

## PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 7 JUNE 2020

Prepared by Alan Harper

### 1 **Being ready for worship**

Today is Trinity Sunday, the last of the sequence of the Ascension, Pentecost and Trinity. These three celebrations involve us in deep contemplation about God. Over the centuries, Christians have sought to understand God – the study of Theology – and it is proper that we do that. We need to be clear about what we believe, because it's not okay to believe just anything. However, it is also proper that we come to the subject of the nature of God with true humility. God is far greater than we can ever understand; God cannot be reduced to some kind of formula or definition. If we think that God can be, then we have invented our own God. So begin today with humility and wonder at the greatness of God.

### 2 **Prayer of Adoration**

*This week I could not resist returning to a well-known hymn as a prayer of praise. The reflection later is on Colossians, a passage that goes to the heart of the identity of Jesus Christ, but an equally profound passage on that subject is the basis of a very popular hymn – At the Name of Jesus. Caroline Maria Noel (1817-1877) lived in London. At the age of 40, she became bedridden with a serious illness, and began writing poetry. In 1861, the fruits of her labours were published in a volume entitled At the Name of Jesus and Other verses for the Sick and Lonely. While most pieces were suitable only for private devotion, Processional for Ascension Day: At the Name of Jesus stood out, and was included in a second edition in 1878. It is based on Philippians 2:4-11, which is itself thought to embody a very ancient Christian hymn, but Noel's hymn is also informed by the understanding of Christ seen particularly (but not only) in John's gospel. In recognising the divinity of Jesus, it is a most appropriate prayer of praise for Trinity Sunday<sup>1</sup>.*

At the name of Jesus  
Every knee shall bow,  
Every tongue confess Him  
King of glory now;  
'Tis the Father's pleasure  
We should call Him Lord,  
Who from the beginning  
Was the mighty Word.

At His voice creation  
Sprang at once to sight,  
All the angels faces,  
All the hosts of light,  
Thrones and dominations,  
Stars upon their way,  
All the heavenly orders,  
In their great array.

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<sup>1</sup> See William J Petersen and Ardythe Petersen, *Hymns. Inspiring stories about 600 hymns and praise songs* (Carol Strem, 2006), pp. 474f.

Humbled for a season,  
To receive a name  
From the lips of sinners  
Unto whom He came,  
Faithfully He bore it  
Spotless to the last,  
Brought it back victorious  
When from death He Passed.

In your hearts enthrone Him;  
There let Him subdue  
All that is not holy,  
All that is not true:  
Crown Him as your captain  
In temptation's hour;  
Let His will enfold you  
In its light and power.

Amen

### 3 **Prayer of Confession**

*You may find this prayer helpful, or choose to pray your own more personal prayer, or to pray a combination of each. God is always ready to hear our confession.*

Father we have reason to humble ourselves before you in repentance,  
for our lives are besmirched by our sin.  
We have failed to love you with our whole heart,  
and we have failed to treat others as we would be treated ourselves.  
There is much good that we have left undone,  
and many hurts that we leave in our wake.  
We persist in sin, placing ourselves at the centre of things,  
and allowing our view of the world to become warped  
by our self-importance.  
Forgive us what we have done, and forgive us who we are,  
for we are truly sorry,  
and we ask it in Jesus' blessed name.  
Amen.

### 4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

The great message of the Gospel is not some academic debating point,  
nor is it a thesis on theology.  
It is good news – the good news of the forgiveness of God in Christ Jesus.  
Paul put it this way in his letter to the church at Colossae:  
*[God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness  
and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves,  
in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*  
So in the risen Christ our sins are forgiven.

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Colossians 1:1-2:4

**The other Lectionary Readings**

Psalm 8

II Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

7 **Prayers for the world and Lord's Prayer**

*My suggestion for today is that, in lieu of prayers of intercession, we individually, or with whomever we gather for worship at this time of isolation, reaffirm our fundamental beliefs by affirming the Nicene Creed. Think about the creed, as you say it, as an affirmation to God of what you know to be true, and give thanks to him that we have a faith which is so securely anchored in the wonders he has revealed to us. Conclude then with the Lord's Prayer, noticing those words at the beginning, "Hallowed be your name". On Trinity Sunday, we do stand in awe before the wonder that is God.*

I/we believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.

I/we believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten not made,  
of one being with the father;  
through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
and became truly human.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory  
to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

I/we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father,  
who with the Father and the Son  
is worshipped and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.  
I/we believe in one universal and apostolic Church.  
I/we acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
I/we look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come.

Our father in heaven,  
Hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come;  
Your will be done  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread,  
and forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil,  
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,  
now and forever.  
Amen

## 8 **Conclusion**

At the end of our passage from Colossians today, Paul wrote this. There could hardly be a better note upon which to conclude:

*My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love,  
so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding,  
in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ,  
in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*

May we all be ever conscious of the great privilege of being numbered among God's people.

**BIBLE REFLECTION**  
***IN HIM ALL THINGS WERE CREATED***

I don't know if you read *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown's best-seller that did the rounds about fifteen years ago, and was turned into a very successful movie. I have to confess that I didn't read the book, nor had any inclination to do so, though I did see the movie. It told a great yarn which suggested that the foundations on which the Church is built were, in fact, the product of a wanton act of falsification in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and a grand conspiracy to suppress knowledge of it ever since. Were the secret to get out, Christians would come to realise that their faith was based on nothing more than an invention of the Roman Emperor Constantine and a decision made at the Council of Nicaea in AD325. Although *The Da Vinci Code* was a novel, a work of fiction, Brown stood by the premises on which it was based. He wrote this:

By officially endorsing Jesus as the Son of God, Constantine turned Jesus into a deity who existed beyond the scope of the human world, an entity whose power was unchallengeable.<sup>2</sup>

Brown was not alone in suggesting that the idea of Jesus' deity was the creation of late antiquity, and that prior to that, Jesus had been regarded simply as a wise teacher. There is a significant coterie of scholars who lay claim to this position. In the last couple of decades of the last century, and into this, The Jesus Seminar – a group of some fifty scholars and a hundred or so laypeople – adopted some highly sceptical positions, including on the deity of Christ. When such scholars, or lay people who are influenced by their work, publish books which make dramatic claims about Christianity, suggesting that it rests on fallible foundations, they often become best-sellers. Barbara Thiering's *Jesus the Man*, which claimed that Jesus' death and resurrection were a fraud, captured the public attention, and resulted in a great deal of media coverage. A few Google searches will demonstrate that grand conspiracy theory about Jesus and the faith he founded is alive, well ... and rather lucrative too. Sadly, there is a proportion of the public thirsty for such "revelations", and eager to be able to claim that the Christian faith is some kind of a hoax.

Christian should absolutely welcome critical scholarship. Good scholarship has brought rich rewards for the Christian faith. We have better biblical texts now than have existed at any time since antiquity. We know far more about the world in which biblical events took place, its peoples, contemporary religions and cultures. Our knowledge of the biblical languages has continued to expand. Christianity has nothing to be afraid of, and much to gain, from close, critical study, because Christianity and its foundations are quite robust enough to withstand it all. The fact that some scholars will reach conclusions with which others would disagree is all part of the cut and thrust of academic study. That too should be welcomed.

The danger comes when scholars lose their objectivity, bringing a personal agenda to bear on their work, looking for "evidence" that what they would like to believe can be justified. Such scholars themselves will be called out by others; that's how academic life progresses. However, when the sceptics' polemic is let loose outside academia, it can do a great deal of damage. The press sensationalises their ideas, the public laps it up, and the conspiracy theorists have a field day. No one is interested to hear what other academics have to say in reply, because that's not "newsworthy". The whole thing takes on a life of its own, and misleads people who haven't the tools or knowledge to critique what they are being fed. As a result, even quite a few Christians themselves are a bit uncertain about the foundations of their faith.

Dan Brown's claim, shared by quite a few others, about the "invention" of Jesus' divinity is a good case in point. *The Da Vinci Code* was a lucrative best-seller, and no doubt the film rights were even

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<sup>2</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, p 233, cited by J Ed Komoszewski *et al.*, *Reinventing Jesus. How contemporary skeptics miss the real Jesus and mislead popular culture* (Grand Rapids, 2006), p. 207.

more rewarding – yet its thesis is simply nonsense. On Trinity Sunday, when we celebrate the one true God, who is in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it is good that the Lectionary has offered us a passage which directly addresses the deity of Jesus Christ.

The letter to the Colossians is numbered among Paul's letters. It dates well back into the 1<sup>st</sup> century, and was addressed to the church in Colossae, a town in Asia Minor – modern-day Turkey. Reading between the lines, it would appear that Paul wrote to this church because it had been reported to him that the congregation had been infiltrated by false beliefs that ran counter to the simple message of the gospel which had been preached to them, and upon which the church had been founded.

Paul sought to address this problem by reminding the Colossians of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. One of these was precisely who Jesus was believed to be. To focus his argument, he appears to have quoted an ancient Christian hymn – that is, what Christians had believed previous even to the date of Paul's letter, which is no later than the mid-60s. In this hymn, then, we are thus looking at what the very first generation of Christians believed about Jesus. The hymn is this:

*The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (1:15-20)*

Were you to pick up any good commentary, you would find that theologians debate shades of meaning in this passage – but those nuances, important as they are, are not our issue. What is perfectly clear is that the first Christians believed that Jesus was (a) God. And this letter predates Constantine and the Council of Nicaea by well over two centuries.

The hymn declares that Jesus is the “image of the invisible God”. In John's gospel, we read, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18). The hymn expresses very much this same idea – that while God is invisible to humans, he has made himself known in Jesus; that is, Jesus literally is God in human form.

The phrase “firstborn over all creation” can cause misunderstanding if taken alone, but must be read alongside the next declaration: “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.” This makes it clear that, far from being a part of the created order, all creation was made *in* Christ, *through* Christ and *for* Christ. Again, the parallel with John's Prologue is very clear. Jesus Christ was acknowledged to be the actual Creator; the same One to whom the opening verse of Genesis refers – “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” In that sense, Christ “is before all things”. Indeed, “in him all things hold together”.

“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,” the hymn declares. Here we encounter one of the many paradoxes that are inevitable when we attempt to understand the complexity of God. While Jesus literally is the Creator God, he is also a separate “person” from “God”, in that God's fullness filled him, making him “the image of the invisible God”. Such a paradox demonstrates why the Church, in trying to understand the nature of God, embraced the doctrine of a triune God – one God in three persons. While such a concept is an enigma, it is the only possible way for us to try to understand God. We should hardly be surprised to have to acknowledge that God is simply well beyond our comprehension, or the ability of human language and concepts to

define. That the creation cannot “get its head around” the Creator is scarcely remarkable.

The hymn also speaks of Christ’s role as the head of his body, the Church; and most importantly, concludes with a wonderful declaration of his role in the reconciliation of all things “through his blood shed on the cross”. Those are very important parts of the Church’s earliest beliefs, but are not central to our concern here.

In the light of this single, very early, Christian passage, it is hard to understand how anyone could maintain the fiction that the divinity of Jesus was a human invention of the 4<sup>th</sup> century! And the hymn embedded in Colossians is but one of many passages in the New Testament attesting to the fact that the very earliest Christians absolutely believed that Jesus is God. Earlier, we used a modern adaptation of a similarly ancient hymn, embedded in Paul’s letter to the Philippians (2:6-11), as a prayer. In that ancient hymn, Jesus is “in very nature God”. “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth”. John’s gospel has many allusions to Jesus’ deity, none clearer than its opening words, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” where “the Word” is very clearly Jesus Christ. The New Testament speaks with one voice about the divinity of its Lord.

It’s important to recall that the earliest Christians were Jews, for whom the absolute belief in one, and only one, God was fundamental. The Gentiles who surrounded them accommodated many different gods, and could happily ally themselves with as many of these as they chose. Polytheism was pervasive in the Graeco-Roman world. The Jews’ strict monotheism was one of the several things which set them apart from the rest of the European and west Asian world. Coming to accept the divinity of Jesus would most certainly not have come easily to them; we should have no illusions that a “new” God could have been adopted without the most excruciating soul-searching, and the most iron-clad evidence. That evidence was, of course, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the extraordinary act which absolutely validated all that he had revealed about himself.

And the fact is that they did not adopt a new God. The first Christians were as strictly monotheistic as the Jews from whom they gradually parted company. What they had come to understand was what they declared in those two ancient hymns – not that there was a new God, but that, in Jesus Christ, the one and only true God had literally appeared, the “image of the invisible God”, the “fullness” of God, the Word made flesh”. Jesus Christ was a manifestation, a person, of the one God. This belief was absolutely central to their faith; it remains absolutely central to our faith today.

None of us should feel intimidated by the sensational claims that are made from time to time about the foundations of our Christian faith. Those foundations are rock solid. They will withstand any legitimate and objective scholarly scrutiny. There are no secrets locked away in the Church’s closet, awaiting exposure by the army of conspiracy theorists who populate social media and the popular press. There is no mysterious papyrus, discovered or undiscovered, which will undermine what Christians have known, declared and celebrated since their earliest days. It behoves us, on this Trinity Sunday, to reaffirm our fundamental beliefs, and to commit ourselves once again to holding firm to them and not succumbing to the uninformed and often nefarious attacks which are made upon them.

If we wonder from time to time why, in parts of the world, Christian faith appears to have “lost steam”, perhaps it is because too many of us have been led to lose our confidence in the truth of the God who so loved the world that he appeared among us, “full of grace and truth”. Because that truth can never run out of steam.