

## **Mystagogical Mission: Living in the In-between Times as Disciples in the World**

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In the first day of plenary sessions at the 2016 NAAC conference, we spent time on theologies of church (*We Receive you into the Household of God*) and on journeying in stages – drawing on the classical stages of the catechumenate through Aidan Kavanagh’s warning that to get into this catechumenal church business means we will have to get back to basics in Christianity – even evangelism! (Dan Benedict). Then we journeyed through the essential non-verbal languages of symbolic discourse – other forms of multifaceted and hospitable evangelism (Marty Haugen).

Evangelism is not a new concept – but it certainly fell out of favour among churches that had lifted rationality to a saving virtue, as well as the desire to resist religion as a public conversation. In an old (and very popular) teaching video called *This Is the Night*, Fr. Jim Newman slaps these ideas in the face, saying that initiation, coming to Christ, is not, cannot, be a private affair. In the same way – handing on the faith (which is pure gift from God) is not first and foremost about instruction or edification, but, with the rites of initiation, it is the means of salvation. Rational didacticism is not the approach of the catechumenate or of formation in general, and the restoration of various types of catechumenal processes is helping us move from information about God to experiences in God – the good news, evangelism, enfleshed in ancient and future ways.

What I would like to do in this last plenary address of our time together is tie together two related concepts from our various conversations: mission and mystagogy, and then address these concepts toward the aspect of Christian spirituality of a church on pilgrimage – walking together we see that the scenery is always changing around us, but the end of the journey remains the same.

### *Mission*

Along with evangelism, mission is a word that has suffered over the past 100 years. Missionaries, mission, missiology were for a long time associated with cultural genocide – accept Christ, accept this dominant culture. Conversion at the tip of a sword was certainly the popular approach to missionary activity in many places and times, and not just for Christianity. But in many Christian circles, missiology has turned into a different academic and pastoral reality, and a large part of the shift was encouraged by the rediscovered catechumenate in the 20<sup>th</sup> century mission fields. Rather than begin with Christianity woven together with a European culture and imposing them as a package deal, the catechumenate called missionaries to listen to people, to hear how Christ was already in their culture, in their lives – even when not named as such. The dialogue became an actual dialogue – tell me where you are, I’ll tell you where we – the church – are. A lot of this is what we call inculturation of the gospel - inculturation of the liturgy. When culture meets liturgy, true inculturation means that both will change, the local

culture will change and the liturgy will change. Again, the restored catechumenate had a lot to do with these changes in mission.

In more recent years, the mission of the church has returned as an important idea in relation to liturgy. It was not so many years ago that Sunday mornings in parishes seemed self-contained – the attitude seemed to be that if people want to be part of this, they can come here and join us AND being here is sufficient – we don't really need to do anything more! (obviously, I am overstating this – and surely none of your parishes were ever like this...)

In the ecumenical liturgical restorations, a number of elements of eucharistic liturgy came back, including the ritual dismissal. *Ita, missa est* (so, you are sent – go away) was the simple Latin dismissal for centuries... a dismissal that disappeared from many ecclesial communities. But being sent out – dismissed – is really one of the most important texts in our liturgy. In many recent translations, the text is expanded – it tells us what we are sent out to do: “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord”; “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord,” “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.” And as many liturgical theologians have reflected on the importance of that dismissal – it has led to a recapturing of the intrinsic relationship between liturgy and mission.

Some of you may have experienced the assumed animosity between liturgy and social justice. To stereo-type for just a second, there were those people (clergy, parishioners, folks) who were interested in liturgy – you know what they're like. Then there were those other people who did social justice – never to be confused with the liturgy geeks. What was being obscured in that friendly rivalry was the essential connection between liturgy and ethics. The whole point of church, the whole point of liturgy, is to be sent out as Christ for the world.

Most profoundly championed in sacramental theology by Louis-Marie Chauvet, ethical conduct is part of his arch or triangle of related realities: scripture, liturgy, ethics.<sup>1</sup> For Chauvet, the link is not just this unity of “knowledge, gratitude, and action,”<sup>2</sup> but grounded in his linking of sacramental institution and ethical verification by means of a theology of gift-exchange. For Chauvet this means that while our human response to God's gift is always unequal to what is divinely given, the sacraments (or more precisely, sacramental participation) shape a Christian, give us a primary identity. And that identity is first and foremost to act in response to the ‘gift’ of the whole Christ. “Without the return-gift of an *ethical* practice by which the subject ‘verifies’ what it has received in the sacrament, Christian identity would be stillborn.”<sup>3</sup>

Particularly in the rites of initiation, with our Western Christian emphasis on baptism interpreted through the lens of the Apostle Paul's dying and rising with Christ, our participation in the paschal mystery is also a “paschal movement” to be Christ for others. Timothy Sedgwick writes that as Christ's offering was a “sacrifice in praise and thanksgiving,” we are called to offer

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<sup>1</sup> Found in both Chauvet's primary sacramental theology books. *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995) and *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> *The Sacraments*, 31.

<sup>3</sup> *Symbol and Sacrament*, 281.

ourselves in response to and in continuation of this self-offering.<sup>4</sup> So the liturgy sends us out –the liturgy is shaped to point to this sending us out - to be the body of Christ for the good of the world, to be the blood of Christ poured out for the good of the world – not just as individuals but as the body of Christ, all of us together.

This has been consistently aided by the restored (and more accurate) definition of the word “liturgy” in the last 15 years. For quite a while, the Greek word *leitourgia* was translated as “the work of the people.” This is a lovely definition as it countered the same clericalism that drove Louis Weil and others to articulate a baptismal ecclesiology. The only problem is that is not actually the etymology of the word in its ancient use. *Leitourgia* is better translated as “a work done on behalf of the people.”<sup>5</sup> In its Greek context this often meant a civic obligation for the upper class to do something for the populace (a banquet, a show, a ritual). If we return to that meaning of the word ‘liturgy’, it offers an intriguing possibility that as the church makes the eucharist it does so not only so that the eucharist will again make, transform, renew the church, but that all these baptized Christians - the body of Christ – does eucharist for all people; for the good of the whole world: liturgical celebration as ethical action for others.

This mission of the church in its liturgical celebration is, however, a two-way street. The idea of the liturgy of the world, so near to the heart of Karl Rahner, is the return of the world’s suffering into a welcoming body of Christ. In every part of daily life, we experience Christ’s own dying and rising, because the mystery of God continues to unfold in our world. According to writings on Rahner,

these joys and sorrows make up the “liturgy of the world,” which he [Rahner] insisted had to be connected to the liturgy or worship of the church. We must bring to the church our own dyings and risings and unite them with Christ’s own.<sup>6</sup>

This double mission – the paschal mystery - of receiving back what is sent out, proclaimed to the world, and experienced in the world has a beautifully poetic description in the hands of a Korean theologian, Jung Young Lee, reflecting on marginality

One day he was walking along a pond and saw the waves made from a fish surfacing in the center. The waves ebbed toward the margin, but then he noticed that they also were reflected back into the center. “Why did I not pay attention to ebbs returning to the center, but noted only the waves coming out to the edge? Why was I interested only in something happening at and from the center? Why did I neglect what happened at and from the margin?”<sup>7</sup>

Missiology has come a long ways from its 18<sup>th</sup> century understanding, and while still part of the primary Christian work of evangelism – of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, it is also

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy F. Sedgwick, *Sacramental Ethics: Paschal Identity and the Christian Life*. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987) 39.

<sup>5</sup> See Anscar Chupungco, “A Definition of Liturgy,” *Handbook for Liturgical Studies: Introduction to the Liturgy*, vol. 1 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997) 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin O’Brien, *America* (May 3, 2004 issue).

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Scott Anderson’s essay “Context, Margins, and Ministry: A Church in the Pacific Northwest’s ‘None Zone’” in *Worship and Culture: Foreign Country or Homeland?* Gláucia Vasconcelos Wilkey, editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2014) 79; from Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995.

parallel to the catechumenate in that it both gives and receives, it first listens to what is already of God in individuals and cultures, and in receiving those realities is itself changed, as is the church, through action flowing from liturgy and returning to change the church and the way the good news is heard and proclaimed.

### *Mystagogy*

Describing mystagogy based on the fourth period of the RCIA, *TeamRCIA* (a Roman Catholic organization offering workshops and training for catechumenate leadership), expands on the official interpretation of mystagogy as “interpretation of mystery” by saying that mystagogy “is initiation into that which is not yet fully revealed.”<sup>8</sup> None of us (I’m pretty sure) comprehend the full revelation of God’s economy, which leads us to the reality that mystagogy is both the final period of the catechumenate in its classical structure, and a lifelong state, or rank, in the church – a true both/and reality.

Just to remind ourselves, in the catechumenal process, the fourth and final phase is traditionally called mystagogy, and that is an important part of the processes of initiation. It assumes – it knows – that the rites of initiation do something to those initiated, transformation happens, and the catechumens (now neophytes) having put on Christ, are invited to reflect on the mysteries with new insight from new experiences – they are, after all, a new creation! This is all good, but it does not erase the other reality that mystagogy is a lifelong phase – what we might call ‘discipleship.’ In the Anglican Church of Canada, the resource for the catechumenate is called “Making Disciples: The Catechumenate in the Anglican Church.” The online description and rites are a distillation and adaptation of John Hill’s work of similar name: *Making Disciples: Serving Those who are Entering the Christian Life*, published in 1991 (and the focus of NAAC’s annual meeting in 2004 – 12 years ago!)<sup>9</sup>

The Anglican Church of Canada’s catechumenate calls the 4<sup>th</sup> stage of the process “Commitment”, a time for “deepening appreciation of the sacramental way of life.”

As the newly baptized awake to the reality of their altered existence, they reflect upon God’s call to them as ministers, based upon their own passions and gifts, and what particular roles they will embrace within the church community and in the world.<sup>10</sup>

Mystagogy - by any name - as a lifelong phase, brings us to the “in-between time” of the title of this talk – liminality in the language of rites of passage. Those of you who have done extensive study and reading of the catechumenate know that it is a classic example of a ‘rite of passage’, a phrase borrowed from cultural anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, who observed and named the three-step process in 1907.<sup>11</sup> Although the steps are often translated differently from van Gennep’s original French study, they are versions of separation-liminality-incorporation.

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<sup>8</sup> From the webpage of TeamRCIA.com, an organization started and overseen by Nick Wagner and Diana Macalintal in San Jose, California. Part of the joy of this year’s NAAC conference is that both Nick and Diana were present and part of the conversations!

<sup>9</sup> Published by the Hoskin Group, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> From “Making Disciples”, [www.anglican.ca/faith/worship/catechumenate](http://www.anglican.ca/faith/worship/catechumenate).

<sup>11</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, 1909; translated and republished as *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge, 1960.

**Separation** was the insight that as one's status in society was changing, it was necessary to leave behind the status or position that one had

**Liminality** was the place between leaving the old and entering the new – the inbetween (*limina* is a threshold, neither in nor out but between and sharing in both what was and what will be)

**Incorporation** is the return to society, but not the same as before separation. Liminality has caused a change, a transformation, so that the reintegration to society is as a different person with a different status or position.

Cultural anthropologists used this template to explore tribal rites of puberty in particular, where 12/13 year olds were removed from their tribe and childhood – initiated into the responsibilities of adulthood in often mystifying and painful rituals and settings, and then returned to their tribe as adults with all the rights and obligations accorded to adults. It is obvious how this applies to many of our rites and rituals, sacramental and other. Traditional marriage rites are a good example: one lives as a single person in society, and then leaves that by becoming engaged or betrothed, one separates oneself from the single life (and the way that others view you as a single person), but engagement is liminality – neither here nor there. The wedding ceremonies bring that liminality to an end, one re-enters society but now as a married person – a transformed person and a transformed position in society. Certainly we can see how the catechumenate is itself a rite of passage, but these rites needn't even be church rituals – graduation, getting a driver's license, vacation, getting sick – all of these can be viewed through the rite of passage structure, but in all of them, it is the liminal period that bears fruit, brings about transformation, changes the person and the society around the individual.

Victor Turner, another cultural anthropologist who built on Arnold van Gennep's definition of liminality, adds another understanding, saying that “neophytes living outside the norms and fixed categories of the social system gain a feeling of solidarity and unity – a oneness with each other.”<sup>12</sup> Turner named this solidarity and unity *communitas*. This is sometimes incorrectly translated as community – our English word ‘community’ doesn't quite carry the punch of a unity and solidarity of belonging, believing, and behaving that the social anthropology term *communitas* carries. But in many ways – what could be better than to aspire to *communitas* as an expression of the centrality of “we” in Christianity? The church as *communitas* – corporate liminality. (the gathering was asked to reflect on occasions when ritual led to *communitas*, and I shared an example of evening prayer leading to an act of civil disobedience in the wake of the murders of 6 Jesuits and 2 women in El Salvador, November 16, 1989).

In our double use of liminality – the catechumenate itself as liminality and mystagogy and Christian life, Christian discipleship as liminality and mystagogy, we can see in one (the mystagogical finale of a catechumenal process) an intensification or densification of liminality that is present in the liminality of Christian life. OK – what does that mean? Let me use the example of sacred space. We often hear people talking about sacred space as opposed to secular or profane. This is a holy place, a sacred space – therefore, that is not – holy or sacred. Now, really, how can that be for us as Christians who profess that all creation is good, created by God, and Christians who profess the incarnation – God become matter, flesh, stuff? It cannot be holy and not holy....that cannot be Christian theology. So, as opposed to American culture and

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<sup>12</sup> “Passages, margins, and poverty: religious symbols of *communitas*” in *Play, games and sports in cultural contexts*. Champaign: Human Kinetics Pub., 1983.

politics, which loves the either/or – either right or wrong, liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat, Protestant or Catholic – this cannot be. What we really have in a sacramental world view is that the whole world, being charged with “the grandeur of God” (thank you Gerard Manley Hopkins), means that certain places, certain times, certain actions, certain people focus, crystalize, intensify, deepen, the encounter with the holy – the glimpse of the divine, the mystery not yet fully revealed. It is not either/or, nor is it both/and, it is the fullness of divine revelation in which the temporal, spatial, and material world of humanity and creation share – we share in the eternal because God wills it and makes it so, begun at creation, intensified at the incarnation, continuing until the fullness of the reign of God.

If you have studied Eastern Christian Eucharistic theologies, you will recognize this language – that the Divine Liturgy (Eucharist) is a foretaste, a glimpse, a proleptic entrance into paradise. This is not saying that everything else is not holy, is not capable of this insight and experience, but that here the goodness of all creation is somehow intensified – ‘a thin place’ of the meeting of heaven and earth, in much the same way that the relics of martyrs throughout Christian history have functioned as the meeting of heaven and earth, as well as the Eastern Christian understanding of the marriage of place and ritual in the divine liturgy or qurbana.<sup>13</sup>

So the mystagogical phase of the catechumenate is a rehearsal, a reminder, an experience of the larger mystagogy that is our life together in Christ – always moving deeper into the mystery that is the fullness of God. Now along with the classic understanding of *communitas*, this corporate liminality and mystagogy is becoming, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more and more a reality. Who we are and what our priorities are as Christians are increasingly not those of society: have you read the news in the past three weeks? Selfishness, narcissism, violence, ‘us’ versus ‘them’, assuming there is a normative “us” against which all others are measured, road rage, mass shootings, misogyny, racism, virulent hatred of all those ‘others’ – and in the midst of this, the revised common lectionary handed us “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, all of you are now one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:23-29)<sup>14</sup> Making disciples for the good of the world is what the catechumenate starts, it is what the church continues. Making disciples for the good of the world is the response to the gift of eternal life that God offers to us, Chauvet’s ‘ethical verification’ of ‘sacramental institution.’ The catechumenate’s mystagogical phase points outward as a rehearsal of a missional and catechumenal church which faces out, not in. Here is a good place to cross paths with Avery Dulles’ *Models of the Church* again, because in his subsequent writing, Dulles adds a sixth model, “The Church as School of Discipleship”.<sup>15</sup> In this synthesis model drawn from several of his original five, Dulles says the process of learning the “job description” of the church is this “school of discipleship.” In this “school” we learn to proclaim the good news and be Christ, herald and servant, for the world. In later interviews, it was this “school of Discipleship” or

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<sup>13</sup> See the classic work of Peter Brown, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. For the liturgical space and the ritual within it as the meeting of heaven and earth in Eastern Christian theology, see Pauly Maniyattu, *Heaven on Earth: The Theology of Liturgical Spacetime in the East Syrian Qurbana*. Kerala: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> The New Testament reading appointed for Proper 7, Year C, in the NRSV Episcopal track of the RCL.

<sup>15</sup> Avery Dulles, *A Church to Believe In: The Community of Disciples and the Dynamics of Freedom*. New York: Crossroads, 1984.

“community of disciples” to which Dulles would point as his preferred model, his “super-model”.<sup>16</sup>

### *Mission, Mystagogy, and Discipleship*

Throughout our short time together in Albuquerque, we had workshops and liturgies and talks that approach the catechumenate – the communal act of drawing people into the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ – as being both about the catechumens and about the church – both are affected by every new member. Every newly baptized person changes the church – and thus, has the potential to change the world around the church.

We’ve also heard many cautions about not approaching, enacting, or understanding the catechumenate as a classroom – this is not about didactic instruction, it is not about information about God, but formation into God – experiential, dialogical, silence and shared awe in the presence of God.

Part of my enthusiasm for putting mission and mystagogy together is that I think, in many ways, both mission and mystagogy are never ending – we are never done with these aspects of discipleship and ministry. And this is a reminder of part of the power of the catechumenate to change our faith communities so that we can change the world. But it is another way to approach the seemingly ceaseless danger of shaping a catechumenate that is complete in and of itself. It is so tempting to turn the catechumenate into a program, a classroom, with neatly tied-up phases and to produce the newly initiated at the Easter vigil as fully cooked after the 50 days of paschal mystagogy. We need some structure – the community that is the household of God into which these catechumens are being received needs some structure – that is simply a reality. But perhaps the remembrance that liminality may be the state of the remainder of our Christian lives – “initiation into that which is not fully revealed” – is also necessary. If we are liminal disciples, a school and community of disciples in the Lord, we may only arrive at the threshold of integration at death, in the next life, at the second coming. That may have an effect on our enthusiasm for programmatic catechumenal neatness, and it may also bring our earlier conversation about ecclesiology together with eschatology.

I think part of the tug of war on a popular level between liturgy and social justice that existed for some time is based on the false dichotomy between liturgy’s love of eschatological fulfillment and social justice’s realized eschatology. Liturgy’s prayers are always inclusive of what will be. I think of some of the words of the Eucharistic prayer I prayed the Sunday prior to the NAAC conference: “We celebrate his death and resurrection, as we await the day of his coming,” or the creed we said together on Sunday, “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come,” or the postcommunion prayer “...we thank you for feeding us with the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; and for assuring us in these holy mysteries that we are living members of the Body of your Son, and heirs of your eternal kingdom.” Social justice advocates, workers in the vineyards of God often speak of what needs to be done now, not offered up for heaven. It is now that we must sit on the floor of the US Congress, it is now that we must feed the hungry, it is now that we must pluck the refugees out of the waters of the Mediterranean, it is now – not then. Both of these are absolutely necessary – now we must be disciples and workers that are part of the bringing about of the fullness of the

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<sup>16</sup> See the summary editorial of Drew Christiansen in *America Magazine*, December 13, 2008.

reign of God – AND – this is not all there is, this is not the fulfillment, there is more. These two are tied together not because we work from the past to the present, but that we live from the future to the present – in liturgy and in life, in mission and mystagogy – we remember our future.

If I might draw a bit from my own Anglican tradition, it means that both real presence and real absence are part of this inbetween time – this liminal journey of a pilgrim church in which we invite catechumens to join us on the way. Real presence – God is always present, and, in addition, there are sacramental moments when that presence is intensified, focused, crystalized. But real presence – that which we invite catechumens to imagine, to see, to enter – must also be real absence because this is not all there is. The eucharist, baptism, the church, the catechumenate – these are all temporary until the second coming of Christ. Real presence, sacramentally, ecclesially, is not something we do or control – it is God's – and our restless hearts desire what cannot be fulfilled yet – there is the already, and there is the not yet, and all our programming cannot control the presence of God, nor avoid real absence.

In the midst of the necessity of remembering eschatological absence is our response of desire, itself a divine gift. Anselm of Canterbury's wonderful petition to God so beautifully expresses this:

What shall your servant do, anxious in his love of you, and cast out afar from your face? He pants to see you, and your face is too far from him. He longs to come to you, and your dwelling-place is inaccessible. He is eager to find you, and knows not your place. He desires to seek you, and does not know your face. Lord, you are my God, and you are my Lord, and never have I seen you. It is you that hast made me, and has made me anew, and has bestowed upon me all the blessing I enjoy; and not yet do I know you. Finally, I was created to see you, and not yet have I done that for which I was made.<sup>17</sup>

This is at the heart of real absence and eschatology – desire for union with God. Real absence is also the ground of ethical action – it drives us forward. Without this restlessness we fall into the worst of inculturation, a postmodern loss of urgency to right the wrong, or the passion to desire God and God's justice.

Might our discipleship – our invitation to catechumens to journey with us into the heart of God – our making eucharist to be remade by the eucharist to make the world anew – might all of this be a matter of finding ways to rekindle or recognize for the first time the desire for God? That is not something we can teach externally, it is not information about God, it is formation into God that is passionate love for God – which is also love of neighbor. This desire for God requires room, and therefore kenosis, self-emptying to make room for a Spirit that is both ours and other – the Holy Spirit. This is not information about God, but central to share with our fellow pilgrims in the catechumenate.

Mission and its parallel, the catechumenate, are dynamic processes – moving forward together into union with God, receiving and welcoming the dyings and risings of the world, receiving and welcoming and encouraging and challenging individuals who come to be part of something far more than the sum of its individual members – the body of Christ. If we circle back to

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<sup>17</sup> Written 1077-1078, *Proslogion* 1.1, online edition, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/anselm.asp>.



yesterday's conversation about ecclesiology, perhaps what we are shaping is a catechumenal church which holds bits of the sacramental model, the herald model, the servant model, the communion model, and the pilgrim model. Perhaps Avery Dulles' "super model" of a "School of Disciples" is sufficiently dynamic with regard to the catechumenate. The model needs this dynamism – it needs to keep us moving – catechumens and faithful, neophytes and well-aged wine, those with new articulations of faith, and those rich in wisdom. We initiate into the universal – the catholic – body of Christ, and into a concrete local manifestation of that.

I began these two related talks by saying that we will not all have the same image, polity, structure, and hope for that concrete local manifestation of the household of God – that is okay. We have both the universality and the particular, and as the body of Christ on the move we do not just tolerate the differences but celebrate the diversity – as we should – the point is we are all moving toward union with God, toward the reign of God which is justice and peace and mercy for all.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.