

# Call to suffer

by Jing Luan

This year of 2015 is a significant Sabbatical year of our church—the 49<sup>th</sup> year of the birth of the LCA. Furthermore, next year of 2016 will be the LCA's Year of Jubilee in which we should totally, according to the writings in Deuteronomy, enter into God's rest and be free from all the 'debts' and 'slavery' that bind us to the earthly world and to our personal predicament. But the reality seems opposite. After forty nine (seven-sevens) years' tremendous grace and blessings since the two Lutheran Churches became one in 1966, God has, once again and more seriously this time, dropped down a plumb line like the one described in Amos 7:7 (oh! another seven-seven), a plumb line named 'women's ordination'. God shows his sense of humour in that he does not join our Sabbatical year celebration by pouring down a significant increase in the number of baptised, or a great sum of donations for outbound mission, but instead dispenses a hot controversial topic which is not fresh and new at all to our LCA. Divergence of opinion exists broadly within our scholars, pastors, church leaders, lay people, congregations, even siblings in our own families. The cloud of division over the LCA seems so obvious and severe that Bishop John Henderson has recently appealed for the 'unity of the Synod'. Everyone, especially those who want to "have a say" over the issue of women ordination, is suddenly finding themselves set behind the judgement of this plumb line.

I quote the passage of which Bishop John Henderson wrote two years ago regarding the unsettling issue of women's ordination: 'God frequently puts us to the test in ways we don't expect'. It is indeed a test, or a trial, from the mighty hands of God. We all have nowhere to run but to undertake the test. Does God really pursue us for a black or white answer? Does God not know our struggle and limitation over the exhausted debate or dialogue? Is God the writer and director of a drama that sets us as actors on a stage? How can we enter the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary with peace and joy if our church is facing division? How can we escape from such a frustrated situation and really taste God's holy rest which is the ultimate reward while we are still living on the earth? We desperately need the answer.

Praise the LORD! We ought to be confident that God not only sets the plumb line as a trial but also he has provided the deliverance which he promises us by saying 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Matt 11:30) and 'No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it' (1 Cor 10:13).

Then, where is the 'way out'? Where is the deliverance? Where is the holy rest offered to us, the restless needy believers? Jesus Christ! He is the way out; he is the deliverance for this vital test. He sets a model for us to follow: not follow his mighty nature like walking on the sea to call for a consensus, but follow his very human nature of being hung onto the cross to suffer!

To suffer means we are true disciples of Jesus; it means we are really dead towards our own dignity; means we do not compromise our identity with secular values; means we rely on God's strength and wisdom over our weakness and shortage; means we will be richly rewarded by his promise—'You let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place' (Ps 66:12).

Thence, lift up your eyes on the Lord and carry your cross to suffer. Forget your stand, your understanding of doctrines, your version of the Bible verses, even your conscience, for they are worthless if they prevent you to suffer like Jesus, to be patient like Jesus, and to endure like Jesus. To suffer from those who dislike you with their emotions; who misunderstand you with their passionate views; who condemn you with their doctrines; who look down on you with their knowledge; who want to excommunicate you with their influence; or who oppress you with their power and authority. Once we have been delivered at such a 'high place' of 'forgetting and suffering' by the comfort of the Holy Spirit, we become sacrifices on the LORD's altar and certainly enter the LORD's rest, harvest our lot from the toil of our suffering and sacrificing, just as our Lord says to us: 'take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matt 12:29).

Our hearts are getting comfort. What God truly examines in this test is whether each of us has a pure and honest heart in front of this plumb line. 'So whatever you believe about these things (e.g. women's ordination) keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves' (Rom 14:22). To seek consensus over women ordination is nothing more than chasing wind because it is not the ultimate answer God expects from us. God wants more than that; he wants a Christ-like life in each of us, God's children in the LCA and in all the world. Thus, while you are suffering, persistently keep your stand, your understanding of doctrines, your version of the Bible verses, and your conscience as your very personal answer to the test of the plumb line, but do not quench the Holy Spirit, knowing that God will lead us into his rest in his way and allow us to watch the wonders done by his mighty hands.

What else can we do, then, if we do not choose to suffer? The answer is nothing but God's judgement, not only by the end of the world but also right now in our daily life: the judgement of our pride, the judgement of our self-centred and self-righteousness, the judgement of our party spirit if any, the judgement of our mistaken zeal, the judgement of our laziness in not being willing to leave our comfort zone of fleshly perception, the judgement of our lack of mercy, love, patience and humility.

Division is always easy to say but never a real option to the trial. The Oneness of our LCA is a splendid crown which Lord Jesus is holding in his hand and awaiting for His Bride to put on. It is not a mission impossible to get there to be crowned in our LCA's Year of Jubilee of 2016, but that only happens when you and me and everyone who is saved by the Lord our Saviour takes up our own crosses to follow him, to be patient, to suffer, to endure and to sacrifice.

A Lenten hymn might help us to ignite a deeper reflection—'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?' Let's mute our mouth, let God be God, let's be God's innocent children. Blessed are those who stand firm in the unity of synod and rather to suffer for the Lord's church: LCA— the apple of God's eye.