

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We are joined this morning by distinguished religious leaders and theologians of The International Commission of Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue, who have met this week here in Jerusalem to discuss the dignity of the human person, as created in the image and likeness of God.

Rabbi Heschel, a Jewish scholar and activist, who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in support of human dignity and equality, has wisely said, ***'God is the God of everyone or the God of no one. God is concerned for all people or God is concerned for no people.'***

The Book of Jonah is perhaps the most well-known Old Testament story to tell of the inclusive and universal love of God, extending even to those considered our enemies.

When Jonah became angry because God showed mercy to the people of Nineveh, God came to him and asked, ***'¹¹And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'***

The message of Jonah must have been controversial and challenging to the people of his day. It meant a dramatic change. God was now seen no longer as a tribal, exclusive God, concerned only for a select few, but as the 'the Maker of us all, concerned for everyone.'

As verse 9 of Psalm 145 says, ***⁹The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.***

This radical inclusivity of God is abundantly clear in the Gospel of John:

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.'

In the ministry of Jesus we see his compassionate concern for the multitudes. Much of our Lord's ministry took place in the Galilee, an area known for its diversity of peoples. In Matthew, we read:

And there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and [from] Decapolis, and [from] Jerusalem, and [from] Judaea, and [from] beyond Jordan.

The mention of Decapolis is revealing. It was a region made up of a league of 10 cities ranging from Galilee to Syria and Jordan, whose mixed populations came together to promote common interests in commerce as well as mutual protection.

The crowds who gathered to hear Jesus from the Decapolis would have been from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, many were of Greek origin.

In demonstrating a concern for the people of the Decapolis, Jesus displayed an inclusive approach to a diverse crowd.

By doing so, He showed that God is the God of all people.

We see this all-encompassing nature of God in today's Gospel passage.

All the laborers are paid the same wage, whether they worked a full day, a half day, or only the last hour of the day. No one is cheated, as the first received what they had agreed to.

The parable is not about the laborers so much, as it is about God's generous kindness and global embrace. No one is left out.

All are **employed**, a word derived from the Latin and meaning to enfold, involve, or to connect. God enfolds and connects us all.

For us Christians, God's great enfolding of humanity is seen most supremely in Jesus, that Great Shepherd of the Sheep, who laid down his life for the salvation of the world. God so loved the world, God gave all for it. God is love, St. John says.

The parable of the laborers reveals God's desire to enfold all people into mutual belonging and meaningful purpose.

It demonstrates God's determination to gather human beings in that life-giving vineyard where all have dignity and equality.

Sadly, such holy intention is often met with resistance and opposition.

Challenges to inclusion and unity are faced even among Christians.

Jesus knew the risk of division and prayed, ***"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. (John 17:20,21)***

Christians are divided, but we can and do come together.

As Christian leaders here in the Holy Land, representing our unique communities, we walk together, upholding one another in prayer and fellowship. We share common interests and concerns.

Chief among them is our cooperative efforts to address the dwindling presence of Indigenous Christians here in the Land of the Holy One.

Not so long ago, Christians were more than 20% of the population. Today we are less than 2%.

As Heads of Churches, our joint actions are designed to strengthen the Christian presence of the Living Stones here in the Holy Land, as we continue to witness to the love of God as revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ.

In addition, our care for and protection of Christian Holy Sites ensure that Christian pilgrims of every denomination, and from around the world, can come to the Holy Land and encounter the Holy One.

The Incarnate God walked this Land, making it Holy for all time. We cannot abandon such a sacred trust. Sustaining indigenous Christian presence and enabling Christian pilgrimage are central to fulfilling the duty entrusted to us.

Another joint effort by the Heads of Churches is our work for peace and reconciliation, especially between Israelis and Palestinians. As followers of the Prince of Peace, we are called to **SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT!**

Christians in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East are peacemakers, promoting understanding and tolerance between diverse peoples and religions. The peace we seek and pursue is one with justice.

Our united voice is heard near and far, as we remind Christians and non-Christians alike, that God's universal concern demands justice for all.

Currently, our voice is speaking out for those Christians in Iraq and Syria who, by virtue of their faith, are facing persecution by extremists. As Church leaders, we draw the world's attention to the challenges faced by these ancient Christian communities and call for an end to such persecution.

By our examples of tolerance and inclusivity, and our commitment to human dignity, we show that people of diverse religious backgrounds can live together in peace and harmony.

Our work and prayers for peace are joined with those of the United Nations who has marked this day, the 21st of September, as the International Day of Peace.

While full Christian unity is confronted by many challenges, we know, especially here in the Middle East, that as members of the Body of Christ we must stand together.

I am pleased to say that by God's grace we are united on many levels, and we stand together to make positive contributions to the common good of the wider region and indeed to the whole world.

That being said, we are always mindful of our Lord's prayer that Christians be one, even as He and the Father are One. Therefore, our efforts must continue.

The International Commission of Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue is one sign of our commitment to Christian unity – as our two churches are joined in the common cause of achieving unity through truth and love, and by working in solidarity for a better world.

As we saw in the story of Jonah, and certainly as we see demonstrated in the person of Jesus, God is concerned for all people.

As Christians, we are not found with those laborers who challenge God's generosity and inclusivity but rather, we are bold in our desire and courageous in our dialogue to truly be One Fold of One Shepherd.

Dear esteemed brothers and sisters in Christ, we celebrate our dialogue, our work for the sake of unity, and our partnership with God in His love and concern for all the peoples of the earth.