

Today we're coming to the final session of our Lent discussions and reflections when we look at our two final marks of love and mission – Transform and Treasure. Let's begin with Transform.

## **Week 5 – Transform**

*Great God, who has told us "Vengeance is mine," save us from ourselves; save us from the vengeance in our hearts and the acid in our souls.*

*Save us from our desire to hurt as we have been hurt, to punish as we have been punished, to terrorize as we have been terrorized. Give us the strength it takes to listen rather than to judge, to trust rather than to fear, to try again and again to make peace even when peace eludes us.*

*We ask, O God, for the grace to be our best selves. We ask for the vision to be builders of the human community rather than its destroyers. We ask for the humility as a people to understand the fears and hopes of other peoples.*

*Give us the depth of soul, O God, to constrain our might, to resist the temptations of power, to refuse to attack the attackable, to understand that vengeance begets violence, and to bring peace--not war--wherever we go.*

*For You, O God, have been merciful to us. For You, O God, have been patient with us. For You, O God, have been gracious to us. And so may we be merciful and patient and gracious and trusting with these others whom you also love.*

*This we ask through Jesus, the one without vengeance in his heart.  
This we ask forever and ever. Amen*

*-- Excerpt from A Prayer for World Peace – by Sister Joan Chittister, OSB*

So this week we're really thinking about transforming unjust structures in society.

The material that spoke to me most this week was Day 4 by James Koester. He says that this mark is the most daunting for him, we can only start small, start here and start now. He says this mark is a really tall order, he often thinks what can he really do, he's only one person. We could throw up our hands and decide I can't do anything, but there is something small we can all do. One of my favourite quotations is from Edward Everett Hale who once said "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do."

This mark of mission is really daunting, but there is something small all of us can do. What's the one thing you can do today to begin to transform unjust structures, to pursue peace and reconciliation and to challenge violence of every kind?

We talk about transforming, but in general we are to obey worldly authorities, because these have been ordained by God to rule over us. Listen to what Paul says in Romans Chapter 13: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing." (Ro 13:1-6 NIV)

However, our ultimate authority, our final master is God, so if authorities act in ways that are not in accordance with God's Laws or command us to do things which are contrary to God's laws we are justified in disobeying and indeed it's right for us to try and bring the structure back into conformity with God's laws.

So, when the apostles were commanded not to preach in the name of Jesus:

"Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed. Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life." At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no-one inside." On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this. Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them. Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." (Ac 5:16-32 NIV)

they were justified in disobeying the authorities, because they were being commanded to go against God's will because Jesus had commanded them to preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations.

Also, our God is a God of justice and righteousness, so when we come across injustice in this world we are to try and right the wrongs and change the structures which are responsible.

### **Why is justice critical to God's mission in the world?**

Scripture tells us:

"Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits." (Ex 23:6 NIV)

““Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly.” (Le 19:15 NIV)

“Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.” (De 16:20 NIV)

### **Where do you think we find injustice in the world today?**

The story of the Exodus in the OT speaks of God’s desire to free his people from oppression. The liberation God wins for the people of ancient Israel is political and economic, as well as religious.

In the giving of the Law, God establishes communal norms that protect the poor from exploitation and limit the power of the rich. God’s laws are designed to create a common good, and to allow it to flourish.

When the people stray from these laws, God sends the prophets to challenge their unjust social-political structures and to re-focus the attention of the people on God’s vision for them. The prophets cry out against the human suffering created by unjust systems imposed by the wealthy and powerful.

Similarly, the Good News preached by Jesus is not only personal and spiritual, but also communal, social and political. Jesus comes announcing that “the kingdom of God has come near” and urging people to “repent and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). The repentance he requires is not *just* a turning away from personal sin, but the *transformation* of social and political systems that elevate some at the expense of others. “Kingdom” is a political term, and although Jesus could have spoken of the “*family* of God” or the “*community* of God,” he chose to speak of the “*kingdom* of God,” a kingdom that stood in stark contrast to the kingdoms of Herod and of Caesar, with which his hearers were very familiar. He taught his followers to pray that God’s kingdom would come “on earth” as it already is in heaven – he meant *right now, in this life*, not just in the after-life.

Jesus tells us that it is for this reason that he was sent into the world: “to bring good news to the poor,” “to proclaim release to the captives,” “to let the oppressed go free,” “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:18,19).

- *How did Christ challenge the injustice and violence of his day? What is he calling us to today?*

### **What can we do to eliminate this injustice and change the structures responsible? – the power of prayer**

#### **Week 6 – Treasure**

God created everything and all creation belongs to him, creation speaks to us of God: The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or

language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.” (Ps 19:1-6 NIV)

The material world around us is good – Genesis chapter I continually says so. And we are the pinnacle of creation, the only created beings made in God’s image. But we have marred and distorted that image through our sin. Nevertheless we have been given the task of ruling over all creation. God also assigns mankind a high role – to rule over other created life forms and to multiply and subdue the earth. Let me read to you from Genesis chapter I:

“Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."” (Ge 1:26-28 NIV)

These verses have sometimes been used to justify the unrestrained exploitation of our planet and its life forms by mankind, but I believe that is an unbiblical interpretation. Other OT passages (such as Micah 6:8), make it clear that mankind was and is to rule over creation as God’s helper in accordance with God’s nature – that is with justice, righteousness and mercy. Additionally, mankind’s rule is now subject to the ultimate authority of Christ, who has been appointed to rule over us (Revelations 19:15). We should feel amazed, and also humbled, that God, in His mighty power, has seen fit to produce such a huge and magnificent creation for us and that He has placed us at its head. What an awesome responsibility! However, let us not be too proud of this high calling as we remember that we were created out of the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7).

Today we wrongly exploit the created order and God doesn’t like it. Listen to these words spoken by the prophet Ezekiel to the people of ancient Israel:

*“Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?” (Ezekiel 34:18-19)*

- When we think of our relationship with creation today, what does it look like? What are some of the ways in which we are ‘muddying the waters’ and ‘treading down the land’? In what ways have we exploited and abused the creation?

We need to work to restore creation.

Hear the words of the psalmist: *Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea thunder and all that is in it; let the field be joyful and all that is therein. Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy before the Lord when he comes, when he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with his truth. (Psalm 96: 11-13)*

- When we abuse creation, we hear cries of anguish rather than songs of joy. How can we restore creation's songs of joy as we anticipate the coming of the Lord?
- What are some of the ways in which we can restore the creation?
- What are some big and small ways we can give back to creation and show our thanks?

This week I liked the words of John Braught. He says in the face of the degradation of creation it is easy to feel helpless and powerless. We need to pray because God comes to us in our darkest hour and our greatest need.

In the face of the degradation of the environment it can be difficult to know what one individual or even one small group can do. We recycle, maybe we're involved in an organization that's trying to make a difference. But in the face of the world we live in, and the choices that are being made that are so much bigger than one individual or group, it can seem like an uphill struggle most of the time.

Now I think all of us definitely need to do whatever we can to help restore the environment. But this is a problem that really only God can solve. It's much bigger than any of us and I think it's healthy to admit that. At the end of the day this is God's creation, this is God's world and God will have the final word.

And so I think the best thing we can do, not the only thing, but perhaps the best thing we can do is to pray. Jesus said whatever you ask in faith will be given to you and I think we should take God at his word. Prayer is powerful, prayer can change things. God comes to us in our darkest hour. God comes to us in our place of need. We need God to restore the environment and to show us what we can do to help.

### **What can we do as individuals to help Treasure God's creation?**

Have we been discounting prayer with regard to the restoration of creation?

Let the group know that there are simple steps to take to give back to creation. The group may want to "brainstorm" a list of these things: Creating compost that nurtures the soil. Planting trees that prevent erosion. Adding flowers that offer habitats for butterflies, bees and birds.

**I think we desperately need prayer in relation to both the issues we've discussed today**

**So as we come to the end of our marks of love and mission has anything spoken to you especially about God's love?**