

“The Peaceful Unification of the Korean Peninsula” - a sermon preached at Knox Church, Dunedin New Zealand by Rev. Dr Kang-Sil Lee on Pentecost 5, 28 June 2015.

In the 1950s, New Zealand and Korea were brought together by the Korean War. Since then our links have been strengthened by migration, our shared location in Asia and our membership in the worldwide family of Reformed Churches. Most of all, we are sisters and brothers in Christ, who connects us more than our national identity divides. Christ is our unity and joins us as family. The Presbyterian Church here is a partner of my Church in Korea, which is why I am here. In Christ, we are global Christians together.

So this morning I want to take you to our situation in Korea, so you can understand more about your brothers and sisters there, and pray for us.

All Koreans in the North and South are one nation with the same physical appearance, language, history and tradition. 70 years ago our nation was divided.

In August 1945, Korea was freed of Japanese rule. In September that year, Russia occupied north of the 38th parallel and America occupied south. In May 1948, the Republic of Korea was declared in the South, and in October the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was declared in the North. Thus began the division of the Korean peninsula.

In 1950 the Korean War broke out when the North tried to unify the country by force. The War lasted three years. There was a large number of casualties and it deepened hatred, distrust and hostility. We are still officially at war. In 1953 a truce was achieved, but no peace treaty has been signed.

We now fight each other with propaganda. Each government tries to make the other look bad. In the South we were told to oppose communism and that North Koreans were devils. Many South Koreans were surprised to find North Koreans were like us!

Korea's division has caused political, social and economic problems.

Politically, democracy in the south has not matured as much as it should have. Rulers from 1948 to 1992 were dictators. They used the threat of the North to extend dictatorship. North Korea was denounced as aggressive and subversive. For the sake of national security, freedom was limited, human rights were abused, and a popular movement for unification was brutally suppressed.

Socially, around 10 million families live in North and South Korea. Divided families have rarely met, only when the relationship between north and south was good. Such meetings are deeply emotional. One person met his father after 60 years apart. The son thought the father had died. A couple married just before the Korean War

met 60 years later. The husband had remarried, while the wife had not remarried, waiting for her husband – a tragedy.

Economically, about 15-20% of our national budget is spent on defence. This has caused economic problems. Although South Korea is the 12th richest country, it has high unemployment, a large number of non-regular and casual workers, high household debt and a big gap between rich and poor. North Korea spends about 25 to 30% of its national budget on defence. Military threats, diplomatic isolation and an economic blockade together with natural disasters brought terrible hardship to North Korea, especially from 1995 to 2000.

We need to stop the skirmishes along the unsettled maritime demarcation line. People are being killed. Recently a South Korean warship was sunk and 46 sailors died. The South government insisted the ship was sunk by a torpedo from a North Korean submarine. Pyongyang denied involvement. Annual military drills involving South Korea and the United States heighten tension. North Korea says the exercises are "dress rehearsals" for a northwards invasion.

We need to stop the war. We need to reduce our military forces.

How might our faith bring insight in such a situation? Let's look at 1 Corinthians 12.

It speaks of diversity among the members of the body. Verse 19 says the body would not exist if all organs were of a single type. No part of a body exists by itself or for itself.

I believe North and South Korea need to respect each other's different political and economic systems and situations. Each must give up trying to absorb the other, making us all the same. At present, the South wants the North to have a certain kind of democracy and capitalism, even though the North resists.

In 2000, North and South reached some agreement. They agreed to pursue unification based on common factors from the North's proposal of loose federation (one state with two presidents under two different systems) and the South's proposal of confederation (of two independent states with two different social systems).

1 Corinthians 12 highlights how diverse members are united in one body. All members are linked with a common destiny. If one member suffers, all suffer. If one member is honoured, all rejoice.

That is very different from war and conquest.

Many people are waiting for the North to collapse. But it is difficult to imagine China letting that happen. And if the North did collapse, the result might not be what

people want. China could intervene in order to have a political buffer with the United States. Or the United States could intervene to dismantle North Korea's nuclear weapons but that it is likely to cause major problems. Or North Korean military commanders could attack Seoul in desperation. Further, South Korea does not have the capacity to address North Korea's poverty if that country collapsed.

It seems the collapse of the North is neither probable nor desirable. Instead, we need to seek unification on the basis of our common interest, our common prosperity.

Verses 21 to 25 of 1 Corinthians 12, say that to prevent division in the body, we are to honour the most vulnerable and weaker parts.

North Korea continues to suffer from food shortages, international isolation, an economic blockade and military tension. We need to keep providing aid and sending food unconditionally to the people of the North Korea.

We also need to try and understand why North Korea behaves as it does. New Zealanders are very opposed to nuclear weapons. I can understand that. However I believe North Korea has developed nuclear weapons to defend itself and to reduce reliance on expensive conventional weapons. Whatever we think, it is evident North Korea will not dismantle its nuclear weapons without a security guarantee from the South and the United States.

We need to rid the Korean Peninsula of nuclear weapons. But before we can do so, there will need to be a peace treaty, diplomatic relations and the withdrawal of US forces from South Korea.

I do not believe North Korea is the bogeyman it is often portrayed to be. I believe it is a marginalized nation attempting to weave its way through the current of international politics independent of major political powers. I strongly believe that North Korea wants to engage in peace.

It is evident that to achieve reunification is going to be very hard. But we live in a world where apartheid ended, a world in which the Berlin Wall was dismantled, a world where dry bones on the floor of the valley can come to life. I believe God said to us "join the two Koreas together into one so that they will become one in your hand".

Jesus broke down the dividing wall of hostility between us and created a new being. He reconciled us to God in one body through the cross. Korean Christianity should carry the cross of reunification and follow the way of Jesus' peace. The peaceful unification of Korea is needed for peace in Asia, for peace in our world. I invite you to pray for our country's reunification as you pray for peace in our world. We are one body in God.