still is, characterized by conflict and strife, tainted with blood and darkened by injustice and oppression. Since the Palestinian Nakba (the exodus of Palestine's Arab population during the 1948 war) the region has seen a series of bloody wars and revolutions and the rise of Islamic extremism. The

story of the Magi also contains many dark elements, most particularly Herod's despotic orders to massacre all the children around Bethlehem who were two years old or under (Matt 2:16-18). The cruelty of these narratives resonates with the long history and difficult present of the Middle East.

It was in the Middle East that the Word of God took root and bore fruit: thirty and sixty and one hundredfold. And it was from this East that the apostles set out to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The Middle East has given thousands of Christian witnesses and thousands of Christian martyrs. And yet now, the very existence of the small Christian community is threatened as many are driven to seek a more secure and prosperous life elsewhere. Like the light which is the child Jesus, the light of Middle Eastern Christianity is increasingly threatened in these difficult times.

Jerusalem is a powerful symbol for Christians because it is "The City of Peace", where all humanity was saved and redeemed. But today peace is missing from the city. Even prayer in Jerusalem has become subject to political and military measures. Various parties stake their claim to it and disregard others. Jerusalem was the city of kings, indeed the city that Jesus will enter triumphantly,





acclaimed as king (Lk 19:28-44). Naturally the Magi expected to find the new-born king revealed by the star in this royal city. However, the narrative tells us that, rather than being blessed by the birth of the Saviour king, the whole of Jerusalem was in tumult, much as it is today. Today, more than ever, the Middle East needs a heavenly light to accompany the people.

In this context Christians are called to seek the new-born king, the king of gentleness, peace and love. But where is the star that leads the way to him? It is the mission of the Church to be the star that lights the way to Christ who is the light of the world. By word and through action the Christian people are called to light the way so that Christ might be revealed, once again, to the nations. Yet divisions dim the light of Christian witness and obscure the way, preventing others from finding their way to Christ. Conversely, Christians united in their worship of Christ, and opening their treasures in an exchange of gifts, become a sign of the unity that God desires for all of creation.

The Covid-19 global pandemic; the economic crisis that has followed and the failure of political, economic and social structures to protect the weakest and most vulnerable; and the racism that blights our communities have underlined

the global need for a light to shine in the darkness. The star that shone in the East, (the Middle East), two thousand years ago still leads us to the manger, to where Christ was born. It draws us to where the Spirit of God is alive and active.

After encountering the Saviour and worshipping him together, the Magi return to their countries by a different way, having been warned in a dream. The communion we share in our prayer together must inspire us to return to ourselves, our churches and our world by new ways. But what does this mean in practice? Serving the Gospel today requires a commitment to humankind, especially the poorest, the weakest and those marginalized. It requires from the churches transparency and accountability in dealing with the world, and with each other. This means churches need to cooperate to provide relief to the afflicted, to welcome the displaced, to relieve the burdened, and to build a just and honest society. This is a call for churches to work together so that we can all build a good future according to God's heart, a future in which all human beings can experience life, peace, justice, and love.



DAY 1

“We observed his star in the East”

(Mt 2:2)

Raise us up and draw us to your perfect light

Readings

Psalm 139:1-10 Your right hand shall hold me fast

2 Timothy 1:7-10 This grace... has now been revealed
through the appearing of our
Saviour Christ Jesus

Reflection

In this fragile and uncertain world, we look for light. We look for the good within ourselves, but often we are so overwhelmed by our weakness that hope fails us. Our confidence rests in God, who in wisdom, enables us to hope for his mercy. We are surprised when it comes in human form: Christ is the light in our midst! God's gift to us is a 'spirit of power, and love'. We are drawn forward on the way to this perfect light by God's Holy Spirit, not by relying on our own strength and ability.

In the midst of darkness, the star from the East penetrates the depths of the darkness that separates us from one another. The star's light continues to shine and to change the face of history. Throughout the ages, by the lives of Christ's followers, the world has come to know the hope that is

inspired by the Holy Spirit. And the Risen One continues to shine, like a beacon guiding all into this perfect light and overcoming the darkness which separates us from one another.

The desire to overcome the darkness that separates us compels us to pray and work for Christian unity.

Prayer

Creator of light,
illumine our path by the light of
Christ who moves before us and
leads us.

May he be a beacon for our
pilgrimage.

Enlighten us and dwell within us.

Guide us to discover a manger in our
hearts where a great light
still shines.

We thank you for the gift of that
unfading Star, Jesus Christ, our
Lord and Saviour.
Heal our divisions and draw us
closer to the Light that we may
find our unity in him.
Amen.

Hymn Verse

How brightly beams the
Morning Star!
What sudden radiance from afar
Doth glad us with its shining,
Brightness of God that breaks
our night
And fills the darken'd souls
with light
Who long for truth were pining!
Thy Word, Jesu, only feeds us,

Questions

Reflecting on the past year:

Global: What could the role of the Church be in proclaiming the good news of the Gospel in a world where there is so much injustice?

Local: Where have you seen signs of hope in your community, especially during a time of pandemic?

Personal: How have you sought 'the light' in the midst of darkness?

Rightly leads us,
Life bestowing;
Praise, oh praise such love
o'erflowing.

Johann Schlegel, tr. Catherine Winkworth

Go and do

(see www.ctbi.org.uk/goanddo)

Global: Visit the website of Embrace the Middle East and see what actions you can take to be in solidarity with Christians of the Middle East.

Local: Organise a candle lit vigil with the churches in your area as an act of unity for this week. It doesn't have to be in person but each church could encourage members to put a candle in their window at an agreed day and time.

Personal: Take time this week to star gaze. Let your eyes settle on an unfading star and pause in reverence and prayer before the Creator of light. You don't have to go outside you can search for and visit an online planetarium.

DAY 2

“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”
(Mt 2:2)

*Humble leadership breaks down walls
and builds up with love*

Readings

Jeremiah 23:1-6 He shall reign as king and deal wisely

Philippians 2:5-11 Who... did not regard equality with
God as something to be exploited

Reflection – True Leadership

Jeremiah denounces the bad leadership of the kings of Israel who divided and scattered the people, a leadership that destroyed nations and drove their citizens into exile. In contrast, the Lord promises a shepherd-king who will ‘execute justice and righteousness in the land’ and gather the flock as one.

Only in Christ have we seen the example of a leader truly after God’s heart. In him we encounter a loving, humble servant who does not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. He comes to serve, rather than be served, and his followers are called to do the same.

Today, the Middle East is experiencing the loss of its people

to exile as ‘righteousness and justice’ are becoming scarce commodities, not only there but throughout the world. Yet leaders, both in the world and in the Church, have a responsibility to bring together rather than to scatter or divide. The more faithfully Christians emulate the servant leadership of Christ, the more division in both the world and the Church will be overcome. As we work for righteousness, justice and peace for all, we witness humbly to the shepherd-king, and draw others into his presence.

Prayer

Just and righteous God,
we confess before you that we often
covet worldly models of leadership.

Help us to seek our Lord Jesus Christ
not in the palaces of the powerful
but in the humble manger.

May we emulate him in his meekness
and become servants to each other
in obedience to you.

We pray in the name of Christ, who
with you and the Holy Spirit reigns
forever in glory.

Amen.

Verse / Poem

It was the day of the strong men
the day when truth retired, redundant
because lies had more glitz,
and justice disabled, mocked,
in the name of a golden god
cast from melted down lives.

And then came the pestilence

Questions

Global: How have you seen the Church follow Jesus' pattern of leading through service?

Local: What Christian leader (either local or national) do you admire for the ability to inspire unity and a concern for justice? What qualities enable that person to lead effectively?

Personal: When have you been inspired to take the lead in seeking justice or working towards unity?

and the day of the servant
ubiquitous, anonymous,
in nursing home and ICU,
and the temple profligate with treasure
in cylinders of breath.

Go and do

(see www.ctbi.org.uk/goanddo)

Global: Focus on a number of examples of where you consider good leadership to be evident. Try to identify the shared principles of leadership in these examples and consider how they can be encouraged in the work of creating unity.

Local: Invite a local leader to a gathering of the churches in your area to hear more about their work and to find out how you can best support and encourage them.

Personal: Find out about or refresh your memory on the [circle of concern](#) and [circle of influence](#) and consider how you can best exercise your personal leadership this week to help the cause of unity.

DAY 3

“When king Herod heard this he was disturbed,
and all Jerusalem with him”

(Mt 2:3)

The presence of Christ, turning the world upside down

Readings

Psalms 2:1-10

Why do the nations conspire...?

2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

But the Lord is faithful, he will
strengthen you

Reflection

Christ's coming disturbs the ways of the world. He comes in humility, denouncing the evil of injustice and oppression that accompanies the ambition for power, wealth and status. Jesus calls for a change of heart and a transformation of life, which will bring liberation from all that dehumanises. This creates disturbance precisely because he rocks the boat of those who seek only their own interests and neglect the common good. But for those who work for peace and unity, Christ's coming brings the light of hope.

We are invited to commit ourselves to act constructively to make justice a reality, acknowledging where we have strayed from God's ways of justice and

peace. Then the answer to our prayer for Christian unity becomes visible as others recognise in us Christ's presence in the world. We can bring the light of hope to those living in the darkness of political unrest, social poverty, and structural discrimination. The Good News is that God is faithful, always strengthening and protecting us, inspiring us to work for the good of others, especially the victims of oppression, hatred, violence and pain.

Prayer

Lord, you led us out of darkness to
hope in Jesus.

Unite us in our commitment to
establish your reign of love, justice
and peace,

bringing light to those living
in the darkness of despair and
disillusionment.
Shine your light upon us and surround
us with the warmth of your love.
Lift us up to you, so that our lives may
glorify you,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Verse / Poem

In the school Nativity Play
they cast the class bully as Herod.
Inspired.
No acting required.

Jesus, you ask
which role shall I play
in my world, your world, today.

Questions

Global: Where have you seen the values of the Church disturbing society's values for the common good?

Local: Is your church or group of churches too comfortable in a discomfoting world? How could your church or group be disturbed into real action?

Personal: When have you been disturbed into doing what was right?

And you will me to seek first
your holy inspiration
that I might be just
myself.

Go and do

(see www.ctbi.org.uk/goanddo)

Global: Covid-19 turned the world upside down and provided an opportunity to reimagine how things could be. Find out more about and get involved in the campaign to [crack the crises](#) and ensure this opportunity for transformation is not lost.

Local: Consider as churches together what situations of injustice or exclusion exist in your locality. Work with others in your community to challenge and change the systems that need turning upside-down.

Personal: Take time today to sit in stillness and discern what injustice most disturbs your conscience, spend time praying, researching and planning how you can take action about it (if you are not already involved in doing so).