

Do not fear the future but embrace it, says World Council of Churches leader

The following is the text of a sermon â??Christ our spiritual compass and hopeâ?• delivered by the World Council of Churches general secretary, the Revâ??d Professor Dr Jerry Pillay, in St. Peterâ??s Cathedral in Adelaide in June.



Dr Jerry Pillay, general secretary of the World Council of Churches

Good morning to each and all of you here today. I thank your archbishop, the Most Reverend Geoff Smith, and your cathedral dean, the Right Reverend Chris McLeod, for their gracious invitation to share Godâ??s Word with you today.

I bring you greetings from the World Council of Churches and joining me in these greetings are our 352 member churches in 120 countries in the world with over 600 million Christians.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be worthy in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

As one who usually finds it difficult to sleep on airplanes because I am so tall, I occasionally enjoy the luxury to travel in business class, it is only in there that I can get some sleep. I let go of all the cares and pressures and demands as I stretch out on my back, and drift off for a bit into a blissful, careless oblivion until I am disturbed by turbulence or the call to fasten your seatbelts.

So, I am glad to see that Jesus, at least by Markâ??s account in the gospel today, approves of naps and is even a bit testy when he is interrupted! Still, I hope not to induce one in you as we reflect on these readings today. Mark tells us Jesus is sleeping in the boat when there is a raging storm and waves breaking over the boat. Interestingly, Jesus is not disturbed by the storm but by his disciples with the accusation, â??Teacher, don`t you care if we drown?â?•

Today the world around us is raging in multiple storms: poverty, hunger, racism, violence, wars, a climate catastrophe and the list goes on. We sometimes

wonder why Jesus is asleep amidst these storms. Canâ??t you get up and do something and do it quick. We are destroying the world, people and planet are at risk. Floods, fires and disasters are destroying lives and environment.

Political leaders seem to support war and violence. Church leaders are confused about whom they should follow, and we wonder how it will all end.

Jesus stands in the middle of our storms, and he says follow me and I will see you through.

Our storms in life whether spiritual, material, physical, emotional and psychological all find their peace, hope and calm in Christ. Christ is our spiritual compass when we are lost, confused and thrown into a state of panic and desperation as the disciples were at that moment. We are told that Jesus got up and rebuked the wind and it was completely calm.

There are some important lessons to learn from our readings today.

1. **Jesus is in the boat: Have faith**

When we are facing trials, tribulations and persecutions it is easy to think God is not with us. We are alone. When we are going through bouts of darkness, depression and despair it is natural to feel abandoned and forsaken by God. It is easy to accuse God of not caring, lacking compassion and being absent when we need him most. As a pastor I have heard people say this many times in their personal struggles through divorce, death, financial crises, sickness and suffering. As General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, I hear critical questions and reflections about injustices, sufferings and pain in the world, and the question: where is God in the midst of all these?

Where is God when thousands of people are killed in Palestine, Ukraine, Sudan and other parts of the world? Where is God when thousands of people go to bed hungry every night? Where is God when thousands of people are denied access to humanitarian aid? Where is God when hundreds of migrants drown or die while fleeing their countries? Where is God when human rights and dignity are denied, deprived and violated? Where is God when indigenous people are denied of their rights, land and history? Where is God when old people are forgotten, and young people not given space to express themselves? Where is God?

Mark tells us that Jesus is in the boat. He is with us in rough and tough times. We are not alone, never alone. He is always with us even when it does not feel that way sometimes. Once I visited one of the ministers in my church who was hospitalised suffering with depression and burn out. I said John, where are you spiritually now, in faith and hope? He responded, â??Jerry, I know Jesus is here in this room, he is seated on that chair, but I need to feel Him in me, I`m not

there yet.â?•

I guess, we all feel that way sometimes. The disciples felt that in that storm that day. Jesus got up and stilled the storm and he said to the disciples, â??Why are you afraid? Do you still have faith?â?• These are the questions Jesus poses to us in our storms in life. Do you still have faith?

What kind of person can sleep through a storm violent enough to swamp the boat and frighten experienced seamen? Or can command the winds to still and the seas to calm? As Jesus himself tells them, it is a person of faith.

We find in Jesus one so close to God, so beloved of God, so trusting of God, as to banish fear and engender courage equal to the elements.

With Jesus, and through him, we too have access to such faith. It is not primarily a matter of beliefs, precious though they be. Nor is faith a question of affiliation with and allegiance to a church or denomination or confession, however important. Nor is it a matter of keeping the Sabbath or following other religious practices and laws, as Jesus himself argued in this reading from Mark. No, faith is falling in love with God, trusting God and Godâ??s compassion with our lives and destiny. Despite suffering, tragedy, and even death, we affirm with gratitude Godâ??s gift of life, and we work tirelessly to protect, support, and nurture it. As Psalm 9:10 affirms, â??Those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek youâ?•.

This steadfast commitment, or self-surrender, to Godâ??s love, revealed in Christ, frees us from our wants and fears, our comforts and delusions, and enables us to face reality, heal from trauma, and make ourselves available to others. It sets us on a journey.

Of course, rough seas will come, winds will howl. As disciples, we huddle in our ships, hoping to make it to shore, with faith not so much in the outcome as in Godâ??s accompaniment. Perhaps that is why the symbol of the ecumenical movement is a ship sailing on the waves, guided only by a mast in the shape of a cross, our sails trusting the winds of Godâ??s Spirit.

David trusted the presence of God when he faced his giant, Goliath. He said, â??I come in the name of God.â?• And with his stones and sling he faced and overcame his giant. In this world we face many giants: poverty, sickness, death, hunger, migration, climate change, economic and gender injustices, personal struggles and pain but, and it is a big But, we are not alone. Jesus is in the boat. God is with us. He is with you right now, right in your storm taking you through. He says, â??Have faith.â?• Do you?

Who are we as Christians? Mark is telling us: we are disciples of Christ, eager but lost, unschooled in the ways of God, relying on Jesus to bolster our faith and

rescue our imperilled craft and our journey together. On land or sea, our pilgrimage of faith binds us together in deep communion as disciples of the one Lord.

God is in control: Bank on hope!

The Apostle Paul, himself no stranger to dangerous journeys, or fickle disciples, offers guidance on how we can live our faith in the turbulence of this worldâ??and sometimes the more turbulent church. He wrote four letters to the Gentile followers of Jesus in Corinth (only two are extant), and they bristle with remonstrations, corrections, warnings, and pleadings. Perhaps you have heard, Archbishop, some congregations can be difficultâ?¦

Not that church is normally a panacea, an ideal community of like-minded souls. Far from it. One recent author has defined church as the community of people you would otherwise never choose to hang out with. As we in the ecumenical movement have discovered, however, our diversity need not spell division. Our distinctive gifts illuminate the shared core of faith commitments. And we need not resolve every historical disagreement to join in fellowship and work to save the world. Our shared roots go deeper.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians to stop their backsliding into pagan ways, to vindicate his message and ministry, and to prepare them to find salvation in their upcoming afflictions and persecution. Paul recites all the hardships he has endured for their sake and the sake of the kingdom. Not to brag (though he can do that sometimes), but to bolster his credibility as an apostle, the late-arriving disciple of Jesus. His catalogue of woes is crowned with virtue, saying:

As servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: in great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; in purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God. (2 Cor 6:4-7)

This passage is a veritable primer in the costs of discipleship. Like Paul, we gain real hope when we join the dying and rising Christ, who gave it all away on the cross, achieving vindication on the third day. Love and life will defeat suffering and death and the powers that deal death in the world. Christâ??s resurrection is ours as well, and his continued presence in the worldâ??in us and our neighbours, in our shared life as a community, in the Word and the Divine Liturgyâ??further strengthens our hope and ignites creativity for the redemption of the world. In the words of the WCC assembly theme, â??Christâ??s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.â?•

So, our faith is neither arbitrary nor naive. Nor is our hope some simple-minded optimism. Christâ??s triumph over death and his continued presence among us,

bringing Godâ??s compassion: that is the basis for a hope we can embrace in ourselves and offer to the world. It changes everything! In the words of this generationâ??s ecumenical prophet of hope, the late JÅ±rgen Moltmann, â??Christian hope draws the promised future of God into the present day and prepares the present day for this futureâ?¦. In light of our faith, as Christians we can honestly assess and face the full force of humanityâ??s contemporary challenges yet also experience and instill a realistic hope of transcending them.â?• We can bank on hope because we know that amidst all our storms, God is in control, God will calm the storms. For in Christ, God, the Father, holds all things together. Even when things fall apart, they come together.

Serve God in love!

These times again test our faith against the elements. No litany can fully capture the depth and magnitude of the challenges humankind faces today. And you, here in Adelaide, know firsthand the tragedy and destruction unleashed by climate disasters. Like all of us, you also witness the increasing global economic inequality, the poisoning of politics and media, and the mass migration of refugees displaced by violence, persecution, and war, challenges in health and education. As persons of faith and hope, as Christians, how are we to respond?

I believe that, as faith grounds our hope, so hope fuels our engagement in the world. Thus, we are called to serve God and the world in love and faithfulness.

I find compelling the ecumenical notion of transformative discipleship. It echoes Jesusâ?? own practice and Paulâ??s hard-won insights. Transformative discipleship notes that the faith-led engagements by which we Christians change the world will also transform us. It impels a kind of ongoing conversion of ourselves and the world. This mutuality creates a spiral of transformation, an alternative, nonviolent future for us and our world. By making ourselves utterly available to address the needs around us, â??we shall all be changedâ?• (1 Cor 15:51).

In this way, I believe our communities of faith become bearers of hope and agents of reconciliation. We step up and out to be advocates for justice, makers of peace, counsellors of unity, catalysts for creative engagement at all levels. Following Jesusâ?? example and his mandate, we are healing the wounded, caring for the afflicted and vulnerable, telling the truth about ourselves and our world.

This way of life is embodied in the ecumenical Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity. Through it, you and all of us in the ecumenical fellowship pledge to pursue justice, reconciliation, and unity in concrete ways. At the WCC, the Pilgrimage is a guiding light to all our work, an umbrella over all our programmatic efforts. Whether in ecumenical theology, international affairs, global health, or communications, we see the whole global ecumenical

movement journeying toward justice, peace, and reconciliation. Practically, that means pursuing human dignity, human rights, peace among peoples, and the health of the planet through deep engagement in concrete activities and consequential partnerships. As Christians, and as Christian churches, our discipleship finds concrete expression in enhancing the human good.

Fundamentally, then, the Pilgrimage is a metaphor for the sacred journey of faith by which all of us, as Christian disciples and as churches, unite to walk and work and pray for the reign of God and the welfare of humanity. Its interlocking aims are meant to address our multiple crises through the fellowshipâ??s and member churchesâ?? modelling real community, through our joint advocacy and action, and through our accompaniment with and service to those in need.

Likewise, for the larger society, including those not affiliated with the churches or those of other traditions, and all people of good will, our message is simple: *Do not lose heart! Commit to life!* In this way, we Christians can become the creative minority that will not allow society to give up on hope or give up on itself, abandoning future generations and the planet. As Paul himself said, â??A little yeast leavens the whole batch of doughâ?• (Gal 5:9).

Jesus asked, â??Where is your faith? Do you still believe? Faith is action. It is joining with God to make a better world for all people and creation. The storms are raging but Christ our spiritual compass holds all things together.

And so, I urge you, my fellow disciples of the Lord, keep the faith, nurture hope, and serve in love. We, as Christians and Christian communities, need not fear the future but must embrace it. We are communities of hope and reconciliation because we know that the God of Life is continually sustaining, renewing, and transforming ourselves and all creation. Each moment presents us with redemptive possibilities for resurrection to new life and Godâ??s New Creation in Christ. We are a movement of hope in life. We are people of faith even in the middle of life`s storms. Does this describe you?

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