

## **The 2014 Pentecost series**

### ***CRIES FOR A HUMANE LIFE***

#### **PREFACE**

The United Ministry for Service and Witness of the DRC family (UMSW) thankfully provides the 2014 series, "*Cries for a humane life*", in cooperation with various role players.

Prof Nico Koopman, Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch, wrote the text. Colleagues Andrew Esterhuizen, Tiana Bosman, Simon Cezula and Nelis van Rensburg assisted and worked together at different stages of the development of the series. Bible Media did the translation of the material into English and made it ready for publication.

The 2014 series is provided and distributed as usual in the church through the channels of Bible Media, CLF, the respective synods and some synodical ministries.

The leadership of the DRC family currently leads us to focus together on a season of human dignity. We purposefully reflect, pray and seek together to live a truly humane life, because this is God's good will for all of us. The 2014 Pentecost Series especially wants to assist us to focus together on this true humane life and to plead together with the Holy Spirit that this humane life shall indeed become reality amongst us as well as in the whole wide world. The series highlights 11 aspects of our prayers for a humane life:

1. A cry to belong
2. A cry for a different kind of father, mother and parent
3. A cry for the Name that makes worthy
4. A cry for the kingdom life
5. A cry for the will that makes the earth into heaven
6. A cry for daily bread
7. A cry to live as a forgiven person
8. A cry to live as a forgiving person
9. A cry to be delivered from evil
10. A cry for people whose attention is not distracted
11. A cry for an anxiety-free life

Let us this year pray together without ceasing that "the Spirit from above be poured out on us" ... so that the wilderness will become an orchard, where justice prevails and righteousness is done, so that we all in society will enjoy rest and peace and security, free from anxieties (Isaiah 32:15-18).

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(On behalf of the UMSW)

## INTRODUCTION:

### The "Our Father" is a prayer for a humane life

#### *a. A humane life*

The American reformed theologian and ethicist, Paul Lehman, describes the heart of Christianity and its calling as "the humanization of life", as the calling to make life more humane. We are being called to fight against all powers that dehumanise our lives. We must combat the powers of force and cruelty, evil and destruction – yes, even the destruction of the natural environment in which we live, the environment from which people live and for which they live.

The Dutch theologian, AA van Ruler, is of the opinion that we become Christians primarily to become truly human, people as God intended us to be. Then we can enjoy life as God intended it for us.

It is the famous Karl Barth who, more so than any other theologian, emphasised the sovereignty and divinity of God. But later in his professional life, he wrote a book with the meaningful title: *The humanity of God*. God is the God of human beings, the One who holds humans in high esteem, the One who became a human Himself in Jesus Christ. He is the God who humanises life.

It was John Calvin, long before Barth, who already strongly connected God's honour and the life for which God had created human beings. To honour God, is to acknowledge the dignity and integrity of his people. Isaiah 43 says we as human beings are honoured and precious in the Lord's sight.

There is an unbreakable bond between God's honour on the one hand and the well-being of his people on the other hand. This is one of the key elements of a reformed understanding of faith in the triune God. This was also the renewed experience of those members of Calvin's congregation in Genève who primarily consisted of refugees and had known suffering.

It is the Confession of Belhar from 1986 that emphasised this truth in a fresh and clear way again when it professed that God's honour on the one hand and a life of human dignity on the other hand go hand in hand. God, to whom all honour and majesty belongs to eternity, is the same God who lets his people live a humane life, a life of visible unity and closeness, a life of healing reconciliation and compassionate justice.

This close link between God's honour and a dignified human life so strongly emphasised by the Reformed tradition, is fully supported by the Old and New Testament's teaching. In Luke 2, with the birth of Christ, the angels' song stressed the link: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to all the people whom He favours." God's honour and the well-being, wholeness and joy of people are intrinsically linked with one another.

This same logic one finds in the Old Testament: God is only being honoured when his people follow a road of human dignity, freedom and justice. And where real human life blossoms, there nature blossoms too.

#### *b. Pray for this humane life*

We have to pray for this humane life, this life of dignified humanity.

Prayer is one of the most important Christian practices. A practice is a co-ordinated, coherent, community and collective action which people undertake over time.

Firstly they do it simply because of doing it; secondly because of the good that the practice produces. Over the ages, Christians have participated in the practice of prayer.

Already during the Middle Ages, the monk, Prosper of Aquitaine, pointed to the close link between Christians and prayer, faith and the way of life. He formulated the well-known *lex orandi* (rule of prayer), *lex credendi* (rule of faith) and *lex vivendi* (rule of life). Bethel Müller, a local theologian, during the last years of apartheid, added the idea of *lex convivendi* (rule of life with one another) to this formula. Prayer, faith, life and life with one another are inspiring and enriching one another.

What we pray for reflects our faith. Our faith, however, also determines our prayers.

Our prayers on the one hand reflect the way we live. Our prayers determine our ethics, our vision of the kind of society we want; they determine our values, our character, our virtues, our choices and our behaviour. We see what we pray for. We admire what we pray for. We become what we pray for. We live what we pray for.

On the other hand, our vision, our values and our character, our virtues and behaviour are all being determined by the content of our prayers.

On the one hand our prayers determine the way we live with one another, despite our histories of division and enmity, in the midst of our rich but challenging diversity of language, culture, ethnicity, socio-economic positions, gender and sexual orientation.

On the other hand, this life with all of God's diverse people influences our prayer life. The life together with other people enriches our prayers.

Christians pray because we believe the Holy Spirit connects our prayers with God's renewal and the humanisation of individuals, congregations, communities and societies.

### *c. Prayers for a dignified life are cries of distress*

The prayer for a humane, for a dignified human life is a matter of urgency. These prayers for a humane life in reality are distress calls which the Holy Spirit inspired in our hearts.

The first supplicants of the Our Father prayer lived in inhuman circumstances, political oppression and socio-economic exploitation and suffering. The distress calls of this model prayer originate within us the moment we realise that the building blocks for a humane life are absent in so many human lives.

1. Many people are lonely. They have no sense of belonging, *ubuntu*, community, created by the "our" of the "Our Father" prayer.
2. Many people are without basic trust and security. They are fatherless, motherless and parentless. Often the fathers in their lives are not "heavenly" fathers, but rather make their lives hell.
3. Many people do not experience that the perfect Name of God gives them dignity, and that this God is with them and for them.
4. Many people do not experience the kingdom's life of justice, peace and joy.
5. Many people do not experience God's care and his moral will which changes earth into heaven.
6. Many people are excluded from the most basic provisions.
7. Many people do not experience the joy of being forgiven.
8. Many people do not experience the joy of forgiving.
9. Many people do not experience freedom from evil in all its forms.
10. Many people experience that they are not being attended to, because temptations inhibit the alertness, attentiveness and care of their neighbours.
11. Many people do not know the assurance and calm that flow from the knowledge that the kingdom, the power and the glory belong to our heavenly Father, for always and without a doubt – more than we can feel, and wish and pray in our hearts.

People who pray the Our Father prayer, do so with a sense of urgency. Praying the Our Father is crying to God for a humane, for a dignified human life. It is a plea for justice for all, including the whole of nature. It is a plea to the living God for a life of freedom for all. It is an appeal to God's Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost, to make a humane life a reality for all – the most fundamental aspect of Christ's work on earth.

Our prayers are protests to God in a dual sense.

Protest literally means to testify to something, to witness *on behalf of* something (*pro testari*). Our prayers are our protests or our witness of what we see when praying, our protests on behalf of God's holy Name; on behalf of his kingdom of justice, peace and joy for all; on behalf of God's will that brings the heavenly life; on behalf of bread for everyone, forgiveness for all, comprehensive salvation for all. We are witnessing on behalf of what we see. And according to Saint Augustine this seeing involves all our senses: "We do not say 'Hear how it glows', 'Smell how bright it is', 'Taste how it shines', or 'Feel how it glitters', because these are all things which we say that we see".

Our protests are not only on behalf of what we see, but also *against* that which contradicts God's kingdom and a dignified, humane life. We therefore protest against the dehumanisation of life, against injustice and oppression. Karl Barth said when we fold our hands in prayer to say the *Our Father* we start the protest against the chaos of this world. The American theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, wrote: "Prayer is the way we let God loose in the world. Although prayer is a common activity, it is therefore also a dangerous one, for God's presence is not easily controlled. God is a wild presence calling us to a way of life we had not imagined possible."

These cries are voiced in communion with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost.

## 1. A cry to belong – 2 Corinthians 13:1-13

The Our Father prayer starts with the word "Our". This plural form is meaningful, and is being used throughout the prayer. It shows from the start that being a Christian, means that you belong to the Father, and that you belong to his children.

*Human life is to be able to be alone and to be able to be together*

The "our" does not mean there is no space for the individual. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the well-known German theologian, murdered by the Nazis at the end of World War 2, clearly spelled it out. In his *Life together* he says: "Beware of the person who cannot be alone. Beware of the person who cannot be together." With this, Bonhoeffer describes the Christian life as one where we as individuals, on our own, commune with God, but also where together, with other people, we worship God. Our individuality and our communality go together. Our individuality in addition enriches our togetherness.

Emeritus archbishop Desmond Tutu made the same point when referring to the relationship among church denominations. He said: "I am a good inter-church person, because I am a good Anglican." On its part, the interdenominational family enriches him as Anglican.

The "our" in the "Our Father" makes room for the individual's communion with his or her Father. However, it is not a communion that happens in isolation of the Father and his other children. The intimate, personal communion of each individual with the Father is not a communion that excludes other people and is not directed towards self-interest and selfishness. Each individual's communion with the Father has as its objective the Father himself and his other children. He or she who approaches the Holy One, also approaches God's holy people. Whoever calls God "Father", becomes part of a family. The acid test for the inclusive relationship with the Father is whether we are able to worship together with the Father and all his other children.

In a world where many people feel themselves excluded, and indeed are being excluded, the word "our" is a source of consolation. Amongst people who experience anguish and pain, this prayer is an invitation to include – and that in itself is part of the gospel of liberation.

*Being alone and together in the presence of the Spirit*

In 2 Corinthians 13:13 ("May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all"), Paul clearly defines the kind of community to which the word "our" refers. The communion of God's children, is the communion of the Holy Spirit. Here we find the trinitarian benediction, widely being used in churches. We are blessed by the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

The fellowship of the Holy Spirit is a special blessing. It reflects the intimate bond between the triune God and all people.

It also reflects the communion among people.

It further reflects the communion between people and the rest of creation.

Lastly we could say that the fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit reflects something of the relationship we have with ourselves. In this respect I think of the man who went to the doctor. The doctor advised him to spend only one hour a week with himself. He responded: "Doctor, I cannot think of worse company!"

Thus we can say the "our" refers to a communion in the Spirit, a trinitarian communion within God, a communion between God and his people, an inter-church communion, a cosmic communion amongst God, humans and nature as well a communion amongst human beings, as well as an existential communion between me and myself.

### *The communion of the Spirit is a communion of grace*

Paul describes this communion as a space where we can experience the grace of Jesus Christ, as a communion where we can experience the love towards the Father. In this communion we experience acceptance, despite our sin and our guilt. The communion of the Spirit is a space of grace, forgiveness, unconditional acceptance and embrace.

### *The communion of the Spirit is a communion of love*

Those who say "our Father" experience themselves as being part of a communion of love.

The great dogmatic works of the centuries describe the content of faith in terms of the love that God shows to us. We experience God's love in that He creates and chooses us, that He cares for us and provides for us, that He heals our wounds, that He forgives us and reconciles us with Himself, that He redeems us, that He renews our human structures and systems and that He leads us to a new future of peace and joy, a future where Paul's prayer in 2 Corinthians 13:9 and his command in verse 11 for our perfection goes into fulfilment.

According to 2 Corinthians 13:11-12, people experience the shared love of God in different ways. People who pray "our Father", are on a journey together to the fullness in Christ. We are open to admonition, discipline, comfort, critique and care. Together we strive for unity, unity in closeness. Together we search for peace. Together we are peacemakers. Together we live off God's love and peace.

### *A world communion for human life of justice*

A couple of years ago the World Council of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council gathered in Grand Rapids in the USA where they united to form a new world body of Reformed Churches, called the World Communion of Reformed Churches. This body, in its vision statement, committed itself particularly to the advancement of the well-being of human beings, animals, plants and nature. In the local as well as international ecumenical life, more and more emphasis is being placed on *koinonia* as a community of people who operates on behalf of justice to all people and the whole of creation.

### *A communion of inclusivity*

All over the world, people are crying out for the fulfilment of the meaning of "our" in "our Father". They use terms like social cohesion, social capital, social trust, social solidarity and social co-existence, *ubuntu* and social compassion. All over the world, both in civil and church communities, people are thirsting for the "our" of this prayer.

Some social scientists refer to Africa as the so-called "fourth world". They argue that no other continent has been excluded from the riches of modern global economies as Africa had been excluded. Therefore, to the inhabitants of a continent regarded as socio-economically the most excluded, the prayer of "our" is a prayer of special significance.

The American theologian, Paul Tillich, identified three sets of anxieties people have.

At the top is the anxiety of guilt and rejection. People fear rejection, they fear that they are not good enough. They do not live morally enough, they do not serve the Lord with enough dedication, they do not achieve enough, they do not look smart enough, and they do not possess enough. The list is endless. To such people, the cry for "our Father" is a consolation, a confession of faith, a protest against exclusion and a protest for inclusion and acceptance.

The "our" of the "our Father" prayer therefore is liberating news to people who experience exclusion and discrimination because of their nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, disability, health or religious affiliation. People praying this prayer, are seeing a new community of inclusivity, a community where they experience unconditional acceptance.

People praying this prayer, are committing themselves to a witness and service that make this inclusive community a reality. People praying this prayer know God is busy creating this new community. They see God at work in the world, and they take part in this work of advancing inclusivity.

In a context of where so many people are being excluded and where they live with the fear of exclusion and rejection, we are crying out to God that all people would take part in building this inclusive "our" in this community of the Holy Spirit, of grace, forgiveness and unconditional acceptance, this community of God's love, this community where one can experience that there are fellow human-beings who care for you, whom you can rely on, to the extent that you will allow them to reprimand you; fellow human-beings with whom you can experience unity in closeness, people with whom you seek peace, with whom you experience God's love and peace, people whom you really experience as friends.

A dignified human life is advanced where people themselves experience this "our" of the "our Father" prayer. People excluded from this communion of the Spirit, do not experience life as God intended it.

*For intercession with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost*

- For a dignified humane life of belonging and inclusion and friendship.
- For redemption from loneliness and exclusion, rejection and discrimination.
- For the realisation of inclusion in marriages, households and churches.
- For more inclusivity in congregations, particularly those of the so-called DRC family.

## **2. A cry for a different kind of father, mother and parent - Psalm 103: 1- 22**

The Lord, whom we address in our inclusive "Our Father" prayer, is the One who is in heaven.

### *A father like the one the Bible talks about*

Some scholars plead that we do away with terminology like "Father" when referring to God. They say it has been misused over many centuries to theologically support many evils.

This concept too strongly makes us think of patriarchy, of the so-called superiority of males and the subservient position of women. It calls forth the idea of God as a Father who punishes and who could even be sadistic. The father symbol calls forth the idea of a father who is unreliable and who leaves his family in the lurch. It makes us think of a father who maltreats wife and child.

For that reason, it is difficult for many people to call God their "Father". For the same reason, many people have difficulty in calling God "Mother". I will never forget how a church member once told me how difficult so-called mothers' day Sundays were to him because his mother had neglected him since an early age.

I do want to plead, however, that we still call God "Father".

We can only do that if we are prepared to discover anew what the Biblical authors meant by God's fatherhood. Jesus himself taught us that God is not just any father. He is our Father who is in heaven. This reference to heaven speaks about God's perfection in love, in truthfulness and in power. It refers to his sovereignty, glory, majesty and beauty. Matthew uses more images of heaven than any other Biblical book. He connects God's fatherhood with heaven.

### *A different kind of father*

This reference to God who lives in heaven, also emphasises this Father's uniqueness. He is different from earthly fathers, mothers and parents. In that sense, his fatherhood, motherhood and parenthood is different from the ones we know. It is being defined from elsewhere, from heaven.

### *A compassionate father*

Ps 103 offers us one of the clearest descriptions of this difference of the Heavenly Father. Verse 13 describes Him as a compassionate father ("... a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him). Various terms are being used to describe the Father. He is the Father who works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed (vs 6). He is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love (vs 8).

Many people are crying out for real fatherhood, motherhood or parenthood which would reveal itself in compassion.

Compassion is God's care for us, his emotion about people and his creation. Hosea 11:8 describes this in a very special way: "My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused." One commentator even respectfully says God develops a stomach problem when He thinks about his children. He feels for us; He shows empathy with us. He puts himself in our shoes. He makes life humane to us. In Jesus, we see his love and compassion at its clearest.

### *A gracious father*

People hunger for that kind of parenthood that realises itself in grace. According to Ps 103, God's grace is seen in the forgiveness He gives. He does not anger against us. He does not keep record of our sins. He forgives and forgets. When he starts a relationship with us, our transgressions do not count anymore. He removes them as far as the West is from the East.



To people in the Old Testament, the earth was flat. East and West thus could never meet.

When I serve Holy Communion at rectangular tables, I always find it very special to think that the bread and wine also separate me from my transgressions – my transgressions are one the one side of the table, and I on the other. Those transgressions will never ever again be connected to me. The blood and broken body of Christ are just too strong for that!

Oh, how very humane does life not become when we start living as people who are forgiven, as people of grace, liberated people!

### *A patient father*

We also long for parenthood which reveals itself in patience.

The patience of our Father shows itself in his willingness to wait for us. He waits for us to accept his forgiveness, to accept the new life He offers us as a gift. God's fatherhood means that He waits for us to be sorry, for our conversion, for us changing our mind and thought, our behaviour, our character, our acceptance in faith of the gift of Jesus Christ.

God's patience means that he puts his hope in us. In Numbers 6: 26 (The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace"). This means: God is looking at us, waiting and hoping. He is like a sports trainer, with expectation encouraging us and involved in our progress.

How very humane life does become when we start to know that there is Someone who puts his hope in us, that there is Someone who has invested in us, who does not write us off, but expects the best from us!

### *A father of goodness*

We hunger for that parenthood that finds its expression in goodness. This is better expressed as God's covenantal love for us. God's love for us is the love that He had expressed by forming a covenant with us.

God delights in us, his people.

Zephaniah 3:17 reads: "The LORD your God is with you,  
the Mighty Warrior who saves.  
He will take great delight in you;  
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,  
but will rejoice over you with singing."

God loves us even when we do things which can impact negatively on his emotions. His emotions and his love are not dependent on our performance or how good we make Him feel. He loves us even as sinners. Even when we sin, He remains our God in a very special way. His love for us is founded on his covenant with us. He chose us, not vice versa. Therefore, even when I disappoint Him or my loved ones, the church or society, I may know there is a God who loves me with a love that is not dependant on my performance as a Christian.

This experience of acceptance, of unconditional love and embrace, is to experience a life of dignified humanity, a humane life. This love transforms all those who call on the Father into human beings who also love with unconditional love, love based on the covenant, love that endures.

### *A father of justice*

People are also crying out for parenthood that realises justice.

The Psalm 103 and other passages of the Old Testament use two words for justice.

*Mishpat* refers to justice in the courts and judicial environment. In today's terms we could argue that it also includes human rights.

The second word *tsedakah* refers to God's work of redeeming people, of making them just. In the New Testament, this is what Jesus came to do, to sacrifice Himself on behalf of other people. Through Christ's work of justification we are being forgiven and liberated, we are justified and as such we have become people that exercise justice.

How wonderful is it not that our heavenly Father embodies and generates justice, compassionate justice, caring justice, restorative justice, reconciling justice, embracing justice, healing justice, transformative justice, renewing justice. This justice is for all of us, especially for those who suffer injustices in various forms.

### *Characteristics for parenthood*

The characteristics of the heavenly Father are grace, compassion, patience, goodness and justice. A father, mother, a parent who resemble this, make life humane. As such, we can drop our prejudices against the term "father" for God. The Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, embodies all of these characteristics.

These characteristics do not allow room for discrimination against women or any other group. They force us to rethink our understanding of manhood and femininity. There certainly are physiological and psychological differences between the sexes, but they are not as rigid as our patriarchal society wants us to believe. For example, not all women are irrational, and not all males are very rational decision makers.

Jesus himself broke those rigid boundaries between the sexes when He told his fellow Jews that He wanted to bring them together like a hen her chickens (Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34). He referred to Himself in feminine terms in order to break down the sharp distinction between male and female traits. Already the Old Testament spoke of God in motherly terminology (Isaiah 49:15: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" Hosea 11: 3 and 4: "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realise it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.")

When we address God as Father, we do it within the framework of the characteristics of God as indicated above.

The word "Father" in the Our Father prayer refers to words like "Pa" and "daddy" – intimate words. It refers to the trust a child has. In societies in need of good parents, fathers and mother, this prayer is a cry for a Father and a Daddy whom one can rely upon, One who is known for his mercy and compassion, patience, goodness and justice. Such a Father makes life humane for all.

### *For intercession with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost*

- For people who are without caring parents.
- For societies where children grow up in a culture where there is no compassion and trust.
- For congregations that consist of fathers, mothers and parents who embody grace, compassion, patience, goodness and justice.

### 3. A cry for the Name that makes worthy – Isaiah 43: 1-7

Isaiah 43:7 ("Bring my sons from afar everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made") tells us that God's honour is linked to what happens to God's people and defines the status of people who carry God's name.

#### *A Name that ensures us that we will never be alone*

Exodus 34 very clearly tells us about God's Name. "I am" sent you, should Moses answer. Yahweh sent you. The Lord sent you. He is the One who is, the One who will be, yes the One who will definitely be with you. He is the One who will be *with* you and *for* you.

The oppressed people experienced that his Name reflected God's character as the One who heard their cries and saw their pain. His innermost being was trembling because of them. He acted on their behalf. He broke their chains. He saved them. He freed them. He liberated them from slavery. He made a path for them in the Red Sea. He provided water and food in the desert. He brought them into a land of plenty.

#### *A Name that gives us human dignity*

Where God binds his Name to us, we experience an unknown dignity and humanity. The German theologian, Helmut Thielicke, calls this dignity an "alien dignity". We receive it from the heavenly Father who binds his name to us. And he argues that there is no one who can take this dignity away from us. "Our dignity is inalienable because it is alien." Our dignity cannot be taken away from us, because it has an alien origin in the heart of the heavenly Father.

#### *The One with the highest Name knows us personally*

Isaiah 43 describes the various building blocks of dignity.

Firstly we experience that God knows us by name. We often want it to be the case that well-known people know us by name. This makes us feel important. The gospel tells us more: The One who is in the strongest, mightiest position in the world, knows us by name. We are not pure numbers to Him, He knows us personally. This means He gives recognition to us. "Where there is recognition, there is dignity!" Remember how thrilled people are when you remember their names? The God who binds his Name to us, recognises us, He knows us intimately. As such He gives us dignity.

#### *Those who are baptised in his Name, belong to Him*

In his grace God binds his Name to our names. This connection is symbolised by baptism. When God proclaims his Name over you in baptism, it means you are his property.

In Old Testament times, a conquering king pronounced his Name over a city that he had conquered. He proclaimed such a city his property.

What a blessing to know that we do not belong to ourselves, but to our heavenly Father! The Heidelberg Catechism calls it our only consolation in life and death. We do not belong to ourselves, but to Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Therefore we use the word "church" which comes from the Greek "kuriake", meaning "those who belong to the Lord". Those who belong to Him, have dignity, alien dignity, a dignity coming from the heavenly proprietor.

#### *A Name during good and bad times*

There is a third way in which God binds his Name to us and which confirms our dignity.

This is the knowledge that even amidst trials and tribulations, we are not alone. Even when we are surrounded by storms, we may know God is with us in our boat – and eventually He will calm the storms. The waters would not make us drown. The storms of life will not demolish us.

When we have to face trials and tribulations, we may experience that there is another Being with us – like in the case of Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel 3:25. Not even the smell of fire was on their clothes. They experienced God to have been with them during their ordeal. They experienced He cared for them and saved them.

#### *A Name sacrificing on our behalf*

God is willing to sacrifice on behalf of those to whom his Name is linked. This we know best from the New Testament where God sacrifices his Son on behalf of us, his name-bearers.

Because we have been created in God's image, this is one of the strongest motivations for our dignity. Even before birth, we were in God's thoughts, part of his planning. Psalm 139:13 sings about our formation in our mother's womb. And Psalm 8 gives us the status of beings who are little lower than divine beings, crowned with glory and honour.

#### *A perfect, different and unique Name*

In the Our Father prayer we pray that God's Name would be made holy.

Holiness in reference to people means that we are put aside for God, that we are his property. As such, we live differently in the world. Holiness does not refer to us being without sin or of our perfection as many people wrongly think.

Holiness, with reference to God, refers to his perfection, his infallibility and glory. It refers to his uniqueness. Being holy also means we recognise and claim God as our God and as our Father. He calls us his, and we call Him our Father.

*Where people see the holiness, uniqueness and perfection of the Name, inhumanity disappears and a dignified human life, a humane life, is materialised.*

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" is a plea that all people will experience that their lives are worthy and that they are never alone, because their Lord is with them and for them; the God of heaven and earth knows their names. Whatever their crises, they are in the caring and healing hands of their Father, who sacrifices even his unique Son for them.

In a special way this is a prayer for baptised people, for people to whom God has attached his Name. This prayer is a plea to the Father that those who are baptised, will experience a dignified human life, one where the journey will not be from baptismal font to prison cell, from baptismal font to gangland, from baptismal font to alcohol, substance or sex abuse, to violence, bloodletting and murder, from baptismal font to bad schools and insufficient medical care, to poor housing and unsafe neighbourhoods.

And those who are praying this prayer, pleading this plea, are doing and practising what they pray for. They protest against all journeys from the baptismal font that do not lead to a dignified human destination. They work and sacrifice themselves so that the journey starting at the baptismal font would have a dignified human destination.

#### *For intercession with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost*

- For a dignified human life for each person, who has been baptised.
- For liberation of all people, especially youth, who are captives of gang, violence, abuse and poverty.

- For schools, health services, neighbourhood, governments, the media and everyone else who can contribute to assist people in having a more dignified human life.

#### 4. A cry for the kingdom life - Romans 14:17; Isaiah 32:15-20 as well as verses 1-8.

"Let your kingdom come" is a cry to the Father to let his kingdom come – a place where there is quality of life.

Some scholars prefer to rather speak about the kingship of God. Then they say the prayer is a plea that the reign of God, his Lordship, will come and fill all of creation. This means that God's reign will be seen in all facets of life.

*The kingdom life is a humane life of justice, peace and joy:*

Life in the kingdom is the best illustration of a humane life. Romans 14:17 describes the central traits of life in the kingdom, namely justice, peace and joy in the Spirit ("For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit").

*The kingdom life is a life of peace:*

Isaiah 32 gives a clear description of a life of peace which has its foundation in justice: "15 ... till the Spirit is poured on us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest. 16 The Lord's justice will dwell in the desert, his righteousness live in the fertile field. 17 The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever."

Isaiah 32 sketches a luring picture of peace. The desert will become a fertile field which will look like a forest. There will be peace, quietness and confidence forever. "My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest (v.19). "How blessed you will be, sowing your seed by every stream, and letting your cattle and donkeys range free (v.20)."

This picture also tells us what kingdom people are like. "Each one will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land (v.2)." Kingdom people are those people who give security to one another and make one another feel safe. They are the kind of people in whose hands you are secure. They help you quench your thirst in life. They give you shelter when things become too hot for you.

Kingdom people are the ones who practise the values without which societies do not survive. They give attention to other people and are alert to their feelings. "Then the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed, and the ears of those who hear will listen (v.3)". "The fearful heart will know and understand, and the stammering tongue will be fluent and clear (v.4)". They live with discernment and see folly as folly and evil as evil (vs 5 and 6), selfishness as selfishness and nobleness as nobleness (vs 8).

*The Kingdom life is a life of justice*

The peace which the prophet describes here is based in justice. Without justice there is no peace. This is made particularly clear in verse 17 of Isaiah 32.

This is the same as in Psalm 85: 11 that tell us that justice and peace meet in God's Kingdom ("Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven"). In modern terms this has in mind justice as legal justice from the courts, but it also refers to justice as sacrificial justice, as justice whereby people are being set free from sin, justice which leads to social justice. This is the kind of justice which leaders in all spheres of society have to embody and practise.

*The Kingdom life is a life of joy*

In a different place Isaiah describes the joy that comes from the values and the practices of justice that creates peace. Isaiah 29:19: "The humble will rejoice in the Lord; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel." And Isaiah 65: 18 and 19: "But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create

Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more."

*Christ is the embodiment of peace that stems from justice and becomes visible in joy*

The peace of the Kingdom life stems from justice and becomes visible in joy. Where this peace reigns, there we experience true humane life, the life for which God created us.

In Ephesians 2 Paul tells us that Christ is the One who preached about this peace (v.17), that He established this peace through the cross (v.13), yes, even more, that He himself is that peace (14).

*We work together in hope with the Holy Spirit to make the Kingdom become a reality*

The Holy Spirit is the One who makes this peace a reality, who gives this peace to each individual, for all, including animals and plants (Romans 4 and Isaiah 32:15).

We have to pray for this Kingdom life. We are protesting for it to become a reality – protesting in a dual sense, namely protesting for a good cause and protesting against evil.

As believers, we work together with the Spirit for the actualisation of the Kingdom life. We know we are fallible sinners. However, we submit ourselves to the kingship of our Lord. Then we report for duty as sinners who have been forgiven. We now dare working together with the Spirit to materialise and embody God's Kingdom. We do this in humility, thankful for the knowledge that the Lord uses our small deeds to make his Kingdom come.

Then we realise that our small contributions are not without meaning. We thus visit the prisoners, pray for the sick, write letters of protest to newspapers about violence in our neighbourhoods, we witness in our congregations, in the media, social media included, about some wonderful relations among people of all races and social standings which give us hope. We commit ourselves to all kinds of efforts to alleviate hardship in our communities, even when our best endeavours look so simple and small. Under the direction of knowledgeable people, we seek for the best economic and political policies for our country, our continent and the world. We do all of this in the knowledge that God uses people like us in his service for the coming of the Kingdom.

Apart from prayer and work, we also hope for the coming of this dignified human life. We say no to hopelessness, no to false hope, and yes to Christian hope.

There are three forms of Christian hope.

It is a realistic hope. It is the kind of hope that rests in the reality of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As such our hope is not wishful thinking. It is not day dreaming. It is not an illusion. It is a reality, because it is based on God's promises which went into fulfilment in Jesus Christ. It rests in the presence of the crucified and risen Lord.

Christian hope is secondly a resilient hope. Often we are being stretched to our limits. But miracle upon miracles – we do not fall apart! We continue. Social scientists are often amazed to see how people can continue under the most difficult circumstances. They are amazed to see how resilient people can be. In our relationship with Jesus, we develop a resilient hope that helps us continue and finally conquer.

Christian hope is thirdly also a responsive hope, hope that acts and hope that takes responsibility. Christian hope is hope in action. It is not something that promotes alienation from this world. It rather helps us see what is new; it helps us see a life of justice, peace and joy, and guides us in working and striving for that new life.

"Let your kingdom come" is a cry to the Lord to fulfil, embody and operationalise the Kingdom life. It is a cry for a humane life of justice, peace and joy. It is exercising a realistic, resilient and responsive hope.

*For intercession with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost*

- That the Kingdom life for all will be actualised.
- That justice will prevail amidst all injustices.
- That peace will come amidst so many forms of animosity in families, in communities and amongst countries.
- For a life of joy without pain and suffering.



## 5. A cry for the will that makes the earth into heaven - Jeremiah 29: 4-14

The third prayer of the Our Father prayer pleads for God's will which changes the earth into heaven. Where the will of the Father is done, life breaks through, that alien life, that different life.

Harry Kuitert, Dutch theologian, refers to the difference between God's provident will and his moral will. These two matters cannot be separated, but the difference can help us understand God's will better,

### *The Father's will is for the good*

God's provident will refers to the Father's care and provision. God's will is always the will of the Father, according to Matthew. Therefore God's will is never an unknown, hidden and threatening will. It is a will that is for the good, the will of the loving Father on behalf of his people's salvation. When in Matthew 26:39 Jesus prays for God's will to be fulfilled, He has in mind this will for which He soon will die.

Jeremiah 29:11 demonstrates that God's providence implies that He is busy realising a hopeful, beautiful future for his people. His plans for them are not plans of destruction, but plans for their well-being, their peace, their *shalom*, a humane life for all.

These good plans are good news for those people who do not always experience that God has their welfare at stake because they experience pain and suffering, sickness and death. In the midst of their captivity in Babylon, their pain and sorrow, God ensures his people: There is a future of hope. Peace, healing, joy and justice are on its way.

God commands them to work and pray for the peace of the city and the land where they are captives – in the wonderful knowledge that God will fulfil his promises and that his good plans for them will eventually be fulfilled.

### *The Father's will does not leave us alone in our hurt*

Over the centuries there have been debates about God's providence. Many people contribute their woes to God's provident will. Recently during a TV interview, a mother whose child was killed in gang-related violence, said: "But we continue. It was God's will that this happened."

This woman acknowledges the presence of God amidst her suffering and violence. She knows God is not untouched by her pain. God is involved in her suffering. She finds consolation in his mere presence. She knows that she and her neighbours are not alone, they are not God-forsaken. With her statement she does not articulate a fatalistic faith that must help her to passively accept her fate and suffering. She does not adhere to a fatalistic faith that wants her to make peace with violence. Her faith does not ask her to neglect resisting this evil and violence. Her faith does not teach her to think that she was elected and predetermined for a life of suffering and violence.

Those who pray this prayer, let your will be done, guards against the portrayal of God's will as a fatalistic will that pacifies us, and that prevents us from standing up against evil. This prayer must therefore not lead to a pacifism and fatalism that allow injustice and suffering to reign supreme.

### *The Father's will free us from unbelieving pacifism and from arrogant activism*

It is, however, also possible that we can fall prey to that kind of activism that pretends that we are the only ones who know what God's will is, and that we will let his will be fulfilled through our human efforts. No, this third prayer of the Our Father prayer asks for a humble interaction with God and other believers. We should be able to see the opposition to God's will, to his vision, to his dream for the world, in our own hearts. It asks of us to see and acknowledge how we ourselves struggle to remember God's plans, to see God's plans, to support God's plans, to render service and witness in fulfilment of God's plans..

"Your will be done", therefore, asks of us to fight the idea of fate and fatalism. It asks of us to become quiet and know, like that woman on the Cape Flats, God is with us in our deepest sorrow; that we. Like this woman, draw strength from God's presence; that we can face suffering with resilient hope, actively waiting for the Lord who is busy working out a positive outcome.

"Your will be done" asks us to guard against that kind of activism that forgets to listen to God's voice and the voices of our fellow-believers. It guards against arrogance and overestimation of our human abilities. It reminds us of the fact that we ourselves are sinners. This is the only background against which we can witness about God's beautiful plans for his creation.

#### *The will of the Father teaches us how to live with God, with other humans and with the rest of creation*

This prayer further requests that God's moral will go into fulfilment. His moral will has to do with how we as God's children have to live before Him and with one another. By saying this prayer, we are pleading that we and other people will follow the moral compass of God's love command.

Like God's provident will, his moral will also wants the salvation of all his people and the whole of creation. The moral assignments following from his moral will are part of the fulfilment of his provident will, namely his plans of peace for all and his dream for a hopeful future for all.

#### *We learn God's will through the Ten Commandments*

The Ten Commandments reflect God's vision for his world as well his instructions to his children. God's plans for this world are being fulfilled where we honour God alone as God; where we guard against wrong perceptions of God; where we guard against abuse of God's Name; where we celebrate the Sabbath; where we honour authority and oppose lawlessness and celebrate life; where we build an ethos of truthfulness, where we fight lies and love the truth; where we broke through a culture of selfishness and greed and only desire what is best for all God's creation.

#### *Christian virtues reflect God's will*

Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, developed seven Christian virtues which reflect God's moral will. Where these virtues are practised, there God's plans of a humane life for all are served: the assurance and calm of faith in a context of anxiety and threat; the joy of hope in a context of despair, hopelessness and false hopes; the excellence of love in a context of mediocrity, specifically the excellent justice of love in a world of injustice; the excellent temperance of love in a world of greed and consumerism; the excellent courage and strength of love in a world of fear and discouragement; the excellent wisdom and good judgement of love in world of foolishness, misunderstanding and oversimplification.

#### *We seek together to discern God's will in concrete situations*

To discern God's moral will, especially where concrete decisions are to be made about concrete moral issues, asks for moral consultation and moral deliberation by God's children. This moral deliberation is to deal with matters like unemployment; poverty; abortion; the dignified and humane inclusion of our gay and lesbian fellow believers; hydraulic fracking in the Karoo; the employment of the army as a temporary emergency measure in townships that are pestered by gangs and violence. We have to pray together for guidance by the Holy Spirit. We have to analyse situations together. We have to judge situations by way of shared moral values and perceptions. Together we have to act with a deep dependency on the Lord, knowing that our best efforts are never without blemish.

God's will can be best seen in Christ. In Him God provides a life of dignity for all his people and creatures. In Christ we see clearly that God uses people to fulfil his will, his vision, his dream – Spirit-filled people who loves his will and who obey his commandments, people who, by God's grace, embody faith, hope and love.

Where God's will is done, there the earth becomes heaven and do we experience a dignified human life. On the contrary, where our will is done, there earth becomes hell and do we experience a life of pain and struggle, a life robbed of dignity and humanity.

*For intercession with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost*

- For the fulfilment of God's plans for his people and his creation.
- For renewed insight and dedication to God's commands.
- For discernment to know God's will for the realities of everyday choices.

## 6. A cry for daily bread – Matthew 25:31-46

The first people who prayed the Lord's prayer knew suffering and a lack of food. When Judea and Galilee became Roman provinces, there were only large estates and no place for the smallholder farmers. The first listeners to this prayer were day labourers who received starvation wages. The daily pay of one silver dinar was not enough to support a small family. For these first disciples of Jesus, this prayer was indeed a cry of distress. Even for us who pray this prayer today on the African continent with all its desperate needs, this prayer remains a cry of distress.

The bread we are praying for should not be spiritualised, as was often done in the church's interpretation of this prayer through the ages. We should also not argue that the bread is only referring to the life of perfect quality that we will one day enjoy at the second coming of Jesus. We should perhaps even be hesitant to see the bread as the bare essentials, the indispensable, the absolute minimum, as it was for the underpaid and unemployed first disciples of Jesus, people without income.

### *We pray for more than just physical bread*

For Matthew, who wrote his gospel for a prosperous city congregation in Syria, this bread was more than the barest necessity of physical bread. It refers to all that is needed for our earthly existence, to all the means that are required to provide in our earthly, everyday needs and necessities. In chapter 25:31-16 Matthew probably gives a clue to the manifestations of need that this prayer is dealing with: hunger, thirst, being a stranger, naked, sick and in prison.

The Heidelberg Catechism, Sunday 50, Question and answer 125, confirms that bread represents everything we need for our bodies. Martin Luther saw this bread as everything needed for the maintenance of the earthly life: food and drink, clothes, shoes, bodily health, good weather, livestock, land, house, a good marriage partner, godly children, good friends, faithful neighbours, good government and peace. The things Luther mentions are all building blocks of a humane life.

The plea for this comprehensive provision for a humane life on earth is an inclusive prayer. Here we pray for "our" bread. Therefore this petition has no room for selfishness and greed, for covetousness and even gluttony, which is the enjoyment of good things in isolation.

### *Enough for every day*

We also pray for daily bread. Here "daily" means that we do not ask for more than what is needed. We pray for what is sufficient and adequate for human life. There is no room here for extravagance and consumer mania and greed.

In this petition we also declare our dependence on the Lord and our trust in the Father. The Father will provide in every day's needs. Obviously it does not mean that we should not do medium and long-term planning. It does mean that that planning must also be done without arrogance, depending on the Father. We take measures to provide for ourselves, knowing well that in the final analysis it is our heavenly Father who provides for every day.

As the Israelites received the manna in the desert with surprise and gratitude every day, so we too receive the means of life every day from the Father's hand with amazement and thankfulness (Exodus 16: 4, 15 and 19). Among other things this applies to our food and clothes, our water and drinks, our homes and families, our work and income, our health and access to health care, our shelter and housing, yes, basically all the means of life that we so easily take for granted.

### *Bread is a matter of urgency*

The petition also requests that the provision of the means of life should take place today, in the present moment, now! The need for bread is an urgent matter. We do not ask this care and provision for tomorrow

or for the future or for the life after death. It must happen today, in the present time, in this life. The provision of the basic means of life is not a matter that can stand over. It must literally get attention today. The prayer as a cry of distress actually confirms that the need requires immediate intervention. The temptation is often so big to water down the urgency of the provision of the means of life and to simply postpone this important matter, which is really a matter of life and death.

The words of our Lord Jesus in Mark 14:7 are often misunderstood, as if they would water down the urgency of the need of poor people. *“You will always have poor people with you, and any time you want to, you can help them. But you will not always have me.”* With these words Jesus does not provide a guideline for how we should always relate to our poor brothers and sisters. Jesus made this statement to explain the noble deed of the woman who anointed Him with expensive oil. The value of that ointment was probably equal to the annual income of a day labourer. The disciples’ concern seems to be understandable. In a context of poverty and unemployment the money should rather have been used for the benefit of the many poor people.

#### *The woman notices the Poorest of the poor*

However, Jesus points out to them that this woman is noticing something that they do not realise, namely that Jesus would very soon be the Poorest of the poor. He would soon be tortured and die on a cross, and would experience being forsaken by God on Golgotha, which is hell. Hell is the experience that I am forsaken by God, that He is turning his back on me, that his kind face is turned away from me (Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:2).

The Lord praises this woman’s deed, pouring out the precious and expensive oil of pure nard, as something which is done in a unique situation that cannot be repeated. In this unique situation she is observant, giving proper attention, seeing what other people do not notice. She anoints Him and thereby prepares Him for what is coming, for his death, his descent into hell, for his coming status as the Poorest of the poor. In this situation she knows the poor of this world will still be with her, but this Poorest of the poor would soon descend into hell. Thus He would no longer be with her physically like her poor fellow-human beings.

In this unique, unrepeatable situation her attention to the Poorest of the poor is praised. Calvin would argue that after Christ’s death on the cross He is honoured when we take care of the poor in our midst. They are still in our midst. But the woman and the disciples would not have Jesus physically in their midst for much longer. Exactly by taking care of the poor we honour Jesus. More than that, Matthew 25:31-46 proclaims explicitly that whoever takes care of the poor does it to the Lord. It says those who take care of the poor, know the Lord and honour Him.

#### *Whoever wants to anoint Jesus must assist the loved ones who are poor*

Jesus did not picture the ongoing presence of poor people as an unavoidable reality which we simply have to accept. He only contrasted their presence with his own imminent departure. Actually, even in his inaugural sermon, but also in the sermon on the mountain, in his parables, in his miracles, in his entire life on earth, He consistently gave priority to the deliverance of poor people. Whoever wants to anoint Him today, says Calvin, will pray and work for the deliverance of our poor brothers and sisters.

In addressing poverty we have to focus on short, medium and long term processes and programs. Everything must, however, be done with urgency, with the urgency of the bread for today of the Lord’s Prayer.

To pray for daily bread and other basic means of life, indicates that we acknowledge our own lack of power. We know the Lord alone can transform our hearts and hands and heads, as well as our political and economical and social systems, so that we can be in the service of a humane life for all, bread for all, caring for all.

Whoever prays this prayer, is working under the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the realisation of that for which we are praying. People who pray of course know that prayer and work go together (*ora et labora*). The one who prays, must work.

### *A life of compassion*

The South African Lutheran theologian and agricultural economist, Klaus Nurnberger, highlights three sets of tasks that we are called to perform in our striving for a humane life for all, for a life in which all enjoy bread.

First of all we must practise compassion. Our inner being must be stirred about fellow human beings in distress, about God's creation in distress. We must genuinely share the feelings of other people, put ourselves in their position, trying to imagine what they are really experiencing and feeling. This way of sharing the feelings of other people, stepping into their shoes, should take place across various kinds of human boundaries. People who pray this prayer therefore develop social sympathy, social empathy and social interpathy.

### *A life of justice*

Secondly we must strive for social and economic justice for all. In a world of socio-economic inequality we should strive for decisions and policies, processes and practices that promote a life in which the equality of all people is respected. Justice must be the vision and the value that guides those who pray, and it should be the virtue we embody. Just people and just societies in the service of a humane life for every person, animal, nature and plant is the desire of those who pray this prayer.

### *Willingness to make sacrifices*

Thirdly Nurnberger pleads that we live with an ethics of willingness to make sacrifices. Mahatma Gandhi once formulated this endeavour in very striking words: "We must live simply so that others may simply live". The Christian faith is the faith of sacrifice, of the cross. The world is saved by the sacrifice of Christ. By his sacrifice and the sacrifice of his followers the way is prepared towards a humane life for all and for everything.

### *For intercession with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost*

Perhaps we can pray to be saved from the power, the reality and the spirit of "empire" – in other words, from the authorities, empires and rulers. The joint research project on globalisation of URCSA and the *Evangelische Reformierte Kirche* in Germany captures this power, reality and spirit of "empire", which is standing in the way of a life of bread for all, of a dignified human life for all, in the following words:

Save us from this power:

- We speak of empire, because we discern a coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today, that constitutes a reality and a spirit of lordless domination, created by human kind yet enslaving simultaneously;

Save us from this reality:

- an all-encompassing global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people, while imperiously excluding, even sacrificing humanity and exploiting creation;

Save us from this spirit:

- a pervasive spirit of destructive self-interest, even greed – the worship of money, goods and possessions; the gospel of consumerism, proclaimed through powerful propaganda and religiously justified, believed and followed;
- the colonization of consciousness, values and notions of human life by the imperial logic;
- a spirit lacking compassionate justice and showing contemptuous disregard for the gifts of creation and the household of life.

## **7. A cry to live as a forgiven person – Luke 15:11-32**

Two of the essential characteristics of a humane life are to live as a person who has been forgiven, but also as someone who is forgiving others. To experience the freedom of receiving the forgiveness of my sin and guilt is to experience human dignity. To experience the freedom of the capacity to forgive others their sin and guilt against me is to experience human dignity.

### *Forgiveness is the first word of the Christian logic of salvation*

Martin Luther described forgiveness as the first word in the Christian logic of salvation. Human logic requires that I first show remorse, that I confess my guilt, that I prove my willingness for reconciliation, that I commit myself to justice and reparation, and that I start demonstrating that justice. Only then forgiveness and acquittal come into the picture. The Christian logic works differently. Forgiveness is the first word. Forgiveness opens the way for repentance, confession of guilt, reconciliation and a life of justice and reparation.

When the prodigal son of Luke 15:11-32 is tied up in the distress of sin and guilt and sorrow, he remembers a gracious and merciful father who raised him. Driven by that memory he decides to return home. And there he discovers that his father has the whole time been waiting on him, hoping for his return, because his father sees from afar that his son is coming back. Seeing his son, his heart is filled with pity. The son who returns experiences how this waiting father is rushing to his son. He sees how the hoping father is embracing and kissing him, forgiving and acquitting him even before he could express his remorse and confession of guilt.

While he is doing his confession of guilt, he experiences forgiveness and reconciliation, and even that they are celebrating his return. More than that, he discovers how the gentle father treats him, the transgressor, like a guest of honour. There are clothes for his body, a ring for his finger and shoes for his feet. The prize calf is slaughtered for him. He has the same experience as the poet of Psalm 23:5-6, namely that there is goodness and mercy following in the footsteps of sinners and offenders, that a sinful and guilty person is treated as a guest of honour at a marvellous feast.

As a child this parable was my favourite, and now, decades later, I understand anew why I enjoyed it so much in my youth. I do not fully understand the height and depth, the length and breadth of God's love and goodness and favour and grace, but I experience the same youthful excitement about a kind of logic that is totally different from the logic of the world in which we live. It is the kind of logic where I do not need to perform to be accepted. It is a logic where I do not feel anxious that I will be rejected if I do not perform well enough – in the religious and moral field, at school, at work, in sport, in my marriage, my home, my family, among my friends and in my congregation. It is a logic that gives me the experience: you are loved, you are cherished, you are accepted despite how well or bad you perform, you are accepted also when you do not reach the standards. This is the liberating, wonderful, almost unbelievable gospel, good news, glad tidings!

### *Where do we get a merciful church?*

This grace-logic is not always so logical for us as sinful people. We find it difficult to accept this forgiveness-logic. The eldest son in the parable does not share his father's joy. He functions with reproach and blame. He does not understand his father's logic. He does not understand the grace-logic, the forgiveness-logic.

Many church people find it difficult to live out this grace. Martin Luther struggled with the question: Where do I find a merciful God? He did not find grace and mercy in the church. The church made him believe in a merciless God who works with human merit.

Luther's question about a merciful God also raises the question about a merciful church. We are called to self-examination about the question whether we are indeed a merciful church, whether we are indeed



merciful Christians, whether we do indeed witness faithfully about a merciful and gracious Father. Do people really experience the church as a place of grace and unconditional love, acceptance and embrace? Are we not perhaps to a large extent the present day manifestation of the eldest son of Luke 15?

*It is difficult to accept that we are forgiven*

The grace-logic of the merciful Father that is depicted in Luke 15 is also difficult to accept where it comes to our own acceptance of the forgiveness that the Father freely gives us. We tend to continue living with blame and feelings of guilt. We really struggle to live with the light burden and the soft yoke of being a forgiven person. We struggle so much to sing:

*I, who received your forgiveness, Lord*

*Gratefully sing my salvation song*

*You know how much I longed for You,*

*You offered me your favour.*

*I praise and worship You always (x2)*

*And extol your great mercy (x2)*

(Nuwe Sionsgesang 226 and Liedboek 245 vers 1 – "Ek wat vergifnis Heer ontvang het" - Freely translated)

*Christ earned our forgiveness in a perfect way, once and for all*

One of the most important so-called reconciliation theories that were formulated in the church history is the forensic or objective reconciliation theory, which was developed in the middle ages by Anselm, the archbishop of Canterbury. This theory, as forensic, juridical theory of reconciliation, explains that we are found guilty, like in a court of law. But the punishment we deserve is not executed. Someone, namely Jesus Christ, took the punishment in our place, and died in our place. By his death He earns justification and acquittal for us. The punishment we deserve is carried by Christ. The justification that Christ achieved, is imputed to us.

This means that when God looks at us, He does not see just the sinner any more. He sees the person who is united with Christ by God's grace and through faith. And He ascribes or imputes the righteousness of Christ to us. Due to being united with Christ through grace, Christ's righteousness is put on our account. By being united with Christ through faith, we are seen as righteous people. Due to our unity with Christ we are acquitted. This justification is also known as the synthetic justification. In synthesis with Christ, being united with Christ, we receive justification, forgiveness and acquittal.

Anselm's theory is the objective reconciliation theory, since the justification is achieved outside ourselves, on Golgotha. This justification is not poured into us, as the Roman Catholic tradition was teaching, but the justification is reckoned or imputed to us. The justification, the forgiveness, the acquittal happens outside ourselves. It is achieved by the triune God, outside us and for us, beyond any challenge.

*Christ's work for us frees us from anxiety*

This theory, which was widely accepted in Protestant churches, brings assurance of faith and frees us from anxiety. It emphasises that our justification and forgiveness are achieved by the triune God, bypassing us. Our justification, forgiveness and acquittal are not dependent on how good we perform or how well we believe. Our forgiveness is certain. Our justification is sure. Even if we do not believe well enough, we know that our salvation is certain. In this regard we can refer to the words of the German theologian, Paul Althaus: "I don't know if I believe, but I do know in Whom I believe!" Yes, we do not always believe, and we do not always believe well enough, but we do know in Whom we believe. That is certain. That is sure.

This is the comfort of the juridical reconciliation theory. Our guilt is fully paid for at Golgotha. This is the comfort of the objective reconciliation theory. Our justification was achieved, outside us, by the living God, on Golgotha. Is that not the gospel! Without our inputs the salvation was achieved. Without our performance the reconciliation was achieved. Without our merits the acquittal was achieved. Even without our faith the forgiveness was achieved – salvation on our behalf, reconciliation on our behalf, acquittal on our behalf, forgiveness on our behalf.

Anselm's theory, his exposition of the biblical story of reconciliation, offers us the joyful assurance of our salvation and forgiveness. It helps anxious people who keep on looking for assurance of salvation and forgiveness, comfort and peace, in themselves. We will never come to rest while we look for the assurance of salvation and freedom inside ourselves. We are indeed defective beings. But we can look outside ourselves, to Golgotha, to Christ. In Him we have our only certainty and comfort! This theory helps lost sons and daughters to appropriate forgiveness, to accept it for themselves. It also helps the eldest sons and daughters to come in and join the celebration, the feast about forgiveness!

#### *The gift of forgiveness leads to good works*

Although our forgiveness is achieved outside us, it is still on our behalf and we are involved in it. Although we are saved without our own efforts, it is done for us and we get involved, we share in the salvation. Although we are not justified because of our faith, believers accept the justification in faith and gratitude. Calvin says about this: "We are not saved because of good works, but also not without them". Calvin agrees that in reality God achieves our salvation without our good works, but that He still involves our good works in our salvation. The good works are not the reason for our salvation, but rather the result and the fruit of our salvation. It is the expression of gratitude for the forgiveness.

A dignified human life is a life in which we live as people who have been forgiven. This petition helps us to accept the forgiveness granted to us by God and our fellow human beings. In the book with the title *Choices* the American theologian, Lewis Smedes, writes about the way in which we can make good and right choices. In the last paragraph of the book he says the following: "After all is said and done, the most important thing in life is not to be right all the time, but to be forgiven." These are of the most liberating words that a human being can hear. We no longer live with the anxiety about our own fallibility and insufficiency that spoils the experience of a dignified human life. We also know that we do not always have the status of *Mr Right* or *Ms Right*, but we do have the status of being forgiven. That is the gospel! That is liberation!

#### *For intercession with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost*

- For seeking forgiveness from God and fellow human beings.
- For the acceptance of the gift of forgiveness from God and fellow human beings.

## 8. A cry to live as a forgiving person – Luke 19:1-10

In the previous meditation we learned that the One we call Our Father changes us into forgiven people. And where his children are thus embraced with forgiveness, our hearts inevitably opens up to forgive others. Where we experience so much love, we cannot do anything but treating guilty people with love. Where his children are accepted so unconditionally, they cannot but accept others unconditionally. Where we experience the freedom of forgiveness, we cannot but let others also taste the freedom of forgiveness. Where we receive the status of being forgiven, we cannot but grant this same status to those who have transgressed against us.

### *To forgive as we are forgiven*

In this petition, “*forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us*”, it sounds as if our granting of forgiveness to others is a pre-condition for receiving forgiveness from the Lord. Exegetes and theologians have made various efforts to clarify this apparent conditional character of forgiveness.

Some say that the form of the verb in this petition is actually indicating that at the very moment we ask for the Lord’s forgiveness, we also forgive those who have done wrong to us in our hearts. Thus we pray: Forgive us the wrongs we have done, and as we are now asking this forgiveness, at this same moment we grant forgiveness to all who have done wrong to us.

Another explanation of this petition handles the form of the verb, the aorist, in such a way that it means those who pray is referring to the fact that forgiveness was already granted in the past by them to their those who had hurt them, and that the effect of that prior action is still valid in the present, and that it constitutes the ground on which the Father is requested to forgive. Thus they pray: Forgive us the wrong we have done as we already forgave those who did wrong to us, and as the effect of our prior forgiveness is still valid in the present.

In Luke’s rendering of this petition in Luke 11:4 the verb is in the perfect tense, indicating that the people who are pleading for forgiveness, already practised forgiveness to those who did wrong to them.

Yet another exposition says that the condition which is mentioned here is not a condition for our forgiveness, but rather a command to go and share forgiveness after we have received it.

Another way to understand the text is to argue that all forgiveness comes from the heart and hand of God and that people cannot achieve or grant forgiveness by themselves. Then this prayer is asking that we receive the forgiveness coming from God for ourselves, and that we then also share the same forgiveness with other people, in particular those who have done wrong to us. Then the petition will be: Grant us forgiveness, just as we will also share the forgiveness we have now received with those who have done wrong to us. In this case the task of forgiving those who hurt me is not experienced as a command, but as an inner urge to share with others what I have received from the only source of forgiveness, namely the heavenly Father, and let them also experience the same grace.

### *Be patient with forgiveness*

No matter how we interpret the role of human beings in forgiveness, this remains a very tall order of the gospel. One almost wants to say it is an unfair demand. It is something that the perpetrator cannot cheaply demand from the victim. It is a demand that no person can force another person to comply with. It is a demand that nobody can put to the poor woman who was raped. Of course it is an evangelical challenge about which we have to keep on reminding each other in our everyday life.

But there is a holy space in specific cases of hurt and injustice where we have to be silent, where we owe the people who have been hurt the opportunity to come to the point where they forgive in their own time and in consultation with our heavenly Father. Such brothers and sisters do not need our pressure and impatience, and even less our reproaches and condemnations. They simply need our intercession and company, our quiet presence and support on the way to their readiness to forgive and experience healing.

### *Forgiveness opens the way for justice*

The command to forgive, as individuals and as groups, can even be called an unjust command. The Christian forgiveness-logic seems to ask that there should be forgiveness and reconciliation even if there is no justice. In this regard Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against cheap forgiveness. Forgiveness is indeed for free, but it is not cheap; it is very expensive. The most expensive, the forgiveness by God and fellow-humans, comes for free, it's free of charge. The most precious we get free of charge. This is grace. Whoever experiences this forgiveness and genuinely accepts it, comes to repentance like the prodigal son, and confesses guilt, and seeks reconciliation, and makes efforts to put things right. The story of Luke 15 can be read together with the story about Zacchaeus in Luke 19. Zacchaeus' experience of the forgiveness and love and reconciliation of Jesus opens the way for putting things right, for justice, for restitution, for reparation: "*Listen, sir! I will give half my belongings to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay back four times as much*" (verse 8).

Zacchaeus comes to repentance in his interaction with Jesus. But Zacchaeus is committed to justice and restitution after experiencing the love and unconditional acceptance of Jesus Christ. The reconciliation theory which the church father Abelard developed in the late middle ages emphasises God's love which we see in Jesus Christ. This theory, which is also known as the subjective or moral reconciliation theory, emphasises what God's love is doing inside us. Therefore the theory is subjective. Something happens to us and in us. The theory is also called the moral theory. The love of God does not leave us unchanged. The love of God in Christ transforms us, changes us, renews us, recreates us into people who also show love. The forgiveness that flows from the heart of the Father, transforms us into people from whose hearts forgiveness also flows. The fact that the loving God accepts us unconditionally transforms us into people who also accept those who do wrong to us unconditionally.

### *Forgiveness and loving embrace brings justice*

In the past two decades South Africans stood in amazement about the testimonies of this forgiveness. In the life of Nelson Mandela and many others, also the so-called victims and families that gave testimony at the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, we saw the effect of forgiveness. There was a lot of forgiveness in South Africa. The challenge for all South Africans is now to keep on praying and working so that this forgiveness will not be made cheap, that the fruit and the outcomes of this forgiveness will be unity, reconciliation and justice for all in our country. South Africans need the way of Zacchaeus, the way of a man who is urged by the love and forgiveness he has received to a life of justice, restitution and reparation.

### *Churches as places where forgiveness is manifested in justice*

Against this background it is essential that our churches create spaces where unity, reconciliation and justice can grow. Churches are regarded as the institutions in the society that are the best equipped to reach even the most marginalised people. Research by different organisations indicates time and again that churches are the institutions in the society that are trusted by most South Africans, despite our flaws and shortcomings.

Social scientists also say churches are the institutions that are best equipped with so-called binding social capital, which means they have the ability to bind people together in relationships of trust and mutual support. Binding capital is evident where people from roughly the same socio-economic and cultural backgrounds worship together. But churches are also best equipped with so-called bridging social capital. That refers to the capacity of churches to bring people together from different socio-economical and cultural backgrounds, and even people who previously lived in enmity and isolation from each other, to form relationships of trust, mutual support and co-operation.

Churches can, by God's grace, through our unity with Christ, and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, make wonderful and unique contributions towards the realisation of unity, reconciliation, justice and expensive forgiveness in our country.

#### *Churches cooperate with partners towards forgiveness that manifests justice*

The drive towards justice as fruit and outcome of expensive forgiveness should also happen in partnership with other institutions in the society, like institutions in the areas of education, sport, culture and art, as well as NGOs and different kinds of religious institutions. The media are an important partner in the drive towards a society of unity, reconciliation and justice. All over the world the media are regarded as one of the mightiest tools in forming public values, public opinion and public policy. So too the cooperation of business people and political authorities should be solicited in an appropriate way for building a society where justice, flowing from forgiveness, is manifested.

A dignified human life is a life in which we live as forgiving people, in which we are no longer tied to the past by the chains of the guilt and harm that we experienced. It is also a life in which we no longer chain those who hurt us and did injustice to us to their guilt, but in which the Holy Spirit helps us to grant forgiveness. This is the gospel! This is liberation!

A dignified human life is a life in which those who are forgiven and those who forgive together experience the wonder of forgiveness that opens the way for a future of repentance and confession of guilt, a future of reconciliation and justice. That is indeed the gospel! That is liberation! It will let our appreciation grow for the title of Desmond Tutu's well-known book: *No future without forgiveness*.

#### *For intercession with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost*

- For the Spirit-inspired capacity to forgive those who did wrong to us as we were forgiven.
- For a humane life in which all experience the freedom and joy that comes with forgiveness
- For practices of expensive forgiveness, that is to say practices that serve unity, reconciliation and justice.

## 9. A cry to be delivered from evil – Matthew 28:16-20

*“Deliver us from the evil one.”* The evil we are dealing with in this petition, is evil in all its forms. Some exegetes emphasise particular forms of evil more than others. In the context of the Gospel of Matthew we should pay attention to what is evil, but also to the Evil One who is behind what is evil, in other words, to evil in its personal manifestation.

### *Liberation from the Evil One in personal form*

The prayer is thus a plea to be freed from the Evil One in personal form. Evil in the shape of the devil is mentioned in many of the books of the New Testament. The purpose is not to understand him, but to oppose and fight him. Bram van de Beek, who practices his theology in the secularised Dutch context, even contends for prayers of exorcism, in which demons are driven out, in this struggle against evil. Where evil in personal shape is discussed, it is often proclaimed that the evil one is subordinate or inferior to God (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6). Actually, the evil one sometimes even functions under God’s command (Amos 3:5-6). God’s children are therefore not powerless against the evil one in its personal or any other shape.

### *Liberation from evil in the form of evil forces*

Evil especially takes shape in the evil forces that are at work in the world. Evil is manifested in those forces that cause Paul to call out in his struggle against sin: “Who will rescue me from this body that is taking me to death (Romans 7:24)? There is a force at work that prevents Paul from doing the good which he wants to do. The same force causes him to do the bad things he does not want to do. Paul is using a horror image to demonstrate the devastating effect of this evil force. The body of death refers to the corpse that was tied to a person condemned to death in those days. As the worms are devouring the corpse, they also start eating the living person. This is the horror of the operation of evil in the world.

According to Karl Barth evil forces also take the shape of our human structures and systems. People develop political, economical and social structures and systems that are no longer under our control or the control of anybody else. These systems become so-called “lordless” forces. Nothing rules over them. These systems develop an autonomy, an independence, a self-sufficiency. These uncontrollable forces and systems do not just become the supporters of the society, but also the engines that drive the society. Although they are a human product, eventually human beings can no longer control them.

These powers and systems get intellectual approval in the form of ideologies that are developed. But even these ideologies, these ideals that people set up, are later almost deified or idolised. “Ideals become idols.” Eventually human beings no longer control these ideologies, but the ideologies control us, even though we may not realise it. We look at ourselves and at other people and at the reality through the spectacles of our ideas and pictures of preference and prejudice, often unconsciously.

In our time we should perhaps ask ourselves to what extent the current economic systems have slipped out of our hands, and out of our control. We, as citizens and especially as leaders in South Africa, should also ask to what extent political systems in our country have slipped out of our hand and are controlling us. We should ask to what extent the ideology of consumerism and greed is controlling us. It may perhaps direct our lives more than we think. To pray for deliverance from evil is to know that we are not powerless against these forces. By his cross and resurrection our Lord already conquered these forces. Their lordless character and pretensions do not have the last say. Jesus, who teaches us to pray, *deliver us from the Evil One*, is the Lord!

### *Liberation from evil in the form of sin*

Evil also takes shape in our sin. In this petition we pray for deliverance from our sin, sin in all its manifestations, individual and collective sin, personal and structural sin, as explained above. We can also see sin as that which we have done wrong and as that which we have neglected and failed to do.

The so-called list of mortal sins, which was drawn up in the church of the Middle Ages gives us insight in the nature and manifestations of sin. Mortal sins do not refer to sins that are more destructive than others. It is also not about unforgivable sins. It does imply, however, that when we refer to one sin, other manifestations of evil related to that particular sin also come to mind. On every day of the week the church of the Middle Ages prayed for deliverance from a specific mortal sin. These sins demonstrate the individual and the collective, the personal and systemic nature of sin, as well as the power of sin, and sin as doing what is wrong and failing to do what is good.

On a Monday they prayed for deliverance from jealousy and envy, on a Tuesday for deliverance from hate, anger, aggression and violence. On a Wednesday the church used to pray for deliverance from *acedia*, which means inactivity, not being involved, apathy, melancholy (sadness) and paralysing hopelessness. On Thursday they focused on greed, on Fridays they prayed for deliverance from gluttony, not just the excessive enjoyment of food and other provisions, but particularly enjoying these things in isolation, without our fellow-human beings. On Saturdays they prayed for deliverance from lust, which is from exploiting the most precious gift of God, namely fellow human beings, their sexuality, their labour, their expertise, their different gifts. We have to be liberated from the lust which turns another person into an object, a thing, forgetting that other human beings are not just the means to a purpose, but a purpose in themselves. On Sundays they prayed for deliverance from pride and they went to church to confirm that God is God, not we ourselves.

The American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, identified four manifestations of pride from which we need to be delivered: the pride of power, implying that I am not subject to any other authority and that I am the strongest; the pride of the intellect, claiming that my ideas are the very best; the pride of morality, thinking that I am living by a higher moral standard than other people; and spiritual pride, causing me to believe that I am closer to God than others.

### *Liberation from evil in the form of suffering and sorrow, pain and hardship*

Suffering and sorrow, pain and hardship, struggle and brokenness are still other forms of evil about which we can cry out in distress to the Father. There are many different manifestations of suffering. Individuals suffer and groups experience hardship. People suffer personally and can identify the cause of suffering. However, people also suffer because of systems and forces that are not recognisable and cannot be identified easily. One example is the suffering that is caused by economic systems that lead to inequality, that cause the rich to become richer and the poor to become poorer. In many other cases the causes of the suffering are less detectable than the last mentioned case. We cannot necessarily blame human factors like global warming as the cause for all natural disasters. The causes of some forms of suffering are difficult to identify, yes, even impossible to identify.

*Deliver us from evil* simply means that, whatever the cause of suffering might be, we ask the Lord to let the day dawn when Revelation 21:1-5 is fulfilled and we experience that there are no threatening powers any longer (verse 1), we no longer have tears in our eyes, and there is no more death, no more grief or crying or pain (verse 4). We therefore plead with the Father to deliver us from all forms of suffering. We utter that cry of distress so that the life of Revelation 21 will become a reality, the

Kingdom life of peace, justice and joy, the life without suffering and pain and illness and death, the everlasting life, the life of quality, the true humane life.

*Liberation from evil in the form of death*

A last manifestation of evil to which we have just referred is death. We pray for the coming of eternal life, the life in which we no longer experience the valley of the shadow of death. We pray to be delivered from death and all the powers of death.

We pray this prayer with confidence and conviction and hope, because the One who teaches us to pray like this, went into the centre of suffering and sorrow. More than that, He entered into the place of being forsaken by God. Thus He fully identifies with us in our suffering. He is completely one with us in our distress and death. However, He rose from death and ascended into heaven. Matthew 28 proclaims that all authority in heaven and on earth was given unto Him, in other words, that all powers were made subject to Him. Philippians 2:9-11 testifies that the resurrected Lord was highly exalted. He has a Name that is greater than any other name. Every knee shall bow before this Name and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father!

Because Christ is Lord, there is a dignified human life for us, a life in which the so-called "lordless" powers, and evil in all its manifestations, do not have the last word. Because Jesus Christ is Lord over everything and everybody, because Jesus is saying of every inch of the universe, *This is mine*, therefore we live in security and with joyful assurance, in protest against all evil. Because the One who teaches us to pray is the Lord, therefore we live the dignified human life of faithfulness and obedience to the Lord, even when the powers threaten and attack us and lead us into temptation.

*For intercession with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost*

- For deliverance from evil in all its manifestations.
- For faith and assurance because Jesus is Lord.
- For the courage to stand up against evil, because Jesus was resurrected (He stood up).



## **10. A cry for people whose attention is not distracted – Matthew 4:1-11**

Evil threatens us in different manifestations, including the shape of the Evil One in personal form, as well as the manifestations of evil powers, sin, suffering and death.

The petition “*lead us not into temptation*”, pleads with the Lord for help so that we will not be caught in the trap of evil.

### *The Bible is the book of temptations*

Temptations are not strange to believers. The German theologian, Ernst Lohmeyer, calls the Bible the book of temptations. It tells us about people who tempt God. It also tells us about God who tests people, and where we react in the wrong way on these trials, they become temptations. The Bible also tells us about people who tempt each other. This includes individuals, groups, the political and economical systems we as humans devise, even dominant human public opinions. Finally, the Bible tells us about the Evil One and evil in general that tempts people. Actually, Jesus was also tempted by the Evil One.

### *Temptations are attacks*

Temptations come to us in different shapes. Martin Luther pointed out that bad things as well as good things in our life can function as temptations and inner struggles. Sickness, poverty, dishonour and other set-backs or adversities can lead to impatience, resentment and hate. Prosperity, success, honour and similar privileges can lead to self-exaltation, lust, ambition and envy. Both sets of temptations and inner struggles can bring us to the point of forgetting God, trusting in ourselves and losing the spirit of gratitude and love.

In the story about Jesus’ temptation by the Evil One in Matthew 4:1-12 we can learn a lot about the nature of temptations. His followers are exposed to the same temptations to which our Lord was exposed.

### *The temptation to achieve a potential that should not be achieved*

The first temptation to turn stones into bread is an effort to tempt Jesus to provide in his bodily needs. In his booklet with the title *Temptation* Bonhoeffer calls this temptation the temptation of the flesh. It touches the basic need of people for their livelihood. It knows the human vulnerability and aims to exploit it.

However, this temptation attempts to do more. It wants to lure Jesus into fulfilling the potential that He has, a potential that cannot be fulfilled without becoming unfaithful to his holy calling. That calling is to suffer on the cross for our salvation, being fully God and fully human. This temptation would be repeated in Gethsemane (Matthew 26: 36 - 46) and on Golgotha (Matthew 27:40).

The temptation wants to thwart his calling. The attack of the Evil One wants to betray the deepest reason for which He is on earth. If Jesus would achieve the potential that He has to turn stones into bread, or to avoid his death on the cross, He would not be able to die in our place and achieve eternal salvation for everyone. This temptation intends to divert Jesus’ attention away from God and away from his holy calling.

### *The temptation to manipulate God for our own glory*

The second temptation takes Jesus to the highest point of the temple roof and challenges Him to jump off, since God did promise that He would command his angels to protect Jesus. Bonhoeffer calls this temptation the spiritual temptation. The temptation tries to convince Jesus to demonstrate how much He trusts God, taking God on his Word, building on God's promises.

Essentially He is tempted to strive for the glorification of his faith rather than for obedience to God. Secondly the temptation is trying to let the Son manipulate the Father, so that He would try to move the Father to let a miracle take place – as a result of his faith and trust in the Father. Where this happens, it is actually a demonstration of how the human takes control of God.

This second temptation also tries to draw the Son's attention away from the Father and from a life of obedience to the Father. It wants to divert his attention from his holy calling. It intends to take the attention away from the Father, from glorifying the Father, to glorifying the Son's trust in the Father, from worshipping God to worshipping the self. And when God is not honoured, there the salvation of the people is forfeited, and the striving towards a dignified human life for all is betrayed.

#### *The temptation to choose for a different power than God's power*

Bonhoeffer calls the third temptation the perfect temptation. This temptation wants to lure Jesus into questioning the power, authority and dominion of the Father. It wants to seduce and mislead Him to ponder the question as to whether the political, economical and social power is not after all in the hands of a different authority, other than the Father. It aims to let Him consider whether salvation does not after all come through other channels of power than the Father's frail power, gentle power, the power of the cross. This temptation wants to cause doubt about the Father's definition of power, namely the power that runs through Golgotha. It urges Him to believe that it is possible to be a Saviour without a cross. The real purpose of this temptation is also to divert Jesus' attention from the Father and from his God-given calling.

These temptations would challenge Jesus right through his ministry. The same temptations also come to the disciples of Jesus today. We are still tempted to achieve potential that we are not supposed to achieve. Where it happens, our attention is drawn away from God. Even today we experience the inner urge to build on our own faith in God rather than on God Himself. By focusing on our own faith, we believe there is more benefit to ourselves. Then we trust in our own faith as an action, and not in the content of our faith, which is the triune God. Where this happens, our attention is once again diverted away from God. Even today we are still tempted to question whether God really rules, and especially whether his frail type of power can really overcome evil in the world. Today we are still seduced to be supporters of powerful and violent concepts of authority, rather than followers of the soft, gentle and frail power of our Lord.

#### *All temptations aim to divert our attention away from God and our calling*

The Jews often prayed to be exposed to temptation, and that God will keep them standing against the temptations, so that they can become spiritually stronger. Jesus, however, teaches us to pray that we will not come into temptation. Temptations are destructive. It pulls us away from God. It draws our attention away from God and our fellow human beings. It may cause us to lose track of our calling. And it is so dangerous because it is almost not recognisable, it is hidden and it comes to us in beautiful shapes. It distracts our attention without us even realising it.

The American theologian, Helmut Richard Niebuhr, thinks the ethics of responsibility starts with the habit of paying attention. People who pay attention ask these questions: What is happening in the world around us? Are we participating in God's work in the world? Political scientists tell us that societies cannot bloom if there are no citizens who practise the art of focused attention.

Whoever prays the Lord's Prayer, is reporting for service. Temptations try to divert our attention from the service to which we commit ourselves. Temptations want to draw our attention away from the holy task of praying and working that every person will experience the dignified human life, which includes the following:

- Belonging to the Father and to the Father's family (children);
- Experiencing the love of a Father, Mother and Parent, thus enjoying total security;
- Carrying a unique Name, a life of being treated as precious and in high esteem is guaranteed;
- A life of peace resting in justice and expressed in joy;
- Standing under the rule of God's will through which we experience heaven on earth;
- A place where everyone's need for the basic means of life is urgently addressed;
- A life in which we live as people who are forgiven and who therefore forgive others;
- A life in which we are no longer slaves of evil.

*Where we overcome temptations and pay attention, a humane life is possible*

Whoever prays the prayer of Jesus, is asking the Father's help to be alert and sober, to be attentive so as to notice the hidden forms of temptation, and be able to detect the Evil One behind the misleading beautiful shapes of temptation. By asking that we should not come into temptation, we are pleading that nothing will divert our attention from praying for and witnessing through word and deed about the humane life which God is preparing for everyone and everything.

This prayer is a cry of distress almost at the end of the Lord's Prayer. Why? Because it can happen so easily, even without realising it, that temptations can subdue the enthusiasm and quench the flame that flow from a life that really pays attention to God and God's calling for us.

In world history there are so many examples of people who did not pay careful attention, who did not notice the desperate need that was unfolding under their noses, people who later confessed with collective remorse and collective blame: If only we knew; if only we were attentive; if only we paid attention; if only we prayed: *Do not lead us into temptation.*

*For intercession with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost*

- For protection against temptations in all its forms;
- For paying attention to God and God's calling for us;
- For the realisation of a humane life for all.

## **11. A cry for an anxiety-free life – Matthew 6:9-13**

The Lord's Prayer concludes with praise, which was probably added to the prayer at a later stage. It is indeed an apt conclusion to the petitions for a humane life. This expression of praise also contains a cry of distress to the Father, a cry for the realisation of an anxiety free life, a cry for a life of security, a cry for the achievement of a humane life.

### *The anxiety of guilt and rejection*

Earlier on we referred to the first of the three sets of anxieties which the American theologian, Paul Tillich, identified. Tillich argued that all people experience these three sets of anxiety. The first set to which we referred earlier on, was the anxiety for guilt and rejection, the anxiety that I will experience rejection due to my shortcomings, my imperfection and my guilt. The Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, argues that the reconciliation theory of Anselm is dealing with this anxiety. The certainty that Christ died in my place and carried my guilt, removes this anxiety that I will be rejected by God and my fellow-humans due to my imperfection.

### *The anxiety of mortality, chance and fate*

The second set of anxieties is the anxiety of mortality and fate. It is the anxiety that grows when I notice my own mortality and the mortality of my loved ones. It is the anxiety for sickness, suffering and death. It is also the anxiety that I am exposed to the forces of chance and fate, to the powers of contingency. Contingency means that things could just as well have worked out differently in my life if the dice had fallen differently, if fate would have taken a different course. There is actually no reason why my life developed the way it did. Everything happened by chance. It could just as well have been different. This anxiety grows from the conviction that there are actually no roots and no firm foundation in my life, that there is no story line that gives predictability and stability to my life.

Douglas John Hall contends that the reconciliation theory developed by Irenaeus in the early church is pointing to the liberation that Christ brings from the anxiety of mortality, chance and fate. Irenaeus taught that Christ's redemption is about his victory over the powers of evil. Due to the victory of Christ on the cross and through his resurrection the "lordless" powers no longer exist. All powers are subject to Him. The certainty that Christ is the Lord liberates us from the anxiety for all the powers of mortality, sickness and death, the anxiety for the forces of chance and fate.

### *The anxiety of having no meaning and no purpose*

The third set of anxieties deals with the loss of value, meaning and purpose in life. People live with the anxiety that the day will dawn when I will be of no value, that my life will no longer have any meaning, that there will be no purpose for which I am living, that I will not really be missed by anybody, that I could just as well disappear. This anxiety paralyses you and fills your heart with hopelessness.

Hall argues that Abelard's reconciliation theory is pointing to our liberation from this anxiety. Abelard's theory, to which we previously referred briefly, tells us about the love of God in Christ, that does not leave us unchanged, but transforms and renews us into people who also radiate and show love to God and fellow human beings. This expression of love towards other people in a variety of ways gives value and meaning, a purpose and direction to my life.

It was always one of the great joys of my years in congregational ministry when I was visiting the senior people to encourage them. You always left with the feeling that you were encouraged, because these old people ministered to you. They blessed you with heaps of love and acceptance and understanding. They assured you that, although they no longer had the strength and health to

be actively involved in congregational activities, they were carrying on with the ministry of intercession for the church and the world and also for you as pastor and your family. I always experienced that these old people did not know the anxiety of a lack of meaning and purpose, because they felt loved and accepted, and because their hearts were filled with love for other people.

#### *To Him belong the Kingdom and the power and the glory*

The expression of praise (or exaltation) of the Lord's prayer confirms that the life without anxiety, the dignified human life, the Kingdom life of justice, righteousness, peace and joy, without any doubt belongs to the Lord and comes from Him. The praise confirms that the power which opened the Red Sea for the fleeing people of God (Exodus 14), and the power by which Jesus was risen from death (1 Corinthians 6:14), and the power that makes the Kingdom life possible for us (1 Corinthians 4:20), belongs to God and comes from God. It confirms that the glory, the majesty and sovereignty and beauty, the splendour and brilliance and glitter and radiance, yes, the perfection and completeness, belong to the Father, and come from the Father.

#### *It belongs to Him forever and for sure*

The exaltation confirms that the Kingdom and the power and the glory belong to the Lord forever. The saying *for ever* has a double meaning. On the one hand it refers to the fact that the Kingdom and power and glory belong to the Lord *for eternity (forever and ever)*. Secondly it means that the Kingdom and power and glory belong to the Lord *for sure*. There is no doubt about it. It certainly belongs to the Lord.

#### *The meaning of the Amen-faith*

This certainty is confirmed by the little word "Amen". After all, Amen literally means "that is sure, that is certain". The Heidelberg Catechism, Sunday 52, Question and answer 129, clarifies the meaning of the Amen. It explains the meaning of Amen as *my prayer is more certainly heeded by God than what I feel in my heart that I can desire it from Him*. It is sure and certain that God listens to my prayer, far more certain than the longing in my heart that He should take heed, or even than what I *feel* in my heart that I can expect from Him.

The Amen confesses that we know the Father is allowing us to belong to Him and to his family – far more than we can desire it in our hearts. Through his Fatherly, Motherly and Parental love the Father grants us the experience of safe protection and calmness – far more than we can feel in our hearts that we desire it from Him.

The Father binds us to his perfect Name and offers us dignity and high esteem – far more than we could feel in our hearts that we desire it from Him. The Father lets us participate in the Kingdom life of justice, peace and joy – far more than we could feel in our hearts that we desire from Him. The Father grants us the experience of a breakthrough of heaven on earth – far more than we could feel in our hearts that we desire it from Him. The Father provides in our needs as earthly and bodily creatures – far more than we could feel in our hearts that we desire it from Him. The Father delivers us from evil in all its forms – far more than we could feel in our hearts that we desire it from Him. The Father protects us against temptations that could divert our attention from the realisation of a dignified human life – far more than we could feel in our hearts that we desire it from Him.

*Choose between the dignified human life of the Amen-faith and the inhumane life of Anxiety-disbelief*

The choice in front of us is clear. Choose between the dignified human life of the Amen and the life without dignity and of anxiety. Do we choose the way of a life without dignity, a life of anxiety, feelings of guilt and inferiority, feelings that I am not good enough, fear of rejection? Or do we choose the way of the Amen-faith, the way of joyful assurance that the Lord who teaches us to pray this prayer, indeed took our guilt upon Himself, was rejected in our place and therefore makes us good enough, assures us that the Lord's grace is sufficient for us.

Do we go the way of anxiety, of fearing sickness, mortality, death, chance, fate, the dice, or do we go the way of the Amen that assures us the Lord is victorious over all the evil forces?

Do we follow the way of anxiety and fear of a meaningless, worthless and purposeless existence, or do we follow the way of the Amen that assures us that the Lord loves us deeply and transforms us into people who also radiate love?

Where we live with the Amen in our hearts, the anxiety fades away and the joyful assurance, the feeling of security, the courage and the strength grow. And there the dignified human, the humane life grows. The following play upon words will help us to remember the point: *A humane life means we say no to Anxiety. A Humane life means we say yes to the Amen. A humane life means we say yes to a life of blessed Assurance. A humane life means we say yes to a life of assertiveness and strength.*

More than we can ever feel in our hearts that we desire it from Him, the Father takes heed of our prayers, and brings the humane life to fulfilment for human, animal, plant and nature, because to Him belongs the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen!

*For intercession with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost*

- We close with the Lord's prayer.