

JOINT CHRISTMAS SERVICE – 17 DEC 2015

We are here this evening to celebrate Christmas together – to celebrate it through worship and prayer. Our celebration keeps the Lord Jesus very much in focus and draws us to gaze on Him. The theme for our celebration “*Merciful like the Father*” inspires us to fix our gaze on Him as the bearer of the Father’s mercy to us. This theme is drawn from Lk. 6:36 which records Christ’s command to His disciples: “*Be merciful as your Father is merciful.*”

YOUR FATHER IS MERCIFUL

In order to have a better grasp of Christ’s command, it is useful for us to remind ourselves of what the Father’s mercy consists in. Evidently we can never fathom the Father’s mercy totally; but we do have a good idea of its essence since we have repeatedly heard it being proclaimed to us in the Bible. The primary element about the Father’s mercy is that it flows from His love. So let us do a quick run through the Bible to remind ourselves of this love and see mercy in its context.

God’s love underpinning our existence

The very first chapter of the Book of Genesis tells us that God created us human beings in His own image and likeness (cf. Gen. 1:26,27). In essence, this means God created us to share in His own life in paradise symbolically depicted as the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15). Why? Because God is love and wanted to share His life with us. Unfortunately, we were not contented with that; we wanted to be “*like God, knowing good and evil*” (Gen. 3:5). Deep down in our hearts we strove to declare independence from God and be gods to ourselves and compete with God our Creator.

God’s mercy underpinning our salvation

As God had warned us, the consequence of our ambitious attempt to be gods unto ourselves was death (Gen. 3:3). In justice, we deserved to die. But God’s love for us was too great to allow us to die. God’s love led to His mercy. So He immediately announced His plan to destroy the serpent tempter: “*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head and you will strike his heel*” (Gen. 3:15). When carried out, this plan would bring us salvation.

The one to destroy the tempter would be Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man. Indeed, the Son of God “*emptied Himself (of His divinity), taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness*” (Phil. 2:7). We lost the image and likeness of God through sin; the Son of God took on our human likeness to restore God’s image to us.

Satisfying God’s justice

As if emptying Himself of His divinity to become man was not enough, Jesus “*being found in human form, humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death – death on a cross*” (Phil. 2:8). Here, Jesus took our place to pay the death penalty we deserved for sinning. In this way, He satisfied the justice of God for us.

Justice satisfied and mercy shown

On the third day of His death, the Father raised Jesus to life. Following that, Jesus ascended to His Father’s right hand to reassume His divine status. Through His resurrection and

ascension, the Father expressed His acceptance of Jesus' satisfaction of justice in the name of fallen humankind. With this came forgiveness of sins and bestowal of life to all.

In the symbolic terms borrowed from the opening chapters of Genesis, Jesus' death on the cross was the striking of His heel by Satan; His resurrection from the dead was His striking of Satan's head, whereby He scored total victory over him. Indeed, by His resurrection, Jesus restored to us the image and likeness of God in which we were created but which we lost through our sins. In this way, we have been reconciled with God and brought into a renewed relationship with Him in paradise.

Christmas celebrates God's love and mercy

Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus the Son of God who emptied Himself of His divinity to become man and die on the cross on our behalf to satisfy God's justice and win His mercy for us. The birth of Jesus manifested God's love. The love of God gives us joy.

GRATITUDE: "BE MERCIFUL"

Our experience of God's love and mercy stirs up in us a deep sense of gratitude to Him. The greatest and most genuine expression of gratitude is to imitate God in His mercy. The directive Jesus gave to His disciples, "*Be merciful as your Father is merciful*", is a call to express gratitude to the Father for His mercy.

This evening I would like to look at our response at two levels: the level of the ACS and our own personal level.

The level of the ACS

The Association of Churches in Sarawak was established, I think, at least forty years ago. Before that, the different Churches were not only not talking to one another but often talking against one another – with an air of superiority and a judgemental attitude.

The Association of Churches has now come a long way from that kind of attitude. Over time and guided by the Holy Spirit, we have learnt to love one another. In this love, we have learnt to forgive the hurts we caused to one another. We have learnt to respect and accept one another as children of the one Father in heaven – a status we do not deserve but we enjoy by the grace of the loving mercy of the Father.

Yes, we have experienced this loving mercy of God and are now reflecting it not just to one another but also jointly to others. Let me just single out a couple of ministries clearly reflecting the Father's loving mercy.

Pro-Life Ministry

This ministry seeks to save the lives of unborn babies. Those in this ministry have gone all out to proclaim the sanctity of life and reach out especially to pregnant girls and young women contemplating abortion. They have also been invited by different schools to talk to students about the value of life and advise them about boy-girl relationship. Their good work has been widely acknowledged.

Prison Ministry

Another ministry of mercy is the Prison Ministry. Members make regular visits to the prison – reaching out to prisoners with God's love and mercy to give them hope and inspire

them to turn over a new leaf. Prison ministers carry out their visits without a judgemental attitude.

Individual member Churches

There are many other ministries of love and mercy different member Churches of the ACS are carrying out. It is not possible to list all of them within the limited time available in this Joint Christmas Prayer Service. But surely, all of them are ways in which we Christians seek to be “*merciful like the Father*”.

Personal level

The personal level on which we seek to respond to Christ’s call to “*be merciful like your Father*” touches on several areas.

The family

The primary place where we are called to show love and mercy is of course the family. Let Christ’s call this evening be an occasion for us to examine our attitude towards our spouses and children. Am I loving and merciful towards those closest to me? Do I forgive when hurt? Do I apologise when wrong? Do I take out my anger on my family? Am I a terror in my family? Or am I a person of love? Am I doing my part to put God at the heart of my family? Am I drawing my family to God and to one another in love?

Neighbourhood, workplace and Church

From the family we move to our neighbourhood, our work place and our Church. How do I relate with people around me? Are they persons or simply nobodies? Do I exploit them for my own ends and purposes? Do I have a personal agenda in my relationship with others? Am I imposing on them? Do I apologise when wrong? Do I forgive when offended? Do I show love and inspire love?

Poor and needy

There are many people around us we are called to help – the poor and the needy, the sick and specially challenged persons, victims of human trafficking and exploitation, and even those in prison, and the list goes on. It would be strange if we did not know of any individual in need. We are called to respond to their need in the name of Christ – to show the Father’s mercy to them. For all of them are our sisters and brothers, children of the one Father in heaven.

In short, have we Christians been “*the salt of the earth and light of the world*” (Mt. 5:13,14) by being “*merciful like the Father*”?

LOVE AND MERCY – QUALIFICATION FOR THE KINGDOM

When Christ returns at the end of time, He wants to take us into His kingdom. But we need to qualify for entry. What is the qualification for entry? Christ spells it out in very clear terms in Mt. 25:31-46. Let me quote the following verses (34-37; 40):

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

What does this all mean for us at Christmastide? As we gaze at the Lord Jesus in the manger, we are led to sense His helplessness as a baby just born, His poverty as He was wrapped in swaddling cloth lying on the feeding trough of cattle, His humility as He became man. All these conditions reflected those of our sinfulness: in sin we are helpless, poor and humiliated. At birth Jesus identified Himself with us in conditions we have landed ourselves in through our sins.

Underlying Jesus' identification with us is of course His love and mercy for us. In His love and mercy He wanted to take our place to satisfy His Father's justice and pay the death penalty due to our sin. In this way, we could once again be reconciled with the Father and share in His eternal life in His kingdom for which He created us.

In the light of all this, Christmas is seen as a manifestation of the Father's love and mercy for us. Our celebration of it becomes meaningful and fruitful only when we genuinely respond to Christ's call to "*be merciful like your Father*". From this genuine response springs forth joy – the joy of Christmas.

It is in this joy that I wish all of you and your dear ones at home: "A joyous Christmas filled with the Lord's love and mercy."