

WORLD DAY OF PRAYER ALTERNATIVE MEDITATION

Based on picture and Ephesians 1, 15 – 19 (NRSV).

For the meditation I am not using the printed version but would like to comment on the beautiful picture and the scripture reading in the context of the church in Taiwan. Please have a look at the picture for a moment.

I can see two women praying: one kneeling at a river with a child strapped to her back, and another standing, stretching her arms out to the bird, which is flying from darkness into light.

The bird is a spoonbill, an especially endangered bird in Taiwan. Could it be a symbol for the Holy Spirit, showing us the way to God's light, - or "seeing with the eyes of the heart", as Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians?

Taiwan has experienced many dark times, inflicted by the various occupying powers over the years.

In the 16th Century there were the Portuguese, followed in the 17th century by the Dutch and the Chinese and lasting into the 18th century. Then in the 19th century came the Japanese.

In 1949, the Kuomintang regime under Chiang Kai-Shek lost the civil war with the Chinese Communists and retreated to Taiwan, leading to civil unrest with the indigenous population and martial law.

Only since 1960 were the Taiwanese people able to fight for freedom, democracy and human rights. It took 27 years for these rights to be established, with martial law being lifted in 1987.

In 1996 the first presidential election took place, and since 2016 the country has had its first female president.

These dates show us what a “young” country Taiwan is as an independent country, yet the fossil record shows that humans have been living in Taiwan for 20,000 years.

I mention these things because this is where the Taiwanese have quite a bit in common with the first Christians in Ephesus. When Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, he himself was imprisoned for his faith’s sake, but he still received information about the church communities he had founded. He begins the letter by reminding the Ephesians to always remember the unfathomable grace of God bestowed on them, giving them freedom and forgiveness through their faith in Jesus Christ.

The second part of the first chapter begins with verse 15:

“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you,---”

Paul had heard about their steadfast faith and their deep love for all. These little words, “for all”, are important. They tell us that the Ephesians did not only love family and friends but lived the deep agape love that is grounded in faith. They could reach out with loving actions beyond their immediate horizon.

Originally this letter was sent to the Christians in Ephesus. Now it addresses all of us. Paul is overjoyed about their spiritual progress, but he wants more for them.

We are urged to pray to gain deeper knowledge of who God is and what God's ways are. To be able to understand this we need to ask for the illumination of the eyes of our hearts. God's ways are not grasped through mere theories. God needs to be understood through our "inner eye".

Paul praised the Ephesians faith and love, and now he adds hope. Hope in hopeless situations is only possible if rooted in faith in Jesus Christ. In dangerous and seemingly hopeless situations it's easy to perceive God as non-existent, as absent, or as weak. It is especially then that we need to ask for this inner enlightenment to grasp the greatness of God's power.

When we read through the information we received from Taiwan about their general and church history, we see that in the post-World War 2 period the Taiwanese had to endure crushing persecution at the hands of the Chiang Kai-Shek regime, which imposed martial law for as long as 38 years. Yet the remnants of church life were there to blossom again when this period came to an end.

In view of the expansionist ambitions of mainland China, wanting to take Taiwan back as they did Hong Kong, we know it is our task to pray for the people of Taiwan, living as they do with the constant threat of invasion.

If you look closely at the map you will see that all their major ports and airports are on the western side of the island, within easy reach of mainland China.

Let us, who live so far in relative safety, take on the pastoral role of the apostle Paul and pray that the Taiwanese Christians may stay strong in their faith and deepen their wisdom and knowledge of God's power and love, whatever the circumstances.

We have heard stories about Christians in Taiwan, and in other countries where there is severe persecution of Christians at the present time.

The Taiwanese World Day of Prayer Committee responded with letters of encouragement.

Let us continue the liturgy from page 9.