

# BIBLE LESSONS

## BIBLE MONTH

*September 2015*



**“God Rich in Mercy”**

(Ephesians 2: 4)



**CATHOLIC SECRETARIAT  
PASTORAL DEPARTMENT**





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# CONTENTS

PREFACE	5
1. The BOOK of JOEL	7
2. The BOOK of OBADIAH	10
3. The BOOK of THE PROPHET JONAH	14
4. The BOOK of HAGGAI	18
5. The BOOK of THIRD ISAIAH	25
6. The BOOK of ZACHARIAH	23
7. The BOOK of MALACHI	29
8. St. PAUL AND HIS WRITINGS	32
9. The LETTER of PAUL to the ROMANS	33
10. PAUL'S FIRST LETTER to the CORINTHIANS	36
11. PAUL'S SECOND LETTER to the CORINTHIANS	39
12. PAUL'S LETTER to the GALATIANS	41
13. PAUL'S LETTER to the EPHESIANS	44
14. PROGRAM for the BIBLE MONTH- SEPTEMBER 2015	47
15. LAUNCHING	48

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## PREFACE

September is Bible month for the Catholic community here in Malawi. The Bible, God's Word, is source of nourishment and spiritual growth. Its importance in our daily lives obliges us to know and fully appreciate it. We need to constantly and consistently read the Bible in order to acquire necessary spiritual benefits. Thus in the following pages I invite you all to a serious joint reflection and study of the Word of God for our mutual benefit.

This year the Bible Month will be officially launched in all Parishes on Sunday, **6 September, 2015** under the theme **“God Rich in Mercy” (Eph. 2:4)**. The launch should include the following: Bible Enthronement, short presentation on the messages in the Post Exilic Prophets and the selected letters of Saint Paul. The Eucharist will be the climax of the celebration. The priests are encouraged to read and clearly understand this year's theme. Furthermore, all parishes are reminded to make a special collection and remit it to the relevant offices for the support of the activities of the Bible Apostolate: 20% for the National Office and 80% for the Diocese. I therefore recommend that all Parish Priests be at the Parish Church for the launch. The theme has been carefully selected because it is a special theme chosen by the Holy Father, Pope Francis for the Year of Mercy.

**Book IV** of the Bible Month 2015, is a series of Bible Month Lessons. The Booklet covers seven Post Exilic Prophets namely Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Haggai, Third Isaiah, Zachariah and Malachi and five letters of Saint Paul namely Letter to the Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians and the Ephesians. I therefore encourage the Parish Priests to ensure that Bibles and Booklets on the Bible lessons are available for sale throughout the year. The Parish Priests should encourage all the faithful to buy and read the Bible and exchange gifts of the Holy Bible during this period. They should be encouraged to follow the programme indicated at the end of the booklet. Each prophet and letter is given a full month of study starting from the month of October 2015 to August 2016.

It is worthy noting that this year's Bible reflection falls within a period when the Universal Church has been invited to join in the celebration of the JUBILEE OF MERCY which will be officially inaugurated by Pope Francis

on Tuesday, 8 December 2015, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and will close on 20 November 2016, the Solemnity of Christ the King. On this day the Pope will open the Holy Door of Saint Peter's Basilica.

During the Jubilee Year, the Pope will send "Missionaries of Mercy" throughout the world to forgive sins.

Furthermore, this year's Bible reflection falls within a period when the Universal Church is celebrating the release of the Encyclical on "**the care of creation**" by Pope Francis entitled "**Laudato Si (LS)**" which was issued on the Solemnity of Pentecost, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2015.

*Laudato Si* means "Praise be to you." It is the first line of a canticle by St. Francis of Assisi that praises God with all of his creation.

The encyclical wishes to enter into an on-going dialogue with all people. It is a call to profound interior conversion. It calls for an '*ecological conversion*', whereby the effects of our encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in our relationship with the world around us.

On behalf of the Episcopal Conference of Malawi (ECM), I encourage the whole Catholic family in Malawi to make it a habit to read daily, meditate and understand the teachings of the post-exilic prophets and some letters of Saint Paul in the Bible in relation to the Merciful Father who so loved humanity and the universe.

The Episcopal Conference of Malawi wants to make sure that the *Year of Mercy* becomes a true source of spiritual renewal through the Word made flesh (Jn. 1:14). The year should help us to "put out into deep water..." so that together with Jesus Christ we may harvest many fruits born of our faith (Lk 5:1-11). For apart from him we can do nothing (Jn. 15:5-6; Ps 127:1-2). Furthermore, our missionary call obliges us to make Christ known to those who, till now, have not personally met him as their personal Lord and Saviour (Acts 4:12).

**+ Rev. Peter Musikuwa**

CHAIRMAN FOR PASTORAL COMMISSION

# 1. THE BOOK OF JOEL

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The book of Joel appears second in the book of the Twelve Minor Prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Joel comes between Hosea and Amos.

## 1.2 THE PROPHET

Joel was son of Pethuel. But very little is known about this prophet. The name Joel (Yoel) means Yahweh is God. ‘Yo’ or ‘Jo’ is short form of Yahweh. Joel is looked upon as the prophet of the Last Judgment and the prophet of the Pentecost.

This prophet is so dear to Christians because his prophecy (Joel 2:28-32) about the out pouring of the Spirit was quoted by St. Peter on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2: 17-21.

## 1.3 THE BOOK

It has four chapters in the Hebrew Bible but in other versions and translations, the book has three chapters. The book is largely about two things; repentance and the new age to come.

## 1.4 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Scholars are divided about the time Joel was in active ministry. Some think he was active between 400 – 350 BC while others think he was active between 837 – 800 BC. It looks Joel was active when there was no monarchy in Jerusalem because he does not mention the king or royal court. Joel 3:6 suggests that some Judeans were sold as slaves to the Greeks. This may suggest a date after the Babylonian exile when Judah was weak and contacts with Greece were increasing. The Temple plays a very important part in the book and that may indicate a period after the reconstruction of the Temple.

## 1.5 THE AUDIENCE

The addressees were people in Jerusalem after the exile. The prophet was active in Jerusalem and the temple worship was in full swing.

## 1.6 MESSAGE

Joel teaches that God punishes his people through an invading army that is to say a foreign nation. He does not see how the people can avoid the punishment other than repentance from the heart and true worship. When repentance happens a new age will usher in with the outpouring of the Spirit on all people.

## 1.7 KEY THOUGHTS

- i. God will give the Spirit to all people without distinction in the new age. It is no wonder that Peter saw this prophecy being fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21).
- ii. The Day of the Lord will be one of Judgment on his people and not necessarily on non-Israelites molesting God's people (1:5; 2:1, 11; 2:31 (3:4); 3:14 (4:14)).
- iii. Yahweh controls natural forces and history. He controls both the invading army and the locusts. He is Lord of history and nature.

## 1.8 KEY THOUGHTS

The plague of the locusts 1:2-2:27

Laments and call to repentance 1:2-2:17

Yahweh's answer 2:18-27

The promises of salvation 2:28-3:21

The outpouring of the Spirit 2:28-32

The judgment of the nations 3:1-17

The glorious future of Israel 3:18-21



## 1.9 QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP REFLECTIONS

How does Joel understand ‘the Day of the Lord’? How is his use of the term different from Amos?

What is the significance of locusts in Joel?

Draw some similarities between Ps 51 and Joel’s call to lament.

## 1.10 PASTORAL REFLECTION

In this postmodern era, characterized by rampant skepticism towards anything spiritual, it is difficult to read divine judgment into a natural happening such as a locust attack or even this year’s floods that affected 15 of Malawi’s 28 districts for that matter. However, there is much sense in Joel’s argument that many of the natural disasters that we are experiencing today have a human cause which is often sinful and calls for conversion.

In his latest Encyclical **“Laudato Si”**, Pope Francis is, reminding the entire humanity that Mother Earth, our sister and common home, is hurt due to our misunderstanding of our God-given responsibility towards her. We have misunderstood God’s invitation, in Genesis 1:28, to fill and subdue the earth as a license to abuse and plunder her at will. Consequently, this is seriously affecting us and future generations. Like Joel, Pope Francis is calling for a change of mentality, what in religious circles is called conversion or “metanoia”, if we are to avoid an impending catastrophe. Like Joel, the Pope is convinced that a serious change of direction today can reverse the dreadful consequences of our present careless and sinful culture of death.

Let us take heed of Pope Francis when he is asking us to pause and reflect over our selfish human acts that consider non human “brothers and sisters”, especially the non-replaceable ones, as objects to be used selfishly and carelessly without any consideration for the future. We need a paradigm shift in how we relate with the environment. We are interdependent.

## **2. THE BOOK OF OBADIAH**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

Obadiah is the shortest book among the twelve Minor Prophets. It is a single twenty-one-verse oracle against Edom. It is one of the least known of the prophetic books. The book is about Judah's experience of anger and resentment against a brother/sister or brother/sister nation who becomes an enemy.

### **2.2 THE PROPHET**

The name Obadiah means “servant of YHWH” or “worshipper of YHWH.” Nothing is known about the author. However, most scholars suggest that Obadiah was a servant of Ahab who saved the lives of hundreds of prophets during Jezebel's persecution (1 Kgs 18:4), though there isn't enough evidence warranting this identification. The book itself says nothing about its author or his family.

### **2.3 THE BOOK**

The book of Obadiah is a prophecy. Unlike other prophetic books, it begins in the middle of things. There is no mention of reigning kings when the prophet lived; no mention of the place where he preached. It is believed the book was composed sometime after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., when the Edomites apparently took advantage of the helpless people of Judah and Jerusalem (v. 11; Ps 137:7). The proposed date for the present form of the text is the end of the exilic period.

### **2.4 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The historical context of Obadiah's prophecy is understood to be the time when the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and Judah in 587 B.C. During this time of calamity Edom looted Jerusalem. They even went to the extent of murdering fleeing refugees. Edom became an ally of Babylon. It is also believed that when the Edomites were migrating after the destruction of Jerusalem, they seized and annexed much of the Negeb desert area of Judah.

The Edomites are the descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob. Therefore, the book of Obadiah has to do with the experience of anger and resentment against a brother/sister or a brother/sister nation who becomes an enemy (*If an enemy had done this I could bear it, but it was you, a brother, a sister who did it [Ps 55:12]* ).

## 2.5 AUDIENCE

Obadiah was a prophet to whom God gave a word to speak against Edom. The prophet denounces Edom. Some say that there is little reason to believe that Obadiah went to Edom to deliver his message as Jonah went to Nineveh. The prophecy of Obadiah against Edom was also an encouragement to the Judeans.

## 2.6 MESSAGE

The message of the prophecy of Obadiah is a cry of vengeance against Edom for its pride and its crimes. The prophecy announces the impending destruction and annihilation of Edom. Mount Esau in Edom will be occupied and ravaged by the enemy, while Mount Zion will be restored to its former sanctity and security. Edom shall be punished because she abandoned Judah during her destruction and became an ally of the enemy of Judah.

## 2.7 KEY THOUGHTS

1. Pride is a sin against God and it shall not go unpunished (vv. 1-4).
2. Rivalry between siblings can lead to crimes against humanity (vv. 12-14).
3. The tendency of taking advantage of other people's misfortunate is an offence to God and therefore, punishable (vv. 15-16).
4. God takes revenge on behalf of the poor and the exploited (vv. 15-16).
5. "Edom" with time evolved into a type or symbol to represent all enemy nations of Judah (vv. 15a.16-18).

## 2.8 STRUCTURE

The structure of the book is made of three units/parts as follows:

- i. Edom's Arrogance before God (vv. 1-7).
- ii. Edom's Hostility against Israel (vv. 8-15).
- iii. Edom's Fall and Judah's Restoration (vv. 16-21).

## 2.9 QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP REFLECTION

- i. Why did Obadiah speak against Edom?
- ii. Describe the historical contexts in which Obadiah carried out his mission?
- iii. Explain why it was difficult for Judah to comprehend the actions of Edom during the fall of Jerusalem in 587 (cf. Ps 55:10-15)?
- iv. Why did God disapprove the behaviour of Edom during the fall of Jerusalem in 587?
- v. Narrate an incident in your life where you behaved like Edom?

## 2.10 PASTORAL REFLECTION:

Esau and Jacob were rivalling siblings from birth. Moreover, this rivalry was even being inflamed, knowingly or unknowingly, by both parents who took opposite sides in this tension between the twins. Much later, when Jacob's descendants, the Israelites, were being destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC, the Edomites, Esau's descendants, rejoiced and even joined in the plunder.

This attitude should never be allowed among God's believers and especially among us Christians. It is very unfortunate that during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Christians quarrelled and separated. Fortunately today we are talking about ecumenism as well as interfaith dialogue. In Malawi, Christians work together through the Christian Health Association in Malawi (CHAM) to promote common Christian values through health. We also work together through the Association of Christian Educators in Malawi (ACEM) again to instil common Christian values through education. Then we have Christians and Moslems working together through the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) to promote democratic and religious values in socio-economic and political affairs. This is all very commendable. God's believers should be able to live in harmony amidst religious differences since God is one and is the God of peace and harmony.

However, we still experience pockets of religious tension whereby Christians, even members of the same denomination and other faith groups denounce each other publicly through the social media. This should be seriously discouraged. As Pope Benedict XVI used to tirelessly say that we

can never kill or hate each other in the name of the God of love, peace and harmony in whom we all believe.

But when this unfortunately happens between us, as it often does, unlike Obadiah praying for vengeance over Edom, we should rather pray for peace, love and reconciliation with one another. We should be able to celebrate unity amidst religious diversity. We are brothers and sisters in God and should always wish each other well. We can never pray for each other's destruction and still remain true Christians and believers in God, the Father of Jesus Christ.

## 3. THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET JONAH

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The book of Jonah is placed fifth in both the Hebrew and English Bibles. This book has neither a title sentence nor an introduction into the circumstances or its chronological setting as you find in other prophetic books. Jonah is one of the smallest prophetic books but a most beautiful story ever written.

### 3.2 THE PROPHET

There is not much known about Jonah. The book does not claim to have been written by Jonah. The book carries a story about Jonah and by Jonah. Questions arise whether Jonah was a real historical or a literary figure? There is a prophet with the name Jonah Son of Amittai in 2Kings 14:25. He lived probably three miles away from Nazareth. There is no evidence connecting our Jonah to the Jonah in 2Kings 14:25.

The most probable thing is that the author of the book of Jonah brought the name of a historical prophet of 2Kings 14:25 for his fictitious story. He must have borrowed the name of Jonah son of Amittai because of the meaning of the name 'Amittai'. Son of Amittai means son of faithfulness. Jonah abandoned his faithfulness when he was called to preach to Nineveh. Only later under pressure did he go to Nineveh.

The name Jonah means dove or pigeon. The names show the contradiction in the life of the prophet. The dove son of faithfulness does not obey Yahweh. The author of the book could have been a post-exilic writer who was reacting to the contemporary thoughts of his fellow Jews about God's universal love. The contemporaries of Jonah believed that God loved only Israel.

Scholars think in these lines because the book presents Jonah as an ardent nationalist, pro-Israel, against foreigners and stubborn even against God. He does not want to carry God's mission to a pagan nation that oppresses

Israel. He knows that God is merciful and full compassion and will forgive these pagan people 4:2. God will not punish the pagans. Jonah does not want to see himself as an instrument of God's mercy.

### **3.4 THE BOOK**

The book of Jonah has only a half verse of prophecy 3:4b but all the same it is included among the twelve Minor Prophets. Ben Sirach 49:10 attests to this inclusion of Jonah among the twelve. The book was included among the twelve because it mentions Jonah son of Amittai in 2Kings 14:25. Jonah may also have been included among the prophets because of its teaching and the spirit of books that are very close to greatest prophets.

The book is about Jonah's refusal to go to Nineveh at God's command and his eventual compliance at God's pressure (Jonah 1-3). It is also about Jonah's anger at God's mercy towards the people of Nineveh. These two issues are interwoven with the mythological story of a big fish that swallows Jonah and vomits him out after three days. Another strange thing about the book is that it speaks of plant that grows quickly and it then dies because God sends a worm 4:6-7. Jesus used the story in MT 12:39-41; LK 11:29-30. The story of Jonah may be taken as historical narrative or novella.

### **3.5 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Many scholars agree that Jonah was written between 400 – 200BC. It was written four centuries after the time of the prophet Jonah son of Amittai mentioned in 2Kings 14:25. Jonah son of Amittai mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 lived during the reign of Jeroboam II (786 – 746 BC). Jonah is a postexilic prophet.

### **3.6 MESSAGE**

God loves other people as he loves Israel. He sends Jonah to the people of Nineveh. The people of Nineveh responded positively to the preaching of Jonah. God did not carry out the punishment he had threatened against Nineveh.

### **3.7 KEY THOUGHTS**

- i. God controls events in the book of Jonah. Jonah wants to run away from his mission but fails. God appoints a great fish to transport Jonah from his country to Nineveh. God's call cannot be resisted.
- ii. Jonah while in the belly of the fish gives thanks to God for saving him. Therefore the proper response to the acts of God is thanking him.
- iii. God gives a sinner a chance to repent.
- iv. God's forgiveness is universal. The compassion of God applies to all peoples.
  - v. God can change his mind by withdrawing his punishment when people repent.
- vi. Yahweh, the God of Israel is the God of the whole world (Gen 2:4).

### **3.8 STRUCTURE**

- i. Jonah's rebellion against his prophetic call 1:1-17;
- ii. The psalm of Jonah in the belly of the fish 2:1-10;
- iii. The conversion of the people of Nineveh 3:1-10;
- iv. God's attempt to convert Jonah 4:1-11.

### **3.9 QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP REFLECTION**

- i. Why did Jonah refuse to go to Nineveh?
- ii. What could be the significance of the fish that swallowed Jonah?
- iii. How do we feel when we see people embracing our faith?

### **3.10 PASTORAL REFLECTION**

The Book of Jonah is a constant reminder to Christians in general and to us Catholics in particular that we can never own God and God's Spirit who blows where He will. As the Creator of the Universe, God does not belong to any one group exclusively but He is a parent to all.

It is important to grasp this today when you often hear exclusive and impatient, if not downright hostile, religious language. Some religious groups claim to be the only ones who have been saved and so despise others. Re-



ligious intolerance is on the rise. We forget what St. Paul says in chapter 13 of the first Letter to the Corinthians that our present knowledge of God here on earth is only partial as in a mirror.

We should always rejoice when we see our wayward brothers and sisters repent and embrace God. There are Catholics who resist Christian burial to their hitherto lapsed brothers and sisters who repent at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour like the thief on the cross. Our faith should be based on the God of abundant mercy about whom Pope Francis is calling us to reflect during the coming Jubilee Year of Mercy. Let us not exclude others from experiencing this redeeming divine mercy. We are called to be merciful just as our Heavenly Father is also merciful (Luke 6:36).

## **4. THE BOOK OF HAGGAI**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

The book of Haggai is the tenth book of the Minor Prophets in the Bible. It is short and has one main theme. In the book the prophet expresses the urgent need for Judah and Jerusalem to reconstruct the Temple of Yahweh.

### **4.2 THE PROPHET**

The name Haggai means “my delight.” Haggai the prophet is the only person in the Bible who bears this name. Very little is known of this man. The information that is available to us is solely that which is found in his book. Haggai is generally believed to have been one of the exiled Judeans who had recently returned. It has been suggested that Haggai was a cultic prophet. His prophetic activity lasted little more than three months. His preaching extended from August 29 to December 18 of the year 520 BC.

### **4.3 THE BOOK**

The book of Haggai in the form it is now is a result of an editor, probably a disciple. The book was compiled in its present form only a short time after the prophet spoke, before 515 BC, when the work on the Temple initiated at Haggai’s urging, was completed.

### **4.4 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The oracles were all delivered in the beginning of Darius I’s long reign over the Persian Empire (521-486 BC). Darius I renewed the policies, introduced by Cyrus II (538-530 BC), which allowed persons deported by the Babylonians to return to their homelands. Judah had already its leader, Zerubbabel, and a priest, Joshua. The war between Persia and Egypt must have disturbed Judah socially and economically, for Persian armies had to pass through Judah. The struggles for power in the Persian Empire itself continued after Cambyses’ death in 522 BC, even after Darius had consolidated his own fundamental position. The event had negative effects on Judeans. All this contributed to the tendency of the people in Judah to be more concerned with their own selfish interests than they were with work for the advancement of their society and its religious institutions (Ha 1:2-9).

## 4.5 AUDIENCE

Initially the oracles are addressed both to the governor, Zerubbabel, and to the high priest, Joshua (1,1), but it is also entirely fitting to suppose that the people of Judah and Jerusalem were part of his audience (1,12). So his audience was the governor, high priest and the people.

## 4.6 MESSAGE

The message of the prophet is straightforward: Rebuild the Temple of Yahweh and therein witness and give testimony to the reign of God, both in the present and in the future. When Haggai began his prophetic activity the altar of sacrifices had scarcely been restored. The returnees from Babylonian exile had neglected rebuilding the society and its religious institutions and were too preoccupied with their own self interests. Haggai addressed both the leaders and the people in order to urge them to rebuild the society and the Temple. In Ezra 5,1-2; 6,14 we are told that he was successful in moving the people of Judah to action in rebuilding the Temple.

## 4.7 OTHER KEY THOUGHTS:

- i. The wellbeing of the community is linked to the restoration of the Temple.
- ii. The restoration of the Davidic rule is an eschatological reality.
- iii. The Temple is a symbol of God's presence among his people.
- iv. It is necessary to live by God's will and practice virtue if the worship of God is to have any real meaning.

## 4.8 STRUCTURE

The book has a simple and straightforward structure which is made of five episodes. Each episode with a date assigned to it. The narrative that spans approximately three and one-half months is presented and arranged according to the appropriate date.

- i. Hag 1,1-15a: The call to build the Temple  
(August 29-September 21, 520 BC)
- ii. Hag 1,15b-2,9: The Future Glory of the New Temple  
(October 17, 520 BC)
- iii. Hag 2,10-14: Unworthiness for Temple Worship  
(December 18, 520 BC)

- iv. Hag 2,15-19: A Promise of Blessings (December 18, 520 BC)
- v. Hag 2,20-23 (December 18, 520 BC)

#### **4.9 QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP REFLECTION:**

- i. When was the book of Haggai written?
- ii. What is the main message of the book of Haggai?
- iii. Why was the reconstruction of the Temple of God so important?
- iv. Describe the lessons that can be drawn for the book of Haggai?

#### **4.10 PASTORAL REFLECTION**

Today very few people see the connection between a sound and healthy liturgical celebration and a strong and sound moral well being in society. God is more and more being pushed out of the public domain. Some people look at Religion as a private entity and not a public affair. A public show of religious faith is therefore resented and heavily resisted. Some Catholics have money for expensive material things but spare very little for their religious obligations.

However, Haggai is reminding us that a sound mind and spirit leads to a sound body and society. If God does not build the house, we labour in vain (Ps 127:1). Society today is losing its moral bearings mainly due to religious neglect that kills consciences. Instead of seeking first the Kingdom of God, we are rather seeking first the kingdom of consumerism and self-gratification. We are doing our best to ignore the Bible, Catechism and the social teaching of the Church. We care more about the gospel of self-enrichment than about the principle of the common good, mercy and compassion. Church attendance is on the decline while football and netball stadiums are almost always packed to the brim. Church buildings are poorly maintained and yet some of us are living in expensive mansions. Liturgical celebrations and homilies are poorly prepared. Catechetical classes to both children and adults are entrusted to ill-prepared instructors.

Let us heed Haggai who advises us to take God's affairs seriously if we want to succeed in changing the present social, political and economic degradation. Let us borrow a leaf from our grandparents who took pride in building grand cathedrals for the glory of God. God should always come first.

## **5. THE BOOK OF THIRD ISAIAH**

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

Third Isaiah refers to chapters 56-66 of the book of Isaiah. The addressees are returnees from Babylon. The book introduces us to the beginning of apocalyptic writing, so that not even death will damage the new heavens and new earth created by the Lord (66,17-20).

### **5.2 THE PROPHET**

The name Isaiah means “YHWH is salvation.” Most scholars argue, however, that the writer here is not the Isaiah of Jerusalem but a disciple who belonged to the prophet’s school of thought.

### **5.3 THE BOOK**

The book was not written by the prophet Isaiah who wrote the first part of the book (1-39) but his disciple/s who belonged to his school of thought. The book is believed to have been written in the fifth century BC after the return from Babylonian exile.

### **5.4 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Third Isaiah was written in the period immediately after the return from Babylonian exile. Those who returned had the bitter experience of seeing Jerusalem ravaged and the countryside given to idolatry. The construction of the Temple met with obstacles. Few hearts underwent conversion despite the exile. Evil in the city was in full sway. This moral crisis was compounded by a spiritual crisis. The fulfilment of the divine promises was delayed. The pain caused by these circumstances disturbed the returnees who had remained faithful to God. They confessed their sins and asked for salvation they knew was not deserved. It is in such a situation that the oracles we find in the book were uttered.

## 5.5 AUDIENCE

The addressees of the oracles found in this book were returnees from the Babylonian exile. The returnees were both in moral and spiritual crisis to see that what they expected to happen when they returned was not taking place.

## 5.6 MESSAGE

The third book of Isaiah encourages the people who had just returned from the Babylonian exile not to lose hope for a better future because God is about to come in person, on the day of vengeance, to destroy the wicked and deliver the weak and innocent. The book also bitterly condemns the greedy Temple leaders of the postexilic age (56,9-57,13). Other oracles speak of the Messiah, “the anointed of the Lord,” “the bearer of the Spirit,” who is coming to announce, along with the day of vengeance, “the year of the Lord’s favour” (61,2). The people are encouraged to be open to Gentiles because the God of Israel is the God of all nations. The book introduced the people to a pure and more spiritual form of religion not one based on externals.

## 5.7 OTHER KEY THOUGHTS

- i. God reveals the meaning of history to contrite and humble persons (57, 15).
- ii. Many hearts did not convert despite the spiritual lessons brought by the exile they suffered (57,1-13; 59,15).
- iii. God fulfils his promises (62:11-12).
- iv. The God of Israel is the Lord of all peoples (66,17-24)

## 5.8 STRUCTURE

- i. The oracle of Temple for Outsiders (56,1-8)
- ii. Struggle for True Leadership (56,9-59,21)
- iii. The Glorious New Zion (60,1-62,12)
- iv. From Sorrow to a New Heaven and New Earth (63:1-66:16)
- v. Forgiveness at Home in God’s House (66:17-24).

## 5.9 QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP REFLECTION

1. Describe the social and religious context in which Third Isaiah was written?
2. Explain the problems that the addressees of the book were facing?
3. What is the message of the book to the addressees?
4. Does Third Isaiah teach us anything today?

## 5.10 PASTORAL REFLECTION

Like the Jerusalem returnees, today Malawians in general and Christians in particular are facing multiple socio-economic, political, cultural and religious problems despite our return to multiparty democracy which had been silenced for close to thirty years of dictatorial rule. During the transition from one party to multiparty system of government, Christians joined their Malawian brothers and sisters in euphoric celebrations. People had expected a return to the promises of the Independence era, reflected in our National Anthem, whereby hunger, disease and envy would by now be history. We had looked forward to religious, cultural, social, material and political inclusion and well being. People yearned for human dignity and genuine freedoms and responsibilities. We looked forward to the rule of law.

Twenty one years down the road, there is a general sense of frustration and despair as poverty, insecurity, public theft, fraud and general moral degradation are on the increase. Today marriage and family are being re-defined in ways that challenge the old traditional and Christian understanding thereof as a union between a man and a woman. And African governments are being coerced to accept these redefinitions which are often tied to bilateral and multilateral help. Even religious freedom has often meant the proliferation of religious sects many of which promise easy ways out by preaching the gospel of cheap success devoid of the Cross and suffering.

It is in this environment that the Church should preach the “Joy of the Gospel” that assures believers that God is still in control and that spiritual, moral and social well being are still attainable. This Gospel should encourage parents to raise their children according to Christian and Catholic morals and ethos despite all the voices to the contrary so as to gradually

bring about a generation of leaders of moral, socio-economic and political integrity. Priests should preach with conviction and boldness against false teachings that Catholics find confusing regarding marriage, contraceptives, abortion and cheap politics of exclusion, regionalism, ethnicity and nepotism. Consumerism in the midst of abject poverty should be boldly condemned. Bad laws are to be openly challenged. The present cash gate mentality that has crippled social services in the country is heinous and completely unacceptable.

God should be seen defending the voiceless against selfish powers. The Church's prophetic voice should never go silent for its consequences are very costly. The Church should remain the beacon of hope today amidst the present culture of despair and a general sense of hopelessness all around us.



## **6. THE BOOK OF ZACHARIAH**

### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

The book of Zachariah is the eleventh book of the Minor Prophets. It is placed before that of the prophet Malachi. Of course this listing does not correspond to the chronological order of prophetic utterances.

### **6.2 THE PROPHET**

The name Zachariah means “Yahweh remembers.” He is said to be the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo. The name Iddo is included in a list of priests who returned from the Babylonian exile (Nehemiah 12,4). There are possibilities that he was a cultic-prophet (Nehemiah 12, 16). He proclaimed his message between 520 and 518 BC.

### **6.3 THE BOOK**

The book of Zechariah was not written by one author. Chapters 1-8 were written by the prophet himself. Chapters 9-14 were written later and probably by a number of unknown authors. Chapters 1-8 were probably written in the period stretching from 520 to 518 BC. Chapters 9-14 are believed to have been written within the period that stretches from the end of the fourth century to the end of the third century BC. This part of the book is also called Deutero-Zachariah.

### **6.4 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The preaching of Zachariah took place in the period that the Israel exiles returned to the Promised Land. The returnees went back to their homeland with great expectations of immediate religious and political restitutions. But as time passed by problems multiplied, principally the opposition of the Samaritans to the rebuilding of the Temple. This is reflected in the delays surrounding the reconstruction of the Temple and a certain anxiety among the people that the Temple would never be rebuilt. Another setback was that they could not trace the farm lands of their forefathers. The people

dwelt in the land but were not able to enjoy its fruits; the harvested produce was collected for Persian loyalty. There were no signs of a possible change or restoration of well-being and justice. Zechariah chapters 1-8 was preached and written in such a situation. The joy of the return was soon filled with sadness and disappointment.

Chapters 9-14 have a later and different historical context. In this section of the book we have sayings and oracles from different authors. They come from a period extending from the end of the fourth century to the end of the third century. In Judah there was political stability under the dominion of Lagid family (a ruling family) in Egypt. During this period the voices of the prophets became silent while Messianic expectations and apocalyptic language became the form of expression of a new social and theological reality.

## **6.5 AUDIENCE**

The prophet addressed the returnees and their leadership. The people were desperate and had lost all hope after seeing that their expectations for an immediate restoration were not met (Chapters 1-8). Chapters 9-14 were addressed to a community at a later date. They were addressed to the leadership of Jerusalem which could not be trusted and had to be destroyed.

## **6.6 MESSAGE**

The book's message is that when humanity loses hope in its ability to build a better and more just world it ought to remember that the word and action of God will be there to create new hope and new visions for the future. You cannot build a future without God. Both books, first and second Zechariah, spell out that the future depends on the action of God. Second Zachariah invites the people to rejoice at the coming of its king, the Messiah (9, 9). The book expects a future royal figure in the line of David. The second book of Zachariah sees the way to the future as marked with conflict, suffering and death but maintains the hope of previous prophets by depicting a glorious eschatological restoration. At that time all nations will recognize Jerusalem's centrality and acknowledge God's universal sovereignty.

## 6.7 OTHER KEY THOUGHTS IN ZECHARIAH

- i. Victory will come to those who are faithful to God at the end of time (10, 1-3a).
- ii. Yahweh is the Lord of the whole earth (4, 14).
- iii. The Temple is the place of Yahweh's presence and dominion (chap 4).
- iv. Moral transformation is not the condition of God's return, but results from it (8,10-19);
- v. Other nations will be included among Yahweh's people (2, 15; 8,20-23); and
- vi. God's justice will have the final victory (Chapter 14).

## 6.8 STRUCTURE

The book of first Zachariah can be divided into three literary units:

- i. A brief introductory unit (1, 1-6).
- ii. The visionary unit (1, 7-6, 15).
- iii. An address to a delegation sent from Bethel and a series of oracles (7, 1-8, 21).

Second Zachariah consists of two distinctive parts:

- i. Preparation for the coming of the Messiah (9-11).
- ii. The defeat of God's enemies and the establishment of universal reign of God (12-14).

## 6.9 QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL/ GROUP REFLECTION:

- i. Who wrote the book of Zechariah?
- ii. Describe the message of the book of Zechariah?
- iii. Is the book of Zechariah of any significance to us and why?
- iv. How can we respond to the message found in the book of Zechariah as Christians?

## 6.10 PASTORAL REFLECTION:

Zachariah, just like Haggai, insists on the centrality of the Temple which symbolizes God's presence among his people. For without God humans

fail miserably (John 15: 4). Zachariah further invites religious, civil and political leadership to live up to their servant-leader calling and become faithful to God and exemplary to his people. Religion is not merely for external show but true religion transforms hearts and lives and leads to fruitful and life-changing action.

While today politicians use religion generally for selfish purposes, Zachariah invites them to consider themselves as God's emissaries who are to make Him known near and far. He is the one, not the human instruments, who controls historical events and makes things really happen. Our prophetic role therefore is to constantly remind especially Christian politicians that their authority comes from God through the people who vote them into power and that they are only its custodians. Their social responsibility is to serve the common good, instil good Christian and traditional values and reject anything that encourages the culture of death among God's people just as the prophets of old used to do. Neglecting God's commandments in politics has serious negative consequences as the history of Israel's and Judah's kings and queens clearly reminds us.

It is further the Church's role to encourage transformative leadership at all levels by encouraging Christians to vote into power people with vision and foresight and who are servant leaders. Good leadership should inspire people to look into the future with confidence and to be inspired to do something about their present miserable social situations. As Proverbs 29:18 rightly puts it, without vision the people perish. Messianic expectation still has a big role to play today.

## **7. THE BOOK OF MALACHI**

### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

Malachi is the twelfth book of the Twelve Minor Prophets in the Hebrew Bible. It is the last book of the Old Testament in the English Bibles. This does not mean that Malachi was the last book to be written.

### **7.2 THE PROPHET**

It is generally agreed that there was no prophet who was called Malachi. Firstly, the name Malachi appears nowhere in the Old Testament. The second reason is that Malachi can be translated as ‘my messenger’ 3:1. All the same, there was a historical person behind the book who cannot be known today.

### **7.3 THE BOOK**

The book has question and answer format between the prophet and the people. The book has been influenced by the themes of the book of Deuteronomy, ‘priests as bound by the covenant of Levi’, (Mal 2:4, 8); ‘the law of my servant Moses’, ‘Horeb and all Israel’ (Mal 4:5).

### **7.4 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The person who collected the oracles forming this book was active between 515 – 445BC. The Temple was finally rebuilt (Mal 1:10; 3:1, 8). The word ‘governor’ refers to the Persian provincial governors (Ezra 8:36; Neh. 2:7). The book belongs to the post-exilic period and depicts a situation of religious decline. It looks at the deplorable conditions that existed in post-exilic Jerusalem.

### **7.5 THE AUDIENCE**

The prophet was addressing priests and ordinary people after the Babylonian Exile.

## 7.6 MESSAGE

The driving idea of Malachi's thinking is Yahweh's covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai, 'if you obey my commandments I will be your God' (Mal 2:10; 3:1). Yahweh is at the center of his message.

## 7.7 KEY THOUGHTS

- i. The book discourages divorce and disloyalty in marriage and even mixed marriages (2:10-16).
- ii. The people should avoid social evils, Yahweh will punish them for those evils (3:5)
- iii. The people should repent and return to Yahweh for Yahweh himself will return to them (3:6-7).
- iv. Malachi encourages people to pay tithes, support the Temple and its personnel as a sign of their return to Yahweh (1:7-8; 3:10)
- v. In the future, nations will join with Jerusalem in the worship of Yahweh 1:11.

## 7.8 STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

- i. The special love of Yahweh for Israel (1:1-5);
- ii. Bringing offerings and keeping the covenant (1:6-2:9);
- iii. Mixed marriages and divorce (2:10-16);
- iv. The day of Yahweh (2:17-3:5);
- v. Bringing the tithes (3:6-12);
- vi. The triumph of the upright (3:13-4:3); and
- vii. Moses and Elijah (4:4-6).

## 7.9 QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP REFLECTION

- i. How does Malachi present the ideal priest?
- ii. How does Malachi look on intermarriage and divorce?
- iii. When was the book written?

## 7.10 PASTORAL REFLECTION

Malachi, as God's messenger, was sent to remind religious leaders of their cultic role to make sure that people were respecting temple worship, carrying out proper sacrifices, paying proper tithes and walking the moral talk especially in marriage and divorce.

Each one of us should take liturgical responsibilities very seriously. Liturgical functions need excellent preparations including homilies and singing. Some liturgical singing portrays bad theology that often humiliates sinners instead of challenging them to conversion.

The Catholic Church introduced methods of paying church dues that fall way below scriptural requirements on tithes and first fruits. In some places rich people pay the bare minimum requirements along with the poor, leaving God feeling cheated (Malachi 3: 6-12). It is high time “**chachikhumi**” is introduced rather than the present “**mtulo**” that varies from one diocese to another. Catholics all over Malawi should learn that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20: 35).

Finally, we need to pray for the success of this year’s Synod on Christian Marriage that will soon take place at the Vatican. Christian marriage is today facing many trials and hardships. We need magisterial guidance if the institution is to remain the first school of love, peace and forgiveness,

## 8 PAUL AND HIS WRITINGS

### 8.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

### 8.2 PAUL

Paul, originally known as **Saul**, was born in Tarsus (modern Turkey) between 5 and 10 AD (Acts 18:11-12; 7:58; 2Cor 11:32-33).

**Paul** was an apostle (though not one of the Twelve) who taught the gospel of Christ to the first-century world. He had two names one Jewish (Saul) and the other Roman (Paul) Acts 7:58; 8:1; Rom 1:1. He used his status as a Jew and a Roman citizen to minister easily both to the Jewish and Gentile audiences.

According to the writings in the New Testament, the early life of Paul was dedicated to the persecution of the early disciples of Jesus around Jerusalem (Acts 7: 57- 60). He was converted while he was on the way from Jerusalem to Damascus (Acts 9: 1-9).

### 8.3 THE LETTERS

Approximately half of the book of Acts of the Apostles deals with Paul's life and works. Thirteen of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament have traditionally been attributed to Paul. These letters are 1 and 2 Thesalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans, Philippians, Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, Titus and 1 and 2 Timothy. Today, Paul's letters continue to be vital roots of theology, worship, and pastoral life in the Catholic and Protestant Churches.



## 9. THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS

### 9.1 INTRODUCTION

The Letter to the Romans is the first in the present arrangement of the letters in the New Testament. It comes immediately after the Acts of the Apostles in the Bible.

**Paul** wrote the letter while he was in Corinth between 57 and 58 AD. The letter to the Romans is not the first of the letters that Paul wrote to a community of believers who were experiencing internal divisions. However, it is the first of the letters of Paul as found in the New Testament of the Bible. This is because it is the longest of the letters that Paul wrote. The letters of Paul are therefore arranged according to their size starting with the longest and ending with the shortest.

### 9.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Though the Church in Rome was going through persecution it was still flourishing. Paul wrote this letter as he was planning to undertake his missionary journey to Spain. He had wished to pass through Rome at the time and as a preparation for this trip he decided to write this letter to this community of believers in order to seek their help. This means that he wrote the letter before he visited the Church in Rome in order to introduce himself and his ministry.

### 9.3 AUDIENCE

Paul is writing to a Church in Rome that was experiencing internal divisions. The divisions came about due to the fact that the community consisted of Jews and non-Jews.

### 9.4 MESSAGE

The letter to the Romans contains Paul's core theology. In this letter, Paul is trying to show how Christianity is rooted in Judaism and at the same time to demonstrate that Christianity is a faith for all humanity. The letter has

also highlighted the power and the grace of God. From the earliest times, these two are shown to be the source of inspiration and renewal within it.

## 9.5 KEY THOUGHTS

- i. Paul argues that there is no distinction between Jews and non-Jews in the Church;
- ii. Paul stresses that Jews are a chosen race of God and descendants of Abraham and reminds them that though they rejected Jesus, God's promises still stood and forever;
- iii. Paul argues that Christians are justified by Faith in Christ and not merely through good works (Rom 1:16-17);
- iv. Paul expected Christians to emulate Abraham's faith in God;
- v. Paul believes that the mercy of God is infinite and is for all;
- vi. Paul expects all believers to accept one another as Christ did; and
- vii. Paul urges all to offer themselves as a living sacrifice.

## 9.6 STRUCTURE

- i. Address (1:1 – 15)
- ii. Salvation by faith (1:18 – 5:11)
- iii. Through one man, sin entered the world (5:12 – 6:23).
- iv. Freed from the Slavery of sin, we receive the Holy Spirit and become God's children (7:1 – 8:39)
  - v. The failure of the Jewish people is temporary (9:1 – 11:36)
  - vi. By baptism man puts on Christ (12:1 – 15:13)
- vii. Conclusion: Plans and recommendations (15:14 – 16:27)

## 9.7 QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP REFLECTION

- i. How important is the Letter to the Romans in our times?
- ii. What pastoral aspects can we draw from the Letter to the Romans which are still relevant to the Church today?
- iii. Which of the challenges that the Roman community faced are similar to our own today?

## 9.8 PASTORAL REFLECTION

Christianity was supposed to break all unhealthy worldly barriers among believers and create a peaceful and harmonious community where all the

baptized would live as brothers and sisters (Eph 2:14-17; Gal 3: 26-29). For Paul is right to say that it is faith in Christ, through baptism, that unites us and not any physical identity or good works. Baptismal faith brings to an end all human barriers. Since the water of baptism is stronger than blood, Christians from other tribes, regions, political parties and cultures are our true brothers and sisters (Mark 3: 31-35).

Presently, however, this is not yet the case. Many Christians, Catholics among them, still identify themselves with their ethnic, regional and language groups; political parties; and dioceses of origin. Often before I see my Christian brothers and sisters for who they are to me namely, my brothers and sisters, I want first to know where they are coming from; what language they speak; and which political colors they wear. We have seen Christians from the same denomination fighting over church boundaries; and we often hear church leaders being rejected by fellow believers simply because they do not come from the said area. We are witnessing Christians discrediting one another through the electronic and other media. All this leaves behind bitter feelings that come with insider and outsider mentality. Paul is still urging us today to live in harmony for we are all insiders since we all share the same baptism and faith in Christ Jesus.

Unfortunately, this very Letter to the Romans was one of the bases for Christian division during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century CE. We thank God that today biblical scholars are trying to reread this powerful instrument of Christian unity and harmony with more sobriety in order to enhance the current ecumenical dialogue. Faith and action are never in opposition since the latter is the fruit of the former as James has made it very clear (James 2: 14-17).

## **10. PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS**

### **10.1 INTRODUCTION**

The first and second letters of Paul to the Corinthians come after the letter to the Romans in the arrangement of the letters in the New Testament. This means that they are shorter than the letter to the Romans.

### **10.2 1<sup>ST</sup> AND 2<sup>ND</sup> CORINTHIANS**

*These two Letters are believed to have been written between 54 and 58 A.D. They are believed to have been written within the same period when letters to the Galatians and to the Romans were written. They were therefore written after the first and second letters to the Thessalonians, believed to be the first letters written by Paul between 51 and 53 A.D.*

### **10.3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Corinth was a city with all sorts of social political challenges that befit and are associated with city life. To underscore this point, it is important to know that the city was also called Sin City par excellence because its temple was associated with 1000 prostitutes. Just as would be expected, the social life of the people influenced the life of the Church when finally the Church began to grow and develop there.

Paul is therefore writing to a Church of Corinth in response to the challenges which were experienced by the Church there. The Church was divided. Then in the second letter Paul tries to expose the differences and then he takes a moment to rejoice over the attained reconciliation.

### **10.4 AUDIENCE**

Paul is writing to all Christian believers in Corinth who were divided amongst themselves

### **10.5 MESSAGE**

In First Corinthians, Paul argues that Christ alone is the object of our faith and he is a source of unity and not division. It is he who died for us. He further argues that all gifts in the church have their source in the Spirit of

God and are given for the purpose of building up Christ's church. And the highest of all these gifts is love.

## 10.6 KEY THOUGHTS

- i. In First Corinthians, Paul tackles the challenges of the small cliques or groupings that are developing and asserts that believers ought to be united around the Eucharistic spirituality;
- ii. For Paul, their Spirit-given gifts should be used in the development and building of healthy communities where full Christian lives are shared and appreciated;
- iii. The letter stresses the point that the Holy Spirit is active in the Christian Corinthians through various gifts; and
- vi. Finally Paul argues that the greatest of the gifts is Love.

## 10.7 STRUCTURE

- I Address and Thanksgiving (1 Cor. 1:1 – 9)
- II Divisions and Party Disputes (1 Cor. 1: 10 – 4:21)
- III Cases of immorality and responses (1 Cor. 5:1 – 6:20)
  - i. *Explanation of the Nature of the gospel (5:1 – 7:40)*
    - The mistake of the young Church listening to the favorite preacher only
    - Preacher as servant of Christ
  - ii. *The Christian scale of values is different (8:1 – 11:1)*
    - Conversion to Christ does not change the state of life
  - iii. *Anxiety of the brethren (11:2 – 34)*
    - Christian life requires effort
  - iv. *Comments about the community meetings (12:1 – 14:40)*
    - The last Supper tradition is recalled and exposed
  - v. *Comments on the gifts of the Spirit (12:31 – 13:13)*
    - Each charism is to build the community of God
    - Greatest charism is love for the brethren
  - vi. *The Resurrection (15:1 – 58)*
    - Christ is Risen
    - The Christian hopes to rise with Christ and this is the heart of our faith
  - vii. *Collection for the Church in Jerusalem (16: 1 – 24)*

## 10.8 QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP REFLECTION

What similarities are there between the Church of Corinth during Paul's time and our own church situation today?

What lessons can we draw from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians?

How can we apply the First Corinthians to our own Church situation today?

## 10.9 PASTORAL REFLECTION

The Gospel should always be about Jesus Christ who suffered and died for humanity and not about Paul, Cephas (Peter) or Apollos who are merely agents of evangelization. Moreover, Jesus understood himself as a servant-leader who came to serve and not a master who yearned to be served (Mark 10:35-45). He always placed God the Father first in his ministry since he came to do God's will and not his own (John 5: 30-40). Jesus even avoided the limelight and forbade beneficiaries of his healing ministry to broadcast his achievements. He was not to let his left hand know what his right hand was doing.

Today it is all about prophet or prophetess so and so and his/her miracles which are broadcast live on TV. Some of these men and women of God are not ashamed to push their names forward and to encourage followers to call themselves after their (prophets/prophetesses') own names. They claim to work miracles in Jesus' name but it is in fact their own names that are on everyone's lips. Jesus' name has now been commercialized. Followers are called after the particular prophet and prophetess that they follow. This is exactly what Paul discouraged at Corinth. Again, it was Jesus, not Paul/Peter/Apollos, who suffered and died for the Corinthian Christians.

Furthermore, gifts that are obtained among Christians are not for an individual's benefit but rather they are there in order to build the church of God. As Paul puts it, if we want to boast let us boast in the Lord (1Cor 1: 26-31). The role of humility in the church can never be overemphasized. Love is the highest gift whose possession everybody should yearn for. Love (not dissension, rivalry or arrogance) conquers everything.

# **11. PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS**

## **11.1 INTRODUCTION**

Paul wrote this second letter to the Corinthians around 57 AD. Paul wrote the second letter to the Corinthians because the first letter which he wrote to them had not achieved its purpose. Paul had written the first letter to answer some questions that had been put to him and to correct some reported disorders.

## **11.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

A group of Judaizers were claiming to be more qualified to speak about Jesus Christ than Paul. There was therefore confusion in Corinth after Paul had written his first letter. Some doubted about the authenticity of his preaching and message since he was a former persecutor of the church. To calm things down, Paul sent his disciple Titus, a well respected man, to Corinth with his second letter which scholars believe is part of the current letter.

## **11.3 AUDIENCE**

Paul is writing to the same people, Corinthians, to whom he wrote the first letter.

## **11.4 MESSAGE**

The Crisis between Paul and the Corinthians made Paul to try to defend his ministry and authority as from God.

Paul encourages the Church to be generous and to support others. He practically does this through the Church's contribution towards the Jerusalem community which was experiencing serious hunger.

## **11.5 KEY THOUGHTS**

- i. Paul demonstrates his determination to spread the gospel having given up everything;
- ii. He demonstrates that he will do everything possible to rebuild and re-unite the community;
- iii. However, Paul is well aware of his weaknesses but these will not detract him from accomplishing his mission.

## 11.6 STRUCTURE

- i. Paul's relationship with the Church at Corinth (1:12 – 2:17)
- ii. Paul's Pride of being minister of the New Testament (3:1 – 4:15)
- iii. The Mission of Christ's envoy (4:16 – 6:13)
- iv. Paul's confidence in the Corinthians (6:16 – 6:13)
- v. Collection for the Church in Jerusalem (6:14 -7:16)
- vi. Paul defends the authenticity of his mission (10:1 – 13:13)

## 11.7 QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP REFLECTION

- i. What similarities are there between Paul's experiences at Corinth and our church situation today?
- ii. What lessons can we draw from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians?
- iii. How can we apply Paul's second letter to the Corinthians to our own situation today?

## 11.8 PASTORAL REFLECTION

Christianity is a religion based on mercy and compassion (Luke 6:36). This explains why Pope Francis is inviting us, in *Misericordiae Vultus*, to celebrate the Jubilee Year of God's Mercy. From its humble beginnings the church has always stood by her poor and vulnerable members to this day (2Cor 9: 6-15; Mathew 25: 31-46). Charity (almsgiving) is one of the three main pillars of the church besides prayer and fasting. Through the generosity of our brothers and sisters overseas over the years, the local church has been able to put up infrastructure, finance its pastoral programs, form its agents of evangelization and carry out relief and development programs.

However, today we need to speed up a spirit of self-reliance so as not to depend on our sister churches overseas for even our basic needs. We need to be finally weaned from the current dependence syndrome as one way of defending our right and authority to preach the Gospel with a Malawian voice. Self-reliance enabled Paul to preach the Gospel with certain authority and independence. The Church in Malawi has come of age to start contributing to the universal church in a more significant way especially after 100 years of Christianity.



## **12. PAUL'S LETTER TO THE GALATIANS**

### **12.1 INTRODUCTION**

Galatians is the fourth letter in the arrangement of Paul's letters in the New Testament. It comes after 2 Corinthians. Most Scholars date its writing between 54 and 55 AD.

### **12.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

It was written at Ephesus during the third missionary journey referred to in Acts 18:23. The Letter to the Galatians was written to refute threats of the Mosaic Law on the newly converted Christians. The conservative Jewish Christians (Judaizers) taught that Gentile Christians were obliged to observe strictly the Mosaic Law such as:

- i. Circumcision(5:2); and
- ii. The keeping of Jewish dietary laws(2:11-14).

Paul was angry because for him this undermined the Gospel message. He therefore wrote this letter to bring Galatians back to the original gospel, which relied solely on Faith in Jesus Christ as a means of salvation. Again for him, any compromise with this gospel meant 'Christ died for nothing' (2:21).

### **12.3 AUDIENCE**

The letter was written to the Christians of Galatia in modern day Turkey, with its capital at Ancyra which is today called Ankara (Acts 13-14). The Church in Galatia was established by Paul during his first missionary journey between 46 and 48 AD.

### **12.4 MESSAGE**

For Paul, righteousness is living according to Christ, the new Law, and his teaching. Here Paul was arguing against conservative Jewish Christians who taught that righteousness came through following Mosaic Law.

## 12.5 KEY THOUGHTS

- i. The Galatians were to remember that it was by faith that they received the Spirit and not by obedience to the Mosaic Law (Gal 3:1-5, 14);
- ii. The biblical promise that all nations will be blessed in Abraham is fulfilled when, like Abraham, gentiles are declared righteous by faith (Gal 3:6-9); and
- iii. A person becomes righteous when he/she has believed in Christ and not simply by being obedient to the Mosaic Law (Gal 5:1-7).

## 12.6 STRUCTURE

- i. Address (1:1-5)
- ii. Loyalty to the Gospel (1:6-10)
- iii. Paul's defense of His Gospel and His Authority (1: 11-2:21)
- iv. Faith and Liberation (3:1-4:31)
- v. No freedom but in Christ (5:1-6:10)
- vi. Conclusion (6:11-18)

## 12.7 QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP REFLECTION

- i. State when and where the letter to the Galatians was written?
- ii. What were the circumstances that led to the writing of the letter?
- iii. What is the main message in the Galatians?
- iv. What lessons can be learnt from the letter to the Galatians?

## 12.8 PASTORAL REFLECTION

We, the African Christians, are still being haunted by our traditional past that cannot be simply washed away and buried. Traditional beliefs are what distinguished an African from the other races. We learned and practiced them from the cradle to the grave. Some of them made lots of sense and enabled us to survive from generation to generation namely, kinship, hospitality, solidarity and a strong love for life and family.

However, our same culture also promoted the inferiority of women, witchcraft, jealousy, polygamy, ethnic wars and hatred and other social evils.

Christianity came to reinforce our good values and condemn retrogressive cultural beliefs and practices. The first missionaries introduced us to the freedom and joy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the one mediator between us and God. Jesus exhorts us not to fear any other powers here on earth or there above. Faith in him and his Gospel suffices. We are God's adopted sons and daughters and we matter to him more than sparrows and flowers of the field. Not even a single hair on our heads falls down to the ground without God knowing. He knows our needs even before we utter them (Matthews 6: 25-34; Luke 12: 22-31). We need not be afraid for Christ is with us till the end of the ages (Mathew 28: 20).

However, we still find ourselves engulfed in paralyzing fear and resorting to practices that contradict Christian values namely, unequal treatment of women, idolatry, sorcery and witchcraft. We still have Christians on Sundays and quasi-pagans during the week. It is true that genuine conversion is a long process. Even towards the end of his life Paul did not relax thinking that he had already been saved. He tells us that he kept on running towards victory (Phil 3: 12-17). But he was also sure of one thing that his whole life was consumed by that of Christ his Lord and master who lived in and through him (Gal 2: 20). And this was only within two decades of Paul's embracing the Christian Faith.

We should therefore normally expect that after a century of Christianity in Malawi, Malawian Christians should be at a certain level of spiritual growth where negative traditional elements were recognized for what they were and rejected. Galatians is challenging us to embrace more fully the freedom that Christ's Gospel has brought us. Let us retain good African values, purify those that are partially good and reject those that are downright anti-Christian. Faith in the Risen and Living Christ should suffice even for us today. Let us now fully embrace the true Christian Gospel of joy and freedom. We should not continue to be afraid.

## **13. PAUL'S LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS**

### **13.1 INTRODUCTION**

In the arrangement of Paul's letters, the letter to the Ephesians is fifth. It was written around 90 AD and is believed to have been authored by a disciple of Paul. The letter is accepted to belong to Pauline body of teachings.

### **13.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The letter is an exhortation encouraging Christian communities to adhere to Christian convictions, values and concepts that all have in common. It reinforces a sense of Christian identity. Content and expression are like the letter to the Colossians.

### **13.3 AUDIENCE**

Ephesians was meant to be circulated among several churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and was, therefore, not addressed to any one church in particular (Eph 4:15).

### **13.4 MESSAGE**

Ephesians, like Colossians, presents the church as a whole, and not Christ as an individual, as the Body of Christ. This Body comprises both Jews and Gentiles who now should live as brothers and sisters in Christ who has sacrificed his life for them. Moreover, Christian families should resemble this union of love and mutual respect that exists between Christ and his church (Eph 5: 21-33).

### **13.5 KEY THOUGHTS**

- i. God takes the initiative to save all humankind;
- ii. Salvation of humankind is realized in Jesus Christ and its announcement is entrusted to Paul (1: 9-10);
- iii. The grace of salvation is given to all; and
- iv. Paul portrays the church as the Body of Christ.

## 13.6 STRUCTURE

- i. Address (1:1-14)
- ii. Unity of the Church in Christ (1: 15-2:22)
- iii. World Mission of the Church (3: 1-4:24)
- iv. The Life of the Church as the Body of Christ (4:1-5:20)
  - v. The Household code of Conduct, an Expression of Unity (5:21-6:9)
- vii. Final Exhortation (6:10-20)
- viii. Conclusion (6:21-24)

## 13.7 QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP REFLECTION

- i. When and why was the letter to the Ephesians written?
- ii. What is the main message in the letter to the Ephesians?
- iii. What lessons can we draw from the letter to the Ephesians?

## 13.8 PASTORAL REFLECTION

Ephesians takes Paul's belief that Christianity surpasses race, ethnicity and locality to its perfection. The writer reminds us that through his death and resurrection, Christ has made all things one in God. He has destroyed ethnic and racial barriers that used to keep Jews and pagans apart and even at enmity. They are now reconciled in Christ.

Malawian Christians better listen to this Gospel of reconciliation and take it to heart. What happened in Rwanda in 1994 and Kenya in 2007 was a Christian scandal. Christians were massacring fellow Christians in the name of ethnic cleansing. What also happened here in 1999 and 2004 after presidential and parliamentary elections deserved a lot to be desired. We could have done better as a God fearing nation.

If we really believe that the church is the mystical Body of Christ where he is the head, then we should expect Christ's life of love, peace and harmony to flow through his body. We should live as brothers and sisters in love and mutual sacrifice. We should never allow ethnicity, regional and racial identity and political affiliations to divide us. Faith in Christ is our unifying factor.

Another strong point that Ephesians brings us, Malawian Christians, is the centrality of Christ in the universe today. All powers have been given to him in heaven and here on earth as he sits at his Father's right hand "far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion, and every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet ..." (Ephesians 1: 21-22; see also 1Cor. 15: 24-28). This is a very strong assertion that should rid us of all fears of harmful traditional beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery. Christ has conquered death and all that goes with it. Christ's power suffices for us. Even Satan admits in Luke that his powers originally came from God and this implies that the same God can also remove them any time (Luke 4: 6). We should therefore strongly believe that if God is for us, nobody and nothing can be against us (Romans 8: 11-39). We, Christians, should never be afraid.

## **14.0 PROGRAM FOR THE BIBLE MONTH- SEPTEMBER 2015**

### **“God rich in Mercy” (Eph. 2: 4). Why was this theme chosen for the Bible Month?**

This is the theme chosen by the Holy Father, Pope Francis for the Year of Mercy which will be inaugurated on 8 December, 2015. During the year, the Pope will send “Missionaries of Mercy” through out the world to forgive sins.

### **Activities for the Bible Month this year**

1. To continue giving Bible lessons during the Bible Month
2. To understudy the Post Exilic Prophets in the Old Testament (OT) and Paul and writings in the New Testament (NT)
3. To explain the main messages and other key thoughts in each prophet and the letters
5. To give simple Bible lessons that can be used in Small Christian Communities to teach and share the Word of God throughout the year
6. To summarise the message in the Post Exilic Prophets and the letters of Saint Paul for Book IV of the Bible Month series.

## 15.0 LAUNCHING

### **6<sup>th</sup> September: (Sunday)**

Proposed day for the official launch of the Bible month at Parish level in all dioceses

It is recommended that all Parish priests be at the Parish Church.

## 2.0 PROPOSED ACTIVITIES FOR THE BIBLE LAUNCH

**Bible Enthronement:** A special place be designated for the Bible in the Church.

Short presentation on the main messages in the Post Exilic Prophets and some letters of Saint Paul.

### **MASS – The Major Celebration**

Use the ordinary readings for the day. Priests should explain the Theme for the Bible Month.

There should be a special collection to support the activities of the Bible Apostolate: 20% for the National Office and 80% for the Diocese

## 3.0 OTHER ACTIVITIES PROPOSED FOR THE BIBLE MONTH

a. During this period, Booklets on the Bible lessons (September 2015) will be made available for sale.

Choirs should be encouraged to compose songs based on Biblical verses on 'Mercy' and 'Care for Creation' as portrayed in the Encyclical "Laudato Si".

Special programmes on print and electronic media should be encouraged  
Organise a special Panel Discussion

Remember the church commemorates Saint Jerome on **30<sup>th</sup> September** -The writer of the Jerome Biblical Commentary. So we encourage panel discussions on this year's theme.



## **4.0 ACTIVITIES THAT DIOCESES AND PARISHES CAN CARRY OUT TO HELP THE FAITHFUL DEEPEN THEIR UNDERSTANDING ON THE BIBLE**

### **a. On Diocesan Level**

- 1.0 Provide the Material for reflection during the entire period of the Bible Month and beyond
- 2.0 Bible Coordinators should be encouraged to organize workshops or sessions for various church leaders at different levels

### **b. On Parish level**

1. Special booklets prepared for the Bible Month will be used on Sundays of the month of September
2. Readings for daily and Sunday masses are the ones found in the liturgical calendar
3. The Parish should encourage all the faithful to buy a Bible and exchange gifts of the Holy Bible during this period

### **c. On Small Christian level**

1. Book IV of the Bible Month 2015 should be studied following the programme indicated at the end of the booklet. Each prophet and letter/s should be given a full month of study starting from the month of October 2015 to August 2016.
2. The priests should encourage the faithful to give gifts of the Holy Bible to the needy families and individuals.

## 5.0 SPECIAL PROGRAMME FOR THE BIBLE MONTH(SEPTEMBER )2015

DATE	ACTIVITY	RECOMMENDATION
6th September (Sunday)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launching Bible Month on Parish level</li> </ul>	Give a brief explanation on the material in Book IV of the Bible Month
<b>DAYS OF THE WEEK</b>	<b>RECOMMENDED ACTIVITIES ON PARISH AND SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY LEVEL DURING THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER, 2015.</b>	
<p>The Faithful should know:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Books of the Post-Exilic prophets and some letters of Saint Paul</li> <li>▪ The number of chapters for each book and letter</li> <li>▪ The Authorship, message and Pastoral reflection in each prophet and letter</li> </ul>		
6-12 September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The faithful should be guided to study major themes in the following books:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Joel</li> <li>▪ Obadiah</li> <li>▪ Jonah</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
13-19 September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The faithful should be guided to study major themes in the following books:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Haggai</li> <li>○ Third Isaiah</li> <li>○ Zachariah</li> <li>○ Malachi</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
20-26 September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The faithful should be guided to study major themes in the:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Letters of Saint Paul</li> <li>○ Letter to the Romans</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
27Sep.-3 October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The faithful should be guided to study major themes in the following letters:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ First letter to the Corinthians</li> <li>○ Second Letter to the Corinthians</li> <li>○ Galatians</li> <li>○ Ephesians</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<b>PROPOSED PROGRAM OF BIBLE STUDY IN THE SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES FOR THE WHOLE YEAR</b>		
MONTH	RECOMMENDED ACTIVITY	
October (Month of the Rosary)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In depth study of the Introduction to the Bible.</li> <li>• In depth study of the Book of Joel</li> </ul>	
November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Book of Obadiah</li> </ul>	
December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Book of Jonah</li> </ul>	

<b>January</b>	• Book of Haggai
<b>February</b>	• Book of Third Isaiah
<b>March</b>	• Book of Zachariah
<b>April</b>	• Book of Malachi
<b>May</b>	• Letter to the Romans
<b>June</b>	• First and Second letter to the Corinthians
<b>July</b>	• Letter to the Galatians and Ephesians
<b>August</b>	• Revision of Books and Letters that were not well understood

## **Maphunziro Books**

Introduction to the Bible as the Word of God - Book I (2011)

Bible Month - September - Book II (2012)

Bible Month - September - Book III (2013)

Bible Month - September - Book IV (2014 - 2015)



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