

**THE CHURCH OF THE EPIPHANY IN THE CITY OF  
WASHINGTON  
SEVEN SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 13<sup>TH</sup>, 2018.**

**SERVICES: 8.00 AM & 11.00AM**

**THEME: STANDING IN AND FILLING THE GAP**

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*Readings: John 17: 6-19; Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; 1 John 5:9-13*

The Lord be with you Church. It is a great pleasure to be here at the Church of the Epiphany in the City of Washington DC.

This is my second time to visit United States of America and particularly Washington DC. Thanks for AFRECS invitations. I came in 2015 to attend the AFRECS annual conference in Virginia and this time in Denver, Colorado.

Allow me if I may to say that the AFRECS National Annual Conference in Denver was a great success. Thank you for all organisers.

I am Joseph Bilal, the Project Director for the Episcopal University of South Sudan and board member of Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Commission (JPRC). I serve also as part time lecturer in Bishop Gwynne College and Curate at All Saints Cathedral Juba.

I bring greetings from the Archbishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan, the Most Rev. Justin Badi Arama to all American friends who know and support South Sudan in its quest for justice, peace and reconciliation.

Allow me to register special thanks to Richard Parkins and entire AFRECS board committee for their tireless and selfless efforts in supporting peace building and reconciliation processes in South Sudan. Your support has made a great difference.

A special Thank You to Fr. Rick Houghton for the great support not only in sponsoring my two visits here but also for supporting the work at Bishop Gwynne College and the Episcopal University. His support helped us secure a land of 2 by 2 km square to build the university Administrative Nerve Centre. I am glad to say here that by God's grace we are going to build a library in a memory of Mrs Houghton.

Finally, a Big – Big Thank You to the Rev. Glenna Huber the Priest in-charge of the Epiphany Parish Church for giving me this opportunity to share the word of God with you this morning.

Thank you brothers and sisters in Christ for coming here and for supporting us in South Sudan. Thank you for walking alongside us and with us at this difficult time of journey in our faith and life in South Sudan.

The message I want to bring and share with you this morning is about **“Standing and Filling in the Gap.”** Looking at our three

readings. They tell us something about a mission of standing and filling in the Gap.

- 1) Mathias was Filling in the Gap (Acts 1:15-17, 21, 26).
- 2) Jesus was Standing in the Gap (John 17: 6-19)
- 3) We the Believers are standing and filling in the Gap (1 John 5: 9-13)

Let us look at each of the lessons for the message it is conveying to us today.

### **1. MATTHIAS FILLING IN THE GAP (Acts 1:15-17; 21-26)**

In our reading of the Acts, Luke reports the community prayer under leadership of Peter, calling upon God as the one who knows everyone's heart. But this was not an ordinary community. This was a community that was traumatized, a community that was trying to make sense of all that took place, a community that wasn't at peace by itself because of what had happened: the murder of their leader; the prophet; the messiah, the Son of man and the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The death that happened as the result of their own inner circle betrayal! This was a community, which needs peace, reconciliation, forgiveness and healing. It was clear that Jesus appearance to His disciples and His ascension at the Mount of Olive prompted his followers to act. Otherwise, it does not make sense why do they need a replacement, why would they, the eleven continue rather than the twelve?

It seems there are three reasons in which we need to draw lessons:

- 1) The reconstitution of the twelve was a deliberate act in preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit announced to the disciples by Jesus.
- 2) The twelve symbolises the restoration of the 12 tribes of Israel.
- 3) The disciples knew very well that they must fill the gap created by the tragic death of Judas.

This is not only about the transition and change of the leadership of the Church. It is also something to do with decision-making as the church deals with issues of leadership and people. That is why prayer was a key to their action. It helps the church look beyond itself for guidance and directions. Because the Church know they can't do without God's direction

For us South Sudanese, many decades of conflicts has created apprehension and traumatic experience and situation. This experience has made many of us either to 'act in or act out' like Professor David Hooker said in his lecture in Denver, Colorado about the posttraumatic stress experience.

There is more suicide in South Sudan than ever before particularly among the people in uniform and women. One in ten of people commit suicide everyday. This is because they decided to 'Act in'.

Again the majority 'Act out.' That is why we experience violence, bloodshed, rape, looting and destruction of properties. There has never been any trauma and psychosocial counselling support or peace education provided to the people of South Sudan on various levels to create the basis for peaceful co-existence and harmony.

Sixty to seventy five per cent of the people in South Sudan are said to be Christians. But we are Christians that are traumatized. Unlike the disciples who hid at the upper room, when they came out they marched to preach the gospel of salvation, for us South Sudanese we hid within ourselves and when we come out our actions are contrary to what is supposed to be expected of a Christian.

The story of the selection of Matthias pushes us to ask questions about how we discern the will of God in tragic circumstances. Like the church in Jerusalem, the Church in South Sudan stands at a crossroad. In crucible uncertainty of the political upheavals, economic meltdown, ethnic cleansing, tribalism, violence and bloodshed including women and girls' rape, child soldiers and human rights abuses, the church leaders remain faithful in prayer and in seeking the will of God.

It was through this discernment and prayer that ECSS was able to establish Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Commission (JPRC). The commission is taking peace and reconciliation initiatives into the grassroots. The vision is to see a peaceful society, free from violence and hatred. The main aim and goal is to seek an end to wars and conflicts in South Sudan and to build sustainable peace and harmony through reconciliation and healing in the nation.

Our work in the commission and the university is trying to stand in and filling the gap. Like the work of Matthias, the commission tries to address social aspects of the people in the country and the university trying to address the long-term goal of both social and spiritual aspects of our society.

In addition, we also decided to set up a university. It is a Christian foundation university called The Episcopal University (TEU). The aim is for us to train and produce a God fearing cadre of educated leaders for the nation of South Sudan, Africa and the world at large.

## **2. JESUS STANDING IN THE GAP (Jn.17: 6-19).**

Jesus came in order to die for our sins. He was standing in the gap. His disciples were chosen in order to stand in the gap between God and the people. Not in the temple any more like the high priests used to do in the past but in the community of both believers and unbelievers.

We who are called Christians are also chosen by God for a purpose. We are chosen to fill in the gap. Jesus is praying for us for three things. Firstly to identify with him and to belong to him not the world, and secondly the mission, to spread the message of salvation and peace and reconciliation, and to bring more people to the kingdom, and finally to be united and working together regardless of race, gender and geographical locations.

And this is where AFRECS come in, where you our brothers and sisters in America come in. We are all children in the eyes of God. The unity that Jesus prayed for is not only between an American and an American or a South Sudanese and a South Sudanese but also between people of different race and difference nations, between Americans and Africans, between Americans and Sudanese.

### **3. WE THE BELIEVERS ARE STANDING IN AND FILLING THE GAP (I Jn.5: 9-13)**

The letter of John tells us that we have eternal life when we believe in Jesus Christ. We receive testimony of God, not human testimony from Jesus. When we tell others our experience of how Jesus loves and saves us.

We often think of eternal life as something that will be in future – the life after death. On the contrary, the eternal life is something already given. It is here with us. It is not just life after death. It is about renewed, transformed life that Jesus brings to those who put their trust in him.

In the gospel of John 10:10 Jesus said, ‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’ This abundant life that Jesus gives is now - a life that is different and new. It is life lived in the power of God and under the rule of God. It is life as God meant it to be, filled with goodness and grace, love and kindness; obedience and good works.

When you support the brothers and sisters in South Sudan and Sudan, whether you support the work of peace and reconciliation, the work of education or the humanitarian work you are bringing testimony of God, you remind us of the eternal life, how to be filled with goodness and grace, love and kindness, obedience and good works, peace and unity. You are standing in and filling the gap.

### **4. CONCLUSION**

I appeal that you continue to support the church initiatives to create lasting peace and stability. Support JPRC activities and support our university project too.

I believe, and many of you do here, that education is the key to stability, peace and development in South Sudan and Sudan. The country desperately needs doctors, nurses, trained teachers, engineers, agriculturalists, lawyers and business people who are committed to building a peaceful and prosperous nation of South Sudan.

Instead of spending billions of dollars in humanitarian work alone which is key to saving life, do also think of long term support to us to get rid of poverty of mind which is more dangerous than material poverty. Education for peace and reconciliation is key and vital. May God bless America! Alleluia, Alleluia.

**In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen**