

Resources for
THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY
and throughout the year

2024

You shall love
the Lord your God ...
and your neighbour as yourself

(Luke 10:27)

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BIBLICAL TEXT FOR 2024

Luke 10:25-37

A lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher”, he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live”.

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend”. Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy”. Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise”.

New Revised Standard Version

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME OF THE YEAR 2024

“You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbour as yourself”

(Luke 10:27)

The materials for the 2024 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity were prepared by an ecumenical team from Burkina Faso facilitated by the local *Chemin Neuf* Community (CCN)¹. The theme chosen is “You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbour as yourself” (Lk 10:27). Brothers and sisters from the Catholic Archdiocese of Ouagadougou, Protestant Churches, ecumenical bodies and the CCN in Burkina Faso collaborated generously in drafting the prayers and reflections and experienced their work together as a real path of ecumenical conversion.

Loving God and neighbour in the midst of a security crisis

Burkina Faso is located in West Africa in the Sahel region, which includes the neighbouring countries of Mali and Niger. It covers 174,000 km² and has 21 million inhabitants, of about sixty ethnicities. In religious terms, approximately 64% of the population is Muslim, 9% adheres to traditional African religions and 26% is Christian (20% Catholic, 6% Protestant). These three religious groups are present in every region of the country, and in virtually every family.

Burkina Faso is currently experiencing a serious security crisis, which affects all the communities of faith. After a major jihadist attack was mounted from outside the country in 2016, the security situation in Burkina Faso, and consequently its social cohesion, deteriorated dramatically. The country has endured a proliferation of terrorist attacks, lawlessness and human trafficking. This has left over three thousand dead and almost two million internally displaced persons in the country. Thousands of schools, health centres and town halls have been closed, and much of the socio-economic and transport infrastructure has been destroyed. Attacks targeting specific ethnic groups exacerbate the risk of inter-communal conflicts. In the context of this dire security situation, social cohesion, peace and national unity are being undermined.

Christian churches have been expressly targeted by armed attacks. Priests, pastors and catechists have been killed during worship and the fate of others who were kidnapped remains unknown. At the time of writing, more than 22% of the national territory is outside the control of the state. Christians can no longer openly practice their faith in these areas. Because of terrorism, the majority of Christian churches in the north, east and north-west of the country have been closed. There is no longer any public Christian worship in many of these areas. Where worship is still possible, with police protection, usually in large cities, it has been necessary to shorten services owing to security concerns.

It must be recognised that despite the efforts of both the state and religious communities, the country is becoming increasingly unstable as extremist groups become more widespread. Nevertheless, a degree of solidarity is emerging between the Christian, Muslim and traditional religions. Their leaders are working to find lasting solutions for peace, social cohesion and

1. Further information about CCN can be found in Appendix 3.

reconciliation. To this end, for instance, the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Burkina-Niger is making a major effort to support inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue and cooperation.

Following the government's calls for prayers for peace, social cohesion and reconciliation, individual churches continue to organise daily prayers and fasting. Action by the various Catholic and Protestant churches has intensified to assist displaced persons. Reflection and awareness-raising meetings have been organized to promote better understanding of the situation and of the value of fraternity, and to develop strategies for a return to lasting peace. This hope is also reflected in the traditional Mossi² proverb: "No matter the nature or duration of the fight, the moment of reconciliation will come."

The invitation to work together on the texts for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2024 challenges the different churches in Burkina Faso to walk, pray and work together in mutual love during this difficult period for their country. The love of Christ that unites all Christians is stronger than their divisions and the Christians of Burkina Faso commit themselves to walking the path of love of God and love of neighbour. They are confident that God's love will overcome the violence that currently afflicts their country.

The Biblical Text

The centrality of love in Christian life

Love is the 'DNA' of Christian faith. God is Love and "the love of Christ has gathered us into one".³ We find our common identity in the experience of God's love (cf. Jn 3:16) and reveal that identity to the world by how we love one another (Jn 13:35). In the passage selected for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2024 (Lk 10:25-37), Jesus reaffirmed the traditional Jewish teaching from Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might"; and Leviticus 19:18b, "you shall love your neighbour as yourself".

The lawyer in the gospel passage immediately asks Jesus, "and who is my neighbour?" The question of how far the biblical obligation to love should reach was a disputed one among doctors of the law. Traditionally, this obligation was believed to extend to fellow Israelites and resident aliens. Later, with the impact of invasions by foreign powers, the commandment came to be understood as not applying to foreigners from occupying forces. In time, as Judaism itself fragmented, it was sometimes understood to apply only to one's own particular faction. The question asked of Jesus by the lawyer is therefore a provocative one. Jesus responds to the question with a parable illustrating love extending far beyond the limits expected by the lawyer.

Many early Christian writers such as Origen, Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom and Augustine saw the trajectory of God's plan for the salvation of the world in this parable. They saw the man coming down from Jerusalem as an image of Adam – *ie* all humanity – coming down from paradise to this world, with all its dangers and brokenness, and the robbers as an image of the hostile earthly powers that assail us. They saw Christ himself as the one who, moved by compassion, came to the aid of the half-dead man, treated his wounds and brought him to the safety of an inn, which they saw as an image of the Church. The Samaritan's promise to return was seen as foreshadowing the Lord's promise to come again.

Christians are called to act like Christ in loving like the Good Samaritan, showing mercy and compassion to those in need, regardless of their religious, ethnic or social identity. It is not shared identities that should prompt us to come to the aid of the other, but love of our 'neighbour'. However, the vision of love of neighbour that Jesus puts before us is under strain in the world

2. The Mossi people are the largest ethnic group in Burkina Faso.

3. *Ubi caritas* (attrib. Paulinus of Aquileia).

today. Wars in many regions, imbalances in international relations and inequalities generated by structural adjustments imposed by western powers or other external agencies all inhibit our capacity to love like Christ. It is by learning to love one another regardless of our differences that Christians can become neighbours like the Samaritan in the Gospel.

The Way of Ecumenism

Jesus prayed that his followers would all be one (cf. *Jn 17:21*), and so Christians cannot lose hope or stop praying and working for unity. They are united by their love of God in Christ and by the experience of knowing God's love for them. They recognise this faith experience in one another when they pray, worship and serve God together. However, in inter-church relations, including in Burkina Faso, this remains a challenge. Lack of mutual knowledge between churches and suspicion of one another can weaken commitment to the way of ecumenism. Some can be anxious that ecumenism may lead to a loss of denominational identity and prevent church 'growth'. Such rivalry between churches is counter to the prayer of Jesus. Like the priest and the Levite in the gospel passage, Christians often miss the opportunity to connect with brothers and sisters because of fear. During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we ask the Lord to come to our assistance, to tend our wounds and so enable us to walk the way of ecumenism with confidence and hope.⁴

Christian unity in the service of wider peace and reconciliation

The specific context of Burkina Faso reflects the need to place love at the centre of the quest for peace and reconciliation. This search has often been undermined by the loss of values and of a shared sense of humanity and by a diminished concern for the common good, probity, integrity and patriotism. The search for reconciliation has also been weakened by spiritual impoverishment and by the pursuit of easy gains. Faced with these realities, the imperative to witness to the love of God is all the more pressing.

Moving from division to unity in Burkina Faso

Christian communities in Burkina Faso try to live the call to love through mutual hospitality. This is particularly evident during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. They have committed both human and financial resources to translating the ecumenical French text of the Bible (*Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible*) into local languages, thus helping to lead Christians to the 'inn' of the Word of God (cf. *Lk 10:34*). In addition, they visit each other's churches and share in worship. They also cooperate in the promotion of human fraternity, peace and security in Burkina Faso. They bring Christ to their brothers and sisters when they tend the wounds of those who fall into the grip of poverty and hardship.

However, as an African proverb says, "The tree must not hide the forest". These positive ecumenical examples cannot disguise the fact that there remain many challenges to unity. Despite their efforts to be the neighbour of all who confess the Triune God, the churches of Burkina Faso struggle to truly love each other as Christ commands. They sometimes relate to each other like Samaritans and Jews, divided culturally and theologically and living in unfriendly or hostile relationships. Continued disunity disfigures them and they acknowledge the need for ecumenical conversion, so that they can pour the oil and wine of healing on each other's wounds.

The inn in the parable of the Good Samaritan was frequently interpreted by Church Fathers as an image of the Church. Just as the Samaritan brought the wounded man to the inn, so Christ entrusts the world's wounded and needy to our churches, to tend their brokenness and help restore them to health. This mission in service of the world is also the pathway towards the unity which is God's gift for God's people.

4. For information about how churches in Burkina Faso are working together, see Appendix 2.

BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS FOR THE EIGHT DAYS

DAY 1

*A lawyer stood up to test Jesus.
“Teacher”, he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
(Lk 10:25)*

Help us, Lord, to have a life turned towards you

Additional scripture passages

Romans 14:8-9

Psalm 103:13-18

Reflection

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” This crucial question asked of Jesus by a lawyer challenges every believer in God. It affects the meaning of our life on earth and for eternity. Elsewhere in the Bible, Jesus gives us the ultimate definition of eternal life: “... that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (Jn 17:3). Knowing God means discovering and doing his will in our lives. Every person wants a life of fullness and truth, and God desires this for us too (cf. Jn 10:10). Saint Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive”.

The existential realities of life, with divisions, selfishness and suffering, often distance us from the quest for God. Jesus lived the mystery of intimate communion with the Father, who desires to fill all his children with the fullness of his eternal life. Jesus is “the Way” that leads us to the Father, our ultimate destiny.

Thus, our quest for eternal life brings us closer to Jesus, and in so doing brings us nearer to each other, strengthening our closeness on the path toward Christian unity. Let us be open to friendship and collaboration with Christians of all churches, praying for the day when we can all stand together at the Table of the Lord.

Prayer

God of life,

You have created us to have life, and life in all its fullness.

May we recognise in our brothers and sisters their desire for eternal life.

As we follow Jesus’ way with determination, may we lead others to you.

We pray in his name. Amen.

DAY 2

*The lawyer answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind;
and your neighbour as yourself"
(Lk 10:27)*

**Help me Lord to love you, my neighbour and myself
with all that I am**

Additional scripture passages

Deuteronomy 10:12-13

Psalm 133

Reflection

The lawyer's answer may seem simple, drawn from the well-known commandments of God. However, to love God in this way and our neighbour as ourselves can often be difficult.

God's commandment to love him requires deep commitment and means abandoning ourselves entirely, offering our hearts and minds to serve God's will. We can ask for the grace to follow Christ's example, he who offered himself up completely and said, "Not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). He also manifested his great love to all, including his enemies. We do not get to choose our neighbours. Loving them means being attentive to their needs, accepting their imperfections and encouraging their hopes and aspirations. The same attitude is needed on the path of Christian unity, with regard to one another's different traditions.

The call to love your neighbour "as yourself" reminds us of the need to accept ourselves as we are, conscious of God's compassionate gaze upon us, always ready to forgive. Consider that we are God's beloved creation. Respect yourself. Seek peace with yourself. Similarly, we can each ask for the grace to love and accept our own church or community, with its failings, entrusting all things to the Father, who restores us through the Holy Spirit.

Prayer

Lord, give us the grace to know you more deeply,
in order to love you with all of our being.

Grant us a pure heart, to love our neighbour as ourselves.

May the gift of your Holy Spirit

enable us to see your presence in our sisters and brothers,

that we may love each other with the same unconditional love with which you love us.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

DAY 3

“Who is my neighbour?”
(Lk 10: 29)

Lord, open our hearts to those we do not see

Additional scripture passages

Romans 13:8-10

Psalm 119:57-63

Reflection

The teacher of the law wanted to justify himself, hoping that the neighbour he is called to love is one of his own faith and people. This is a natural human instinct. When we invite people to our homes, they are quite often people who share our social status, our outlook on life and our values. There is a human instinct to prefer places of familiarity. This is also true of our ecclesial communities. But Jesus takes the lawyer, and his wider audience, deeper into their own tradition by reminding them of the obligation to welcome and to love all, regardless of religion, culture or social status.

The Gospel teaches that loving those who are like ourselves is not extraordinary. Jesus steers us towards a radical vision of what it means to be human. The parable illustrates in a very visible way what Christ expects from us – to open wide our hearts and walk in his way, loving others as he loves us. In fact, Jesus answers the lawyer with another question: it is not “who is my neighbour”, but, “who proved to be a neighbour to the man in need?”

Our times of insecurity and fear confront us with a reality where distrust and uncertainty come to the forefront of relationships. This is the challenge of the parable today: to whom am I a neighbour?

Prayer

God of love,
Who write love in our hearts,
instil in us the courage to look beyond ourselves
and see the neighbour in those different from ourselves,
that we may truly follow Jesus Christ,
our brother and our friend,
who is Lord, for ever and ever. Amen.

DAY 4

*When he saw him, he passed by on the other side
(Lk 10:31)*

May we never turn away from those in need

Additional scripture passages

Isaiah 58:6-9a

Psalm 34:15-22

Reflection

The priest and Levite who walk by on the other side may have had good religious reasons for not helping: they may have been ready to perform certain religious rituals and might have risked ritual defilement if the man had been dead. Yet on many occasions, Jesus is critical of religious leadership for placing the rules of religion ahead of the obligation to always do good.

The beginning of the text for the Week of Prayer tells us how the teacher of the law wanted to justify himself. The priest and the Levite in the parable would have felt justified in what they had done. As Christians, how far are we prepared to go beyond convention? Sometimes our ecclesial and culturally conditioned short-sightedness can prevent us from seeing what is being revealed by the life and witness of sisters and brothers of other Christian traditions. When we open our eyes to see how God's love is revealed by our fellow Christians, we are drawn closer to them and so are drawn into deeper union with them.

This parable of Jesus not only challenges us to do good, but also to widen our vision. We do not only learn what is good and holy from those who share our confessional or religious worldview, but often from those different from ourselves. The Good Samaritan is often the one we do not expect.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,

As we journey with you towards unity,
may our eyes not look away,
but be wide open to the world.

As we travel through life,
may we stop and reach out, bind up the wounded
and in so doing experience your presence in them:
you who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

DAY 5

*He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them
(Lk 10:34)*

Lord, help us see the wounds and find hope

Additional scripture passages

Joel 2:23-27

Psalm 104:14-15, 27-30

Reflection

The Good Samaritan did what he could out of his own resources: he poured wine and oil and bandaged the man's wounds and put him on his own animal. He went further still by promising to pay for his care. When we see the world through the Samaritan's eyes, every situation can be an opportunity to help those in need. This is where love manifests itself. The example of the Good Samaritan motivates us to ask ourselves how to respond to our neighbour. He gave wine and oil, restoring the man and giving him hope. What can we give, so that we can be a part of God's work of healing a broken world?

This brokenness shows itself in our world in insecurity, fear, distrust and division. Shamefully, these divisions also exist between Christians. Though we celebrate sacraments or other rituals of healing, reconciliation and consolation, often using oil and wine, we persist in divisions that wound the Body of Christ. The healing of our Christian divisions promotes the healing of the nations.

Prayer

Gracious God,

You who are the source of all love and goodness:

enable us to see the needs of our neighbour.

Show us what we can do to bring about healing.

Change us, so that we can love all our brothers and sisters.

Help us to overcome the obstacles of division,
that we might build a world of peace for the common good.

Thank you for renewing your Creation

and leading us to a future which is full of hope:

you who are Lord of all, yesterday, today and forever. Amen.

DAY 6

*Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn,
and took care of him (Lk 10:34)*

Lord, turn our churches into ‘inns’, to welcome those in need

Additional scripture passages

Genesis 18:4-5

Psalm 5:11-12

Reflection

The man who fell into the hands of robbers was cared for by a Samaritan. The Samaritan saw beyond prejudice or bias. He saw someone in need and brought him to an inn. “The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend” (Lk 10:35).

In any human society, hospitality and solidarity are essential. They require the welcoming of strangers, foreigners, migrants and homeless people. However, when faced with insecurity, suspicion and violence, we tend to mistrust our neighbours. Hospitality is an important witness to the Gospel, particularly in contexts of religious and cultural pluralism. Welcoming ‘the other’, and being welcomed in turn, is at the heart of ecumenical dialogue. Christians are challenged to turn our churches into inns where our neighbours can find Christ. Such hospitality is a sign of the love that our churches have for one another and for all.

When we as followers of Christ move beyond our confessional traditions and choose to practice ecumenical hospitality, we move from being strangers to being neighbours.

Prayer

Father of love,

In Jesus, you showed us the meaning of hospitality,
by caring for our fragile humanity.

Help us to become a community
that welcomes those who feel abandoned and lost,
building a house where all are welcome.

May we come closer to one another as we offer the world your unconditional love.

This we pray in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

DAY 7

*Jesus said: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour?"
(Lk 10:36)*

Lord, show us how to respond to our neighbour

Additional scripture passages

Philippians 2:1-5

Psalms 10:17-18

Reflection

At the end of the parable, Jesus asked the lawyer: who was the neighbour to the man victimized? The lawyer replied "the one who showed him mercy". He does not say "the Samaritan" and we might imagine that the hostility between Samaritans and Jews made that answer hard to admit. We often discover neighbours in the most unexpected people, even those whose very name or origins we find difficult to utter. In today's world, where polarized politics often set those of different religious identities against one another, Jesus challenges us through this parable to see the importance of our vocation to cross borders and walls of separation.

As with the lawyer, we are challenged to reflect upon how we live our lives, not merely in terms of whether we do good or not, but whether, like the priest and the Levite, we are neglecting to act mercifully.

Prayer

Holy God,

your Son Jesus Christ came among us
to show us the way of compassion.

Help us by your Spirit to follow his example,
to serve the needs of all your children,

and so give united Christian witness to your ways of love and mercy.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

DAY 8

*Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise"
(Lk 10:37)*

Lord, may our fellowship be a sign of your Kingdom

Additional scripture passages

Romans 12:9-13

Psalm 41:1-2

Reflection

Through these words – “Go and do likewise” – Jesus sends each of us, and each of our churches, to live out his commandment to love. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, we are sent out to be “other Christs”, reaching out to suffering humanity in compassion and mercy. Like the Good Samaritan towards the injured man, we can choose not to reject those who are different, but instead cultivate a culture of proximity and goodwill.

How does Jesus’ invitation to “Go and do likewise” speak to my life? What does this call of Christ imply for my relationships with members of other churches? How can we charitably bear witness together to God’s love? As ambassadors for Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:20), we are called to be reconciled to God and to one another, for fellowship to take root and grow in our churches and in areas affected by inter-communal conflict, such as the Sahel region.

As mutual trust and confidence increase, we will become more willing to reveal our wounds, including ecclesial wounds, that Christ’s love may visit and heal us through each other’s love and care. Striving together for Christian unity helps rebuild relationships, so that violence can give way to solidarity and peace.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

we thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit, the giver of life,
who makes us more open to each other, resolves conflict,
and strengthens our bonds of communion.

May we grow in mutual affection

and in the desire to announce the Gospel message more faithfully,

that the world may come together in unity

and welcome the Prince of Peace.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.