



### Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy, Fiji

ECREA has long campaigned for fair wages for Fijian workers. Just over half the population of Fiji takes home pay packets that are beneath the poverty line. Despite having jobs, these people are perpetually poor and unable to work their way out of poverty. Increased food prices in the last two years have been particularly hard on the poorest. Wage rises have lagged well behind the cost of living. A flower seller in Suva's market says the cost of living has shot up. However, she feels that selling flowers is more secure than having a salaried position in an office.

ECREA's long campaign for wage justice this year resulted in a Government announcement that minimum wages would rise in garment manufacture, printing, building, hotel and catering work, security, road transport, sawmilling, and in the wholesale and retail sectors. The Ministry of Labour accepted the main recommendations of ECREA's Just Wages for Fiji study, the consequence of ECREA's advocacy work with successive governments. However, more lobbying is needed to bring the wages of all workers in both the formal and informal sectors to decent and fair levels.

### Department of Service for Palestinian Refugees, Gaza

For 25 years, CWS has supported DSPR in its efforts to bring justice and humanitarian support to Palestinians. In Gaza, it provides community health services, vocational training, cash assistance for water, fuel, healthcare, food and nutrition supplements, and counselling programmes.

Currently, DSPR is working tirelessly to reconstruct buildings destroyed in the 22-day Gaza bombings earlier this year. In particular, it is trying to get materials into Gaza City to rebuild a mother and child clinic in Al Shija'ia which was reduced to rubble by an Israeli air strike in January. As a temporary solution, the clinic is operating from a makeshift building while DSPR works to find a permanent home for the clinic. However, this building needs renovation. It has no windows. Part of it sits unfinished and unused, waiting for the most basic but costly construction materials.

The crippling blockade is restricting efforts to rebuild the clinic and the wider Gaza area. DSPR says the blockade is in fact slowly killing Gazans, who are captive and slowly suffocating. Even before the war, nearly 80 percent of Gazans lived below the poverty line on less than \$NZ3.50 a day, according to the World Bank.

### Centre for Community Solidarity, Uganda

In the Oruchinga Valley, in Uganda's dry southwest, orphans and other vulnerable children have to walk 8km to the Kagera River to collect water. On the way, they risk rape and other assault.

CCS Uganda is working to overcome this by building rainwater collection tanks near people's homes, negating the need for children to carry out the back breaking task of collecting rainwater. Instead of collecting river water, children can devote the time to attending school and doing homework. Equally important is that orphaned and vulnerable children, who are often marginalised, are treated with respect once they no longer have to do the most arduous tasks. Most of these children had been denied the chance to go to school and forced to stay at home to carry out housework. Others were denied inheritance of their dead parents' land and property. Some young girls had been forced into early marriages. As a result of decreased stress on families, these practices are reducing. As well as building water tanks, CCS Uganda provides health workshops for families caring for orphans and other vulnerable children. This is part of its effort to fight the spread of HIV and AIDS and mitigate its impact on communities.

### Developers Foundation, Philippines

Another long-term CWS partner is Developers Foundation, in the central Philippines where most people are tenant farmers or fishers. A typical household of six earns just \$105 a month through agriculture and fishing.

From two small community projects in 1991, Developers has expanded every year and now covers more than 40 rural communities. It works alongside local councils to improve local government and administration. This means rural people can tap into technical support from Developers and obtain financial and local government support for their projects. Since 1993, CWS has funded programmes teaching women the skills needed to take part in local government and to improve leadership in their communities. Since 1995, Developers' emphasis has been on promoting agriculture in a way that protects the earth for future generations. Another project, funded by CWS, teaches women ways of earning more money and of protecting themselves and their children against violence and discrimination.

Last year, in the wake of Typhoon Frank, Developers was forced to move for a period into emergency disaster management. Developers' strength in the community meant it was well placed to direct emergency relief in the province.

### Advent One: Hope

Readings  
Jeremiah 33:14-16  
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13  
Luke 21: 25-36

#### Finding Hope in Hard Times

The theme running through these three readings is finding hope in the midst of a broken, violent and deeply troubled world. Jeremiah's prose oracle of hope was probably written after the second exile or about 587 BCE. Because of Jewish resistance to Babylonian occupation under their last king, Zedekiah, in 587, the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and sent Jews into exile as a punishment. Thus began a period known as the Babylonian captivity which lasted until 539 BCE when the Persian king Cyrus conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Jews in exile to return to Judah. The oracle emphasises the importance of being a 'people in covenant' especially during hard times. The covenant of David will be renewed, Jerusalem will be at peace and a future king - 'a righteous branch' - will execute justice and righteousness.

1 Thessalonians was Paul's first epistle and is considered by scholars to be the oldest book in the New Testament. Like the people of Jeremiah's day, the early Christian community experienced persecution under Emperor Diocletian. Nevertheless, the Christian community at Thessalonika continued to prosper and grow. Paul encourages them to remain faithful in spite of hard times.

The apocalyptic vision of destruction found in Luke 21:25-36 once again picks up the theme of living in hope in difficult times. Buried in Luke's vision of impending destruction is the promise of redemption. History, from the perspective of faith, is not an accident but is filled with great expectation. Christians are reminded that they live in the shadow of eternity. The vision proclaims that God's presence is breaking in upon us in the promise of the coming of Jesus Christ.

Promise of a better future is what sustains Christian World Service partners working around the globe. Fiji's Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy (Ecrea) works to lift people out of despair and hopelessness. Ecrea works to create permanent change in Fiji that will outlast any political regime. It works on measures to establish a decent wage level, to educate people about voting and to encourage community leadership. Its work with young people includes training in peaceful ways to live. It also does considerable work with people living in squatter settlements.

### Advent Two: Peace

Readings  
Baruch 5:1-9  
Philippians 1:3-11  
Luke 1:68-79

#### Blessed are those who make Peace

The theme of peace is picked up by the apocryphal book of Baruch. Baruch was the secretary and friend of Jeremiah. Together they were taken in exile to Egypt where they remained until they died. Baruch is writing to those Jews in Jerusalem who witnessed the burning of the Temple. The book consists of three sections: a prose prayer, a wisdom poem and a poem of consolation. The reading is part of the poem of consolation and offers words of encouragement to the remnant of Israel. Peace will once again come to Zion, Baruch affirms, for this is the promise of God.

Philippians develops a similar theme. Paul, now in prison, is writing to his beloved Philippians. Their faithfulness, says Paul, reminds him of the promise that Christ will one day return. Grateful that they pray for him and hold him in their hearts, Paul rejoices that their love will, like peace, 'overflow' and they too will be ready for 'that day' - that is when peace will come upon the world in Jesus Christ.

The same theme is picked by Luke in a prayer or a Benedictus, a prayer of blessing based on the prophecy of Zechariah. According to the prophecy, God then promised the gift of a Saviour who will rescue them from their enemies. 'A child will go before them' anticipates the birth of Jesus. In response, the people are called to prepare the way. A new dawn is coming, light will break in on the darkness and a new age of peace will begin.

This passage suggests that the primary task of Christians is to be peacemakers. While we still live in a world torn by war and violence, Christians are called to let God's light in by offering peace to others.

One present-day peacemaker in the Middle East is Dr Bernard Sabella, of CWS partner Middle East Council of Churches. He heads the council's Department of Service for Palestinian Refugees. He says the message of Bethlehem calls for good will to overcome the narrow interpretations and interests of political positions. For over 30 years, DSPR has helped bring peace to Palestinians by providing basic food and water supplies, income generation programmes, agriculture support, health services and vocational training.

## Advent Three: Joy

Readings  
Isaiah 12:2-6  
Philippians 4:4-7  
Luke 3:7-15

### Songs of Joy

The readings for this third Sunday of Advent all focus on the theme of joy: joy for deliverance, joy for persevering in difficult times, joy for the new order that will come when Jesus comes.

Isaiah 12:2-6 is a song of praise for God's deliverance because of the inauguration of a Judean king – in this case probably King Uzziah. A good part of what is called by scholars First Isaiah or chapters 1-39, is made up of oracles or visions of things to come. The metaphors Isaiah uses in this oracle all focus on the presence of God in the people: God is our salvation, God is our strength, God is our might. The prophet encourages the people to give thanks, proclaim God's name and 'shout aloud and sing for joy'. Such joy can not be contained.

The same theme runs through Paul's words as Philippians 4. 'Rejoice in the Lord always' is at the heart of the Christian community. Paul reminds the community he loves and is writing to from prison that the greatest gift they can share with the wider community is the witness of their lives: living with joy, learning to be content with their circumstances and holding on to 'the peace which passes all understanding' (v7). Christ comes to us in those moments when we share this peace.

John's proclamation in Luke 3 is a call for a new order that will come when the Christ comes. John calls the people to share their possessions, their food and their homes with others and no longer 'extort' money from others. They are to model a whole new way of living in this world. All of this is promised in the coming of Jesus who, declares John, will not only baptise with water but 'with the Holy Spirit'. Once again, the theme of a new order; a new way of living together, a new day, is coming in Jesus Christ. The church is called to model this new way of relating. To enable this to happen, the Holy Spirit is given to the church.

This is a promise but also a challenge. It asks every parish church to ask itself in what ways the ministry and witness of the congregation offer hope, healing and joy to the wider community and in the world. This is the litmus test of Christianity: what difference is it making in our lives, our churches, our communities around the world?

In a tangible way, Uganda's Centre for Community Solidarity is making a big difference to the lives of

people in the drought-prone Oruchinga Valley. The relief and joy of getting a rainwater collection tank means orphans and women no longer have to make the long and difficult journey each day to collect water from the river. Freed from this task, they have the opportunity to use the hours in schooling, gardening or other productive work.

## Advent Four: Love

Readings  
Micah 5:2-5a  
Hebrews 10:5-10  
Luke 1:39-45

### The Ways of Love

Frequently it is only by looking back on our lives that we see the love of God at work. Love is often that way. Sometimes we are so immersed in the everyday reality that we are unable to see God at work in our lives gently guiding us. The three readings for the fourth Sunday of Advent all remind us that we are immersed in God's love if only we have eyes to see and embrace this love.

Micah, the eighth century prophet, is a case in point. The name Micah means 'who is like the Lord' and his career spanned the reigns of three kings: Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. The reading is part of one of Micah's oracles of salvation. However Micah did not espouse the David-Zion tradition, with its belief in the inviolability of Jerusalem. Rather, he strongly supported the Moses-Sinai tradition with its emphasis on the Exodus. His oracles follow a clear schema of doom then salvation: 1:1- 2:11 doom; 2:12-13 salvation; 3:1-12 doom; 4:1- 5:15 salvation; 6:1- 7:7 doom; 7:8-20 salvation. In the oracle for the fourth Sunday of Advent, Micah speaks of one who will come in love, caring for the people and bringing peace with justice.

The book of Hebrews, an anonymous extended sermon dating back to somewhere between 60 and 90 ACE emphasises why 'Christ came into the world'. Christ came, he argues, to offer himself as a once and for all sacrifice for the sins of the people. This, says the writer, is an expression of God's love. For the first time in the book, the writer uses the name Jesus Christ to show that Christ's obedience to God's will involved his whole being. Such is the love of Jesus Christ.

Luke 1:39-45 picks up this theme of love again. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and in sheer exhilaration and joy blesses Mary and recognises the extraordinary promise that will be fulfilled by Mary. As a sign of the significance of this encounter and its implications for the future of humankind, the

child in Elizabeth's womb 'leaps for joy'. Most of us can remember those moments of waiting just before Christmas and the excitement of anticipation. God's love is like this. It awakens our heart so that we stand as it were on tiptoes looking forward to what will take place in our midst and before our eyes.

One way to show love is giving. In the Philippines, CWS partner Developers Foundation extends loans to small holding farmers, giving them the chance to better their lives by expanding their small businesses. Developers works at many levels and in many areas of small enterprise to care for the community of poor people they serve.

## Christmas Light

Readings  
Isaiah 9:2-7  
Luke 2: 1-14, 15-20

### Light has Come to the World

The oracle of Isaiah in chapter 9 probably was first used for the coronation of King Hezekiah somewhere between 734 and 715 BCE. Jewish tradition seems to support this. However, some scholars argue that the king was Ahaz. This oracle is in many ways an utterance of joyous faith and it bursts upon us like the first light of creation. The central theme is light bursting through the darkness and chaos of the day. The oppressor has been overthrown and coming to the throne of David is a king who will bring justice and healing to the people. The words used to describe the new king were commonly used in Jewish coronation rituals: Counsellor, Father, Prince of Peace. However embedded in the oracle is also the expectation of a future king who will not rule by force but through love. Justice will break 'the rod of the oppressor' (v4) and rule with wisdom and compassion (v6). He will come as a child born into this world and he will establish justice forever (v7). This coronation oracle became the blueprint of later messianic expectations. The powerful metaphors of light overcoming darkness, of justice overcoming oppression, of love overcoming hate became deeply rooted in the Christian faith.

When we read Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, all the themes of Isaiah's oracle take on new meaning. There is a direct link from the vision of Isaiah to the story of Jesus' birth in a world ruled by the imperial edicts of Caesar Augustus, Quirinius the governor, and the Roman legions. Amidst Roman oppression, a love story begins: the story of a child born to Mary and Joseph of Nazareth. Debate continues among biblical scholars over whether Jesus was born in Nazareth or Bethlehem.

Luke sets his account of the birth of Jesus against the background of the realities of history. The Jews are an oppressed people, their country is occupied by the Romans and they are subjected to the humiliation of a census for tax purposes. We know that this census raised a huge storm of protest among the Jews which led to an insurrection in Galilee. The insurrection was quickly suppressed by the Romans. One of the requirements of the census was registering in one's place of birth which must have caused considerable disruption and dislocation.

It is within this context that Luke records the entrance of God into history in the person of Mary's firstborn child. The distress is deepened as Luke reports that Mary had to give birth to her son in a stable because there was no room in the inn! As one commentator observes, 'the crowded inn is an eternal parable of the human soul'. Why, he asks, 'why is there always no room for the Christ child?'

However, it is the shepherds who first hear the message of Christ's coming, 'I bring you good news... for to you this day a child is born' (v11). Thus God slips quietly into the world – under the very nose of the Romans, according to Luke. And all of heaven rejoices (v13,14).

Luke's account finishes with the shepherds quietly heading to Bethlehem to see for themselves this miracle. When they see the child, they cannot keep it to themselves and, according to Luke, 'make known abroad' what they have seen. Then they return to their flocks 'glorifying God'.

As all this is happening, Luke shares an astonishing insight in verse 19: 'Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart'. Luke suggests that deep down in her heart, Mary must have had some sense of the eternal significance of what was happening. There is an insight here for all of us every time a child is born: what will happen to the child as he/she journeys through life? God comes into our world uninvited, unseen and only those like Mary who hold the deeper meaning of life in their hearts see the hand of God. The Lukan text seems to say: amidst all the activities of Christmas, will we see what God is doing? Have we eyes to see the real meaning of Christmas? Can we see ourselves as part of God's work in the world?

It is especially appropriate at Christmas to remember the efforts of people in developing countries whose Christmas will not be as full of food and festivities as ours but who share the Christmas message of love and generosity. Now is the time to remember the dedication, devotion and effort they put into supporting, caring for and building up their communities.