Welcome to the fourth International Theology and Ethics Symposium!

I welcome you as a unique group of people – this group, as such, is unlikely to meet again. I also welcome you as individuals. You have each been selected. Others could have been selected too. You are privileged. We have a rich mixture of people. Our characters, gifts, life experiences, understanding of Scripture, and convictions will vary from person to person. We have a rich mix of cultures, though we don’t represent all cultures. Ways in which we express our faith will vary because we serve in different parts of the world and came to know Christ for various reasons at different stages of our lives. We can enjoy learning from one another – about the multiplicity of challenges we face and how God guides, sustains, uses and blesses us. Then afterwards, on our return to our appointments – and in the future - to use what we have gained through being here.

Yet within this diversity there is much that unites us. We are each part of one Army, belonging to the one Body of Christ, bound together in and by the one Holy Spirit. Here, in these special days, we are invited to acknowledge, embrace and enjoy the oneness God wills for us.

We meet to give our attention to one statement – ‘Jesus – Universal Lord and Saviour’. It is a statement that countless Salvationists throughout the world take for granted. The words speak of the One who is the heart of our faith. We have accepted him as Saviour, we worship him as Lord and we believe both his love and his power are ‘boundless’.

This week we are invited to examine the statement, to consider its implications – both individually and universally – and, crucially, to identify ways in which the Army can communicate its truths to a divided, diverse, uninterested, hostile or unbelieving world.

The impact Jesus Christ has made on the world is unprecedented. However, people have viewed him differently. Conflicting assessments have been made about the Jesus of history as well as the Christ of theology. What do we say? Culture has always played a significant part in how Jesus is understood or interpreted. This group is well placed to examine today’s attitudes and challenges. Questions as to who will ultimately be saved and how salvation occurs are fiercely debated in Christian circles. What are we saved from and to what? Why does it matter? Peter boldly declared that ‘there is no other name under heaven... by which we must be saved’ (Acts 4:12). What can we add to this, or affirm? How can we add ‘light’ rather than ‘heat’ to the debate? As Lord, Jesus is described in Scripture as having ‘all things under his feet’, yet he also insisted that he came to serve. How does his Lordship manifest itself and what are the implications for us – his servants?

We thank God for the theological expertise found in this group. It is an important and vital factor. We look forward to sharing in what each of us has to offer. Without intellectual understanding of the subjects we consider, our work would be deficient and our findings suspect. We will refer to the thoughts and writings of scholars, using them with gratitude for our own reflections. At the centre of
every consideration must be the Bible. We turn to God’s word to learn more of the One who is called The Word. What did Jesus say about himself? What did he do – and why? What did he teach? What was on his heart? What should be on our hearts?

As you will realise, our time together is more than an academic exercise. It is a meeting of hearts and minds. Although some have the task and responsibility of presenting or responding to papers, each of us has our own part to play in what takes place. Only you can play your part. Please don’t underestimate it. Only through both contributing and listening can we add to our collective experience and understanding. The Salvation Army is made up of people from all walks of life, people who have differing ways of learning, who speak truth in a variety of ways, who understand God as he has been made known to them. There is no one culture that has all the answers. There is nobody who will not be able to benefit from the offering of others, even from those who may be tempted to feel their personal contribution is lacking in significance. Enjoy the discussion groups. Be God’s gift to each other. Receive from one another with humility and gratitude.

In his First Letter, the apostle Peter wrote: ‘Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have,’ (3:15). This goes beyond having answers that satisfy us. Peter reminds us that we need to be able to articulate our faith to others – clearly and with authenticity. In affirming Jesus as the Universal Lord and Saviour, we want to be able to explain what we mean by that statement and show why it means so much to us.

When we leave this place we will go back to countries where Christianity is not the main religion. We will go to countries where the Army operates by courtesy of a Muslim government, where Hinduism is dominant, or where atheistic tendencies are strong. We will return to dysfunctional societies, or where women are marginalised or oppressed, where children are trafficked, where youth are in rebellion or being radicalised, where materialism is god and where consumerism is embraced enthusiastically by Christians. What does Jesus – Universal Lord and Saviour say to such? How can he be best and most compellingly understood? Jesus put himself in our shoes to help us understand God better. Unless we consistently make the effort to do the same for others, our message will be remote, vague and seemingly irrelevant.

Finally, don’t forget to ask the Lord to help you grow in him this week. This week, he can open our eyes, inspire us, humble us, stretch our thinking, liberate from misconceptions, widen our vision, deepen our faith and give insights that transform our understanding of him and the gospel. Pray each day for these things to happen. Make the most of this opportunity. We will all feel the benefit – and so will the Army wherever you serve.

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