

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 28 JUNE 2020

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 **Being ready for worship**

Today we continue with Paul's letter to the Romans. This is surely Paul's finest exposition of his understanding of the faith, and the more we dig into it, the richer it is. Over the last two weeks, we've been reminded of the great news of the gospel, God's free gift to all who trust in him; and we've been cautioned against thinking that the freedom from judgment earned for us by the death and resurrection of Jesus afforded us licence to do whatever we chose. Today, Paul takes the argument further, and we are confronted with the reality of the choice Christ has won for us – a choice for life, or a choice for death. So, when you're ready to immerse yourself in Paul's forensic examination of our faith, begin with the prayers that follow.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

Another hymns. There are so many, and so many of them are outstanding prayers, written by men and women at critical junctures in their lives. O Jesus I have promised was written by John Ernest Bode (1816-1874). As minister serving at the parish of Castle Camps, near Cambridge in England, Bode officiated at the confirmation of his three children. The hymn was written for that occasion, and it was and is very appropriate for young people beginning their faith journey¹. However, in acknowledging the temptations of the world which constantly allure us throughout our life, it is no less appropriate for Christians of all ages. It fits most aptly with the lesson we shall derive from Paul in the reflection, in which we are enjoined to eschew the apparently tantalising attractions of a sinful life, and to choose instead the life of service to righteousness.

O Jesus, I have promised²
to serve you to the end;
Lord be forever near me,
my Master and my Friend;
I shall not fear the battle
if you are by my side,
nor wander from the pathway
if you will be my guide.

Still let me feel you near me:
the world is ever near;
I see the sights that dazzle,
and tempting sounds I hear;
my foes are ever near me,
around me and within;
but, Jesus, draw me nearer,
and shield my soul from sin.

¹ William J Petersen & Ardythe Petersen, *The Complete Book of Hymns. Inspiring Stories about 600 Hymns and Praise Song* (Carol Stream, 2006), pp. 352f.

² Words taken from *Together in Song* (Melbourne, 2000), hymn 595.

O let me hear you speaking
in accents clear and still,
above the storms of passion,
the murmurs of self-will;
Lord, speak to reassure me,
to chasten or control;
O speak, and make me listen,
true guardian of my soul.

Lord, let me see your footmarks
and in them plant my own;
that I may follow boldly
and in your strength alone;
O guide me, call me, draw me,
uphold me to the end;
and then in heaven receive me,
my Saviour and my friend.

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 ask your forgiveness for the many times we have fallen short,
and failed to heed your call to follow the life of righteousness.
We know there have been times when we have been unfair,
when we have exploited those around us for our own gain,
when we have acted unjustly,
when we have failed to share our wealth with those in need,
when we have lacked integrity.
Forgive us, we pray.
And forgive also our complicity in the sins of our society.
We ruthlessly demand cheap goods,
and give little thought to the exploitation of resources and workers
that makes them so cheap.
Our consumer society demands endless trinkets,
and we vicariously join in the over-exploitation of the earth's bounty
to satisfy our lust for more and more material things.
As share-holders, we demand immediate profits,
relegating long-term needs and the greater good to second place.
We stand by as our own and other wealthy societies
allow people to fall into poverty, homelessness and despair,
resenting the cost of the social welfare net that is needed to address such crying needs,
and spurning the desperate need for our generosity internationally.
Yet we hide behind the excuse that there is nothing we can do;
it's all too hard; it's the problem of governments, not ours.
Forgive us, we pray,
and chasten our consciences to hear and respond to the cry for justice.
Make us servants of righteousness.
For it is Jesus' name that we ask this,
Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

We are assured by the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
Christ revealed to us that God is love.
Christ Jesus has experienced our life,
known our temptations,
seen our helplessness in the face of sin.
In dying, Christ took away our sin;
in rising to new life,
Christ invites us to share in life lived to the full,
free of the wages of sin.
In Christ Jesus, then, our sins are forgiven.

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Romans 6:12-23

The other Lectionary Readings

Genesis 22:1-14

Psalms 13

Matthew 10:40-42

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

At this time, as we begin to emerge from the pandemic, but are nervous and hesitant, even fearful, because we know the virus is still abroad in our communities, and experts keep warning us of a second wave, I could find no more appropriate prayer than the one which follows. It was written by Katherine Buchan, a member of the St Stephen's Sydney congregation, and she has very graciously permitted me to use it. Katherine described the prayer as "partly a personal reflection, partly a responsive psalm (based on Psalm 31) and partly a 'prayer of the people'". The prayer brings so many of our anxieties about the future before our God. I am very grateful to Katherine for her contribution. If you are in company with others, you can appoint one of you to lead, but if you are on your own, the prayer still works very well.

Leader: Lord, I am worried.
I am worried for our world and its people.
I am worried for my friends, my family, my colleagues and my neighbours.

Response: But I trust in you, Lord. I say, "You are my God."

Together: We pray in faith that You will hold the earth in Your hands and wrap Your arms more tightly around us at this time.
We pray that where there is darkness Your love and grace will shine more brightly.
We pray that where there are pain and sickness, You will bring comfort and wholeness.

Leader: Lord, I am worried.
I am worried that your church will not rise to the challenge of a "new normal".
I am worried that for some it will be too hard to come back, too easy to stay away.

Response: But I trust in you, Lord. I say, "You are my God."

Together: We pray in faith that You will renew Your church, that You will raise up leaders for a new generation, that You would pour out our Your Spirit upon

Your people again.

We pray that we would be faithful followers and would hear Your call afresh.

We pray that Your Kingdom come and Your will be done.

Leader: Lord, I am worried.

I am worried that I have not used this time as well as I could have.

I am worried that when this season has passed, I will not have changed, not have grown, that I will not have become more like You.

Response: But I trust in you, Lord. I say, "You are my God."

Together: We pray in faith that You will be speaking into our hearts, even now, transforming us and drawing us closer to You.

We pray that we will not make excuses, but will make disciples.

We pray that in each second of each minute of each hour of each day we would seek Your ways and not our own.

Leader: Praise be to the Lord, for He showed me the wonders of His love when I was in a city under siege.

Response: In my alarm I said, "I am cut off from your sight!" Yet you heard my cry for mercy when I called to you for help.

Together: Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord.

We conclude our prayer with the prayer that Jesus taught us to say:

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

I liked this blessing, which I found on-line. It seemed very appropriate as we consider how we live our lives as the servants of righteousness:

May the peace of God enfold you,

the love of God uphold you,

*and the wisdom of God control you.*³

Amen.

³ Slightly adapted from https://www.faihandworship.com/blessings_and_benedictions.html#gsc.tab=0, accessed 18 June 2020.

BIBLE REFLECTION SLAVES

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells the people,

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. (Matthew 6:24)

We are very familiar with that astute observation. Some of you who are my age or older may also recall Bob Dylan's song, "Gotta serve somebody". The chorus did not exactly echo Jesus' sentiment, but it is not far from it:

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
Indeed you're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody⁴

I don't know if Dylan had in mind today's passage from Romans 6, but he may well have. In rather different terms, Paul sets up a choice between two kinds of slavery – slavery to sin and slavery to righteousness.

The passage in Romans follows on from the beginning of chapter 6, on which we focused last week. You'll recall that there Paul rejected the idea that our liberation from the tyranny of sin endowed us with the opportunity to do whatever we liked, and to keep on sinning. That would be to dishonour the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus. Enigmatically, our liberation frees us to a new obedience, not to the old law of rules and regulations which only led to death, but to the law of Christ which leads to life. As Dylan realised and intoned in his song, there is no such thing as complete freedom of action: we all end up obeying one master or another; and as Jesus said, there is no halfway house of divided obedience – it's one or the other.

In verse 19 of today's passage, Paul says that he's using an example from everyday life. The example is slavery. It has been suggested that verse 19 is a kind of embarrassed apology by Paul for using such a distasteful example⁵, but that is to overlook the absolute pervasiveness and acceptance of slavery in the ancient world. To use slavery as an example was not only completely in keeping with his subject, but it was an institution with which every hearer of his letter would have been thoroughly familiar. Indeed, although we do not know this for certain in relation to the church in Rome, there is little doubt that some of those who heard the letter would have been, themselves, slaves. Others may well have been slave owners. Slavery was, literally, everywhere in the ancient world⁶. It was a familiar illustration from everyday life.

And perhaps it was not as distasteful an example as our modern sensibilities suggest. Here is not the place to present a comprehensive description of slavery in the Roman world, but it is important to emphasise that the picture of slavery which most of us carry in our heads, which is based on our understanding of, and the Hollywood representations of, slavery in the ante-bellum southern states of America, is significantly different from the slavery which Paul and his contemporaries knew. Of

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https://www.google.com.au/search?sxsrf=ALeKk03xSjbU01g2lxj0iUaHZ7e7O0LBg%3A1591850347816&source=h p&ei=a7XhXvrqL9uU4-EPv8-8oAM&q=Bob+dylan+you+gotta+serve+somebody&oq=Bob+dylan+you+gotta+serve+somebody&gs_lcp=CgZwc3ktYWlQAzICCAAyAggAMgYIABAWEB4yBggAEBYQHjoFCAAQgwE6BQgAELEDOgQIABAKOggIABAWEAoQHIC0rZcCWMfplwJgvuyXAmgAcAB4AYAB0gSIAb9IkqEKMi0yOC40LjEuMZgBAKABAaoBB2d3cy13aXo&sclic nt=psy-ab&ved=0ahUKEwi6zI_U-PjpAhVbyjgGHb8nDzQQ4dUDCAk&uact=5 accessed 11 June 2020.

⁵ James R Edwards, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1992), pp. 169, 173.

⁶ Michele George, "The Lives of Slaves", in John J Dobbins and Pedar W Foss (Edd.), *The World of Pompeii* (London, 2007), p538.

course there were similarities, and of course to the modern mind both were morally abhorrent. Slaves were human beings who, due to their enslavement, became, so far as the law was concerned, non-persons, with a status little different from domestic animals⁷. They were forbidden marriage; and any children born of a slave relationship were, by law, the property of their parents' owners. Slaves could be used sexually by their masters (and presumably mistresses); the act did not constitute adultery, and any child born of such a union inherited the status of the mother – most often, the slave victim of her master⁸. And there is no doubt that some, perhaps most, slaves were treated cruelly: leg irons found in a cupboard of one of the houses in Pompeii certainly bespeak the dark side of servile life⁹. So let nothing that follows be taken in any way as a defence of Roman slavery.

However, there were very significant differences between our modern, American-based, conception of slavery, and the slavery with which Paul's hearers were familiar. Firstly, there was absolutely no racial basis to Roman slavery¹⁰. "Race" as a concept had no real meaning to the Romans. The greatest source of slaves by far was captives taken in warfare, who could be from anywhere visited by Roman armies. Foundlings – children abandoned by their parents to die, often due to poverty – could be rescued, raised for a few years, then sold into slavery. Some very poor people even sold themselves into slavery as a way of surviving¹¹. Thus the slave population was very diverse, and included people from throughout the empire as well as beyond.

Secondly, while the lot of slaves could be horrendous, it was not always so, and perhaps the greater number of slaves (though we can't know this) were reasonably well treated, comparatively speaking. Those many slaves who served in households could find themselves doing a wide variety of tasks, some involving considerable responsibility and trust – anything from cooking, cleaning and laundering, to shopping, childcare and tutoring, secretarial work, even acting as a trusted business agent. Some slaves were in a position to earn an income and eventually to buy their own freedom. As time went on, legislation was even passed to afford some degree of protection for slaves against the worst excesses of bad masters¹².

It was also extremely common for Romans to manumit (that is, to grant their freedom to) their well-regarded slaves. The very different attitude to slaves is shown by what accompanied the act of manumission by a Roman citizen. The ex-slave, now a *libertus*, "freedman", inherited Roman citizenship¹³, a great honour, and bore the name of his former master, effectively becoming a member of his family¹⁴. An example of what a slave's situation could be was Tiro, the slave-secretary of the great Roman orator and politician, Marcus Tullius Cicero. Tiro was a very close friend to Cicero (and also to Cicero's brother Quintus¹⁵), and intimately shared his most personal affairs. Eventually Cicero granted Tiro his freedom, upon which the former slave, now freedman, became Marcus Tullius Tiro, a Roman citizen sharing his former master's family name (Tullius), although he did continue to owe his former master certain obligations¹⁶. Throughout the Roman

⁷ James Hadley, *Introduction to Roman Law in twelve academical lectures* (New York, 1890), p. 113.

⁸ WW Buckland, *A Text-book of Roman Law from Augustus to Justinian*, 3rd Edition revised by Peter Stein (Cambridge, 1966), p. 68.

⁹ George, *op. cit.*, p. 539.

¹⁰ In this respect it did differ somewhat from some classical Greek ideas of slavery. Aristotle believed that some peoples were naturally destined to be slaves by their physical bodies (*Politics* i.1-7). However, the Spartans had enslaved the Messenians, fellow Greeks, apparently without compunction.

¹¹ *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (NIDB)* (Nashville, 2000), s.v. "Slavery".

¹² Buckland, *op. cit.* pp. 64f.

¹³ The manumitted slave himself did not enjoy the full privileges of his citizenship, but this disadvantage did not extend to his sons. A *liberta*, "freedwoman", did not receive citizenship, which was restricted to men.

¹⁴ *NIDB*, *loc. cit.*; Henrik Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 66f.

¹⁵ GC Richards, *Cicero. A Study* (London, 1935), pp. 272f.

¹⁶ *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd Edition (Oxford, 1970), s.v. "Tiro".

empire, there were many, many thousands of freedmen and women and descendants of freed slaves, some of whom became wealthy and influential, even taking on political careers. The freedmen in the Emperor's household had extraordinary power, and were treated with considerable deference by even very powerful Romans¹⁷.

None of this was in any way conceivable in American slavery! My point is that Paul was almost certainly not likely to offend anyone by using slavery as an example. It was an institution which was just "part of the furniture" of their world, and which did not necessarily carry the same very negative connotations that modern slavery has for us.

And slavery was an excellent example for Paul's purpose. Paul's hearers would have completely understood the concept of having one's life totally devoted to service. They also would have completely understood that there were good masters and there were bad masters. In real life, the slave did not enjoy the privilege of choosing between the two!

The fundamental divide in the Roman world was between the free and the unfree¹⁸. The natural assumption of Paul's audience, then, would have been that, if one were freed from slavery, then one would be completely free, free of any kind of bondage. Paul describes the situation of Christians before they had been redeemed by Christ as enslavement to sin. The death and resurrection of Jesus freed them from their servitude to sin. They were no longer under the deadly curse of the Law. But were they actually "free"? We saw last week that some had taken their apparent freedom from servitude as licence to do whatever they chose. If the Law no longer held any power over them, some thought they could even keep on sinning – an idea which Paul scotched very quickly.

Paul understood the words of Jesus, and would also have understood those of Bob Dylan, with which we began. With them, he recognised that we are *always* slaves to something. The only issue is to what we are enslaved.

But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness.

Paul's thinking involves a complex understanding of freedom. Freedom does afford us the right to make choices, but beyond that there is really no such thing as true freedom. Our prerogative to choose really only means that we can choose to what we will be enslaved. What we think of as ultimate freedom is actually using our prerogative to serve ourselves – to satisfy our own wants and predilections, our own desires and fancies. Devotion to self is none other than another form of servitude or slavery. Our lives become devoted to the service of ourselves. That can take the form of out and out hedonism, or it can be far more subtle than that – an addiction to consumerism, an insatiable desire to travel, devotion to the accumulation of wealth, an endless indulgence of some interest or other, or any number of other preoccupations which ensure that *we* are the main focus of our lives, the suns in our own solar systems. I am sure you know people like that. I do. They tell themselves that they are free, "living the dream", but they are beholden to the satisfaction of self. And if they're honest with themselves, that self usually demands more and more of them. Those who accumulate *things* can never get enough of them. Those addicted to travel are always planning the next trip. No amount of wealth is ever enough. Like any addiction, they become its slave, while claiming that it is they, not the addiction, who are in charge.

¹⁷ *NIDB, loc cit.*

¹⁸ The Roman jurist, Gaius, wrote, "all people are either free or slaves". (*Institutiones* i.9).

It is precisely for that reason that, for Paul, when some Christians claimed that their rescue from the clutches of the Law freed them to go on sinning with impunity, all they were doing was returning to their addiction to sinfulness. They were exercising their prerogative to return to their life of slavery to sin.

How *should* we, then, exercise our prerogative of choice? If what we think of as freedom is no more than a return to sinful living, what should we choose? For Paul, remember, we are always slaves to *something*. Christ has freed us to make a choice of which master we will serve. Not sin, says Paul; our choice must be to become slaves to righteousness, that is, slaves to God.

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When the Israelites were on the point of entering the promised land, Moses urged them to choose life over death (Deuteronomy 30:19). Paul is urging Christians to make the same choice. A choice for what they thought of as freedom was an illusion; it was no more than opting for the same old slavery to sin; it was choosing death over life. The way to life involved a deliberate decision to become the slaves of God, the servants of righteousness. To choose that way was a choice of life over death.

Just as, in the Roman world, there were good slave masters, in whose service one might be well treated and ultimately freed, and there were bad masters, whose tyranny and cruelty led to suffering and death; so too, the Christian is offered a choice between two masters. The great gift of salvation in Christ frees us from the clutches of destructive sin, and offers us a real choice. We can choose to return to our former master, to satisfy our immediate wants and desires, to live our lives for ourselves, and to succumb once again to the power of sin. We can choose death over life. Or we can offer our lives in servitude to our new, benevolent master, the God in whose service is life, and peace, and fulfilment, and spiritual well-being. We can become the slaves of righteousness. We can choose life over death.

There is great insight, great depth in Paul's teaching here. He lays the matter square on the line. He counters any sophistries with which we may come up. He confronts us unequivocally with the reality of our situation. Thanks be to God, Christ has afforded us a clear choice. There can be no half measures – "No one can serve two masters." To whom will we offer our allegiance? Which is the choice that leads to life? Our passage concludes with a succinct summation from Paul:

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.