

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 14 JUNE 2020

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 **Being ready for worship**

We have left behind Easter, the Ascension, Pentecost and Trinity Sunday, and now move into the six months leading up to Advent when we work our way through the Lectionary readings, enjoying their variety, and finding new insights in passages we thought we knew well. Today we dip into Paul's letter to the Romans, which is surely Paul's most profound theological statement. It is certainly a treasury of wisdom, insight and erudition, a profound statement of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When you feel ready to immerse yourself in this richness, begin with the prayer of adoration, in which we acknowledge the greatness of God, and the prayer of confession, when we acknowledge before God who we are.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

One of the greatest of English hymn-writers was undoubtedly Charles Wesley (1707-1788). Wesley was brought up in a Christian home, started "holy clubs" at college, and even went as a missionary to native Americans. However it was not until he was in his early thirties, in 1738, when he met with a group of Moravians in London, that he actually accepted the gospel and gave his life to Jesus. His realisation that night was that no one could earn their own salvation, that salvation was a free gift bestowed by God on those who put their trust in him. Within days, he wrote two hymns, one of which is still an all-time favourite, "And can it be". Wesley went on to write between five and six thousand hymns, but this first effort is unequalled in its deeply personal response to the free gift of God's forgiveness through the death and resurrection of Christ.¹ On a day when we shall be reflecting precisely on that joyous insight, there can be no better prayer of adoration of Jesus.

And can it be that I should gain
an interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who Him, to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

He left His Father's throne above,
so free, so infinite, His grace!
Emptied Himself of all but love,
and bled for Adam's helpless race!
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
for O, my God, it found out me.

'Tis mystery all! Th'Immortal dies!
Who can explore His strange design?
In vain the firstborn seraph tries
to sound the depths of love divine.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore;
let angel minds inquire no more.

¹ William J Petersen and Ardythe Petersen, *The Complete Book of Hymns. Inspiring stories about 600 hymns and praise songs* (Carol Stream, 2006), p. 472.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
fast bound in sin and nature's night.
Thine eyes diffused a quickening ray;
I woke – the dungeon flamed with light!
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him is mine;
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
bold I approach the eternal throne,
and claim the crown, through Christ my own.

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.

Our Saviour, when, in our minds, we stand before you,
when we approach you in prayer,
we know that we are completely unworthy of your love and grace, so freely given.
As your light casts shadows,
we creep into their darkness,
for we are sinful, and our thoughts and deeds are evil.
Our resolutions are ephemeral,
our promises worthless:
We continue in our sins.
We have not loved you,
nor have we loved our neighbour.
We have sinned both by acts of commission,
and by acts of omission.
Father, we are ashamed,
and ask for your mercy,
that you will forgive us,
and strengthen us to be more worthy of your love.
Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

In our reading from Romans today, we find Paul's assurance of the gospel. These words are slightly rearranged for the present purpose, but you will soon see that they remain absolutely in the spirit of what Paul was proclaiming:

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.
Thanks be to God!

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Romans 5:1-8

The other Lectionary Readings

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

Many of you will know that I sometimes look at the calendar of national and international days and weeks, to ensure that our prayers for the world are not repetitive, and we pray for important matters before the public consciousness from time to time. The calendar tells me the following:

- *Today, 14 June, is both World Blood Donor Day and International Bath Day (Google it!)*
- *This week we are in Infant Mental Health Awareness Week and International Men's Health Week.*

Apart from Bath Day(!), there is a theme about health there, so that centres the following prayer. You may of course choose to pray about other things that are important to you at the moment.

Lord our God,

We give you thanks for good health, both physical and mental.

As we begin slowly to emerge from the pandemic of Covid-19,

which has wreaked, and continues to wreak, such pain and suffering on the world,

we have a greater appreciation of the importance of good health,

and of the blessings you have bestowed upon us at this time.

Australia has been far less affected than so many other nations,

we have a robust health system which was able to cope with the cases which did arise,

and we have national and state leaders who prioritised human life over political posturing.

So we give you grateful thanks that so many of us have been spared,

while we pray for those who were bereaved by the illness,

as well as those whose well-being and livelihoods have been impacted by the lockdown.

We give thanks for the courage and dedication of health care workers

who confronted the virus, treated the sick, nursed the dying, and comforted the bereaved.

Bless them all, we pray.

Of course,

other illnesses and conditions do not stop happening while another takes the limelight,

so we pray for all who this day are facing illness or injury,

for those in pain, those in the throes of lengthy treatments,

and for those for whom there remains no further treatment.

Bless all who tend to them, families who surround them, friends who support them,

and grant the suffering your warmth and comfort.

We pray too, Father, for all who suffer from mental health conditions.

For some reason, we still treat mental illness as something to be kept private,

even something to be ashamed of, as if it were a personal weakness.

As a society, lead us to better understanding of, and compassion for, the mentally ill.

may we allocate resources to that sector

with the same generosity we do for physical health sector.

Be with those who suffer from mental conditions,

particularly for those whose illness leads them to contemplate suicide or self-harm.

May they be cared for with compassion, kindness and professional expertise.
 We pray too for the medical professionals who deal with mental health.
 Theirs can be a difficult lot;
 grant them patience, resilience and care,
 and the ability to see past the illness to the person buried inside,
 no less a child of God.
 In this week marking men's health, we pray for the health issues that face men.
 Often this includes mental health issues, but men have unique physical conditions,
 and suffer from some other conditions disproportionately.
 We pray for research in these areas, and for those at the front line dealing with men's illnesses;
 and for the men who today are suffering from such a condition.
 Grant them all your blessing.
 Finally, we pray for the community effort which is needed to ensure a healthy society.
 Our excellent Blood Service is a stellar example of the healthy making sacrifices
 for the benefit of others.
 We pray for all such initiatives – the RUOK movement, services such as Lifeline,
 support groups of all kinds for those suffering addictions, illnesses or other conditions.
 We know that preventing illness is far, far better than treating it,
 so we pray that we continue to support all community programs designed to head off illness,
 and encourage healthy living.
 The pandemic has reminded us all of the wonderful gift that is good health.
 We pray that we and our society will continue to prioritise and fund
 the health and well-being of all, with compassion, generosity and care.

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**

We have concentrated very much on Paul's teaching in his letter to the Romans today. We should finish with the benediction with which he concluded that same letter:

Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION *BREAKING THROUGH*

I wonder if you have a favourite Bible verse. Some people would say that they have so many favourites that they couldn't single any one out. Others will nominate a psalm. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life," is the favourite for many, many people, and is so well known that you used to see people wearing tee-shirts emblazoned simply with "John 3:16" with no further explanation. I wonder what your favourite verse is, if you have one.

I know what mine is. It's in today's reading from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. It's Romans 5:8 – "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." To me, this verse goes right to the very heart of the gospel.

I claim as my ally none other than Martin Luther, who, in his work on Romans, wrote of chapter 5,

In the whole Bible there is hardly another chapter which can equal this triumphant text.²

Luther's story is well known. A monk and priest, he was sent to the new university in Wittenberg, where, in 1512, he received his doctorate and prepared to teach what was then regarded as the highest of the disciplines – the Scriptures. As he studied, he found in the words new meaning which revolutionised his life, the Church, and indeed the world.

Much later in his life, in his introduction to an edition of his works published in 1545, Luther wrote, "I hated that word *iustitia Dei*" [*sic.*]. *Iustitia Dei* is Latin for "the justice of God". In Luther's time, "the justice of God was conceived of as an active righteousness, whereby the righteous God punished the unrighteous sinner³. Only when a person met God's requirements would God bestow upon them his justifying grace⁴. Before Luther's great realisation, he was tormented by his fear of the justice of God: how could *anyone* actually meet God's requirements of them? Surely God's grace was unattainable, and all were destined to suffer the consequences of God's justice visited upon sinners. The Church's teaching offered no solution; Luther observed that it buried Christ, rather than giving Christ⁵.

Luther's deep engagement with the scriptures led him to a new understanding, that law and gospel were in fact different. "When I found this distinction between law and gospel," he wrote, "I *broke through*."⁶ His realisation was a rediscovery of the power and beauty of the grace of God, of why the gospel is called "*good news*", and of how the righteous demands of the law are satisfied, not by the futile attempts of the sinner, but by the loving gift of forgiveness made possible through the sacrificial death of God's own son, Jesus Christ. It was an epochal step forward in Christian theology, and involved a rediscovery of the ancient teaching of the apostle Paul. Paul's most comprehensive and profound exposition of this teaching is, undoubtedly, his letter to the church in Rome. It is no wonder that Luther regarded its pivotal chapter 5 as an unequalled "triumphant text."

Luther's discovery, and the theological revolution which flowed from it, may have been over five centuries ago now, but its truth is still, too often, buried away by parts of the Church. It is not too many decades ago that a great deal of preaching fell into the "fire and brimstone" category, seeking to frighten hearers into submission before God's "law". Such preaching was none other than a

² Cited in James R Edwards, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1992), p. 132.

³ Unknown author, "Luther Salvation. *Iustitia Dei* – The Distinct Breakthrough", <https://www.livestransforming.com/luther-salvation/> accessed 28 May 2020, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Steven Paulson, *A Brief Introduction to Martin Luther* (Louisville, 2017), p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*

latter-day proclamation of the justice of God, which had so disturbed Luther, and which he had discovered was not the gospel at all; in fact, he had realised that the gospel was the *answer* to the justice of God. A generation after the “fire and brimstone” one, much of the Church remained a pillar of polite middle-class morality, and, consciously or unconsciously, led some who could not “measure up” to reject the Church and its condemnatory teachings. Even today, I know more than a few Christians who are only too keen to pronounce judgment on what they regard as the sins of others, to preach about the justice of God, and to bury the gospel beneath a sea of moral righteousness. The justice of God is still disturbingly influential in a good deal of Christian thinking. So we ought not ever to lose sight of the breakthrough in understanding that Luther achieved all those centuries ago. It is well that our reading today takes us into that ever-so important Christian doctrine.

Paul has spent the first four chapters of Romans setting the scene for the “triumphant text” which comes in chapter 5. He has by no means resiled from acknowledging the sinfulness of humanity, and God’s righteous and deserved judgment of all people. The Law, he demonstrates, has done no more than codify the sins that condemn the Jews; the Gentiles have what the Law requires “written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness” (2:15). All are therefore condemned by the Law, because no one is able to meet all its requirements. This is a proper acknowledgement of the justice of God.

But – and this is where Paul so differed from the pre-Lutheran Church – Paul goes on to show that those who were held to be righteous in the Old Testament were not so judged because they had satisfied God by successfully obeying the Law, but because they had placed their trust in God. Abraham, for example, could not tally up good works about which he could boast to God and so be deemed righteous; “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (4:2-3⁷). Righteousness, concludes Paul, is not earned, but bestowed by God upon those who place their trust in him.

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (3:22-4)

Here is the distinction, which Luther came to understand, between law and gospel. The law, and the consequences of sin, cannot be denied. They do indeed condemn all people, for no one can earn his or her own righteousness. The mediaeval Church’s teaching was, as Luther had realised, impossible. No one could merit God’s grace because we are all enmeshed in sin, unable to escape its clutches. But the gospel was and is that we do not need to do so; the gospel is good news because it declares that God will deem righteous all who place their trust in him. It is through faith alone that sinful people can be rescued and granted the righteousness which, under the law, would ever elude them.

And so Paul reaches chapter 5:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

“Peace with God.” The English word “peace” can mean so many things, but a careful analysis of its biblical usage by James Edwards leads him to conclude that what Paul is saying is that, “having been justified by faith, the believer stands in a condition free from obstacles in his or her relationship with God..... The removal of sin, like the removal of an obstruction from one’s

⁷ Paul is citing Genesis 15:6.

windpipe, restores one's vital signs"⁸. Peace with God is thus not some kind of mental euphoria or transcendental bliss; it is the restoration of a right relationship with our Creator. It is the removal of the sin which has precluded us from righteousness.

This is an extraordinary gift! Our loving God has acknowledged the utter helplessness of humanity, wallowing in a quagmire of sin, and has reached out in compassion to offer an unearned way out. Just as, when the strong arm of a rescuer is held out to a drowning person, all the drowning person is required to do is trust in their saviour, all that God asks of humanity, drowning in our sinfulness, is that we place our trust in him, through Jesus Christ. It is no wonder that Luther's realisation of this wondrous gift of God – the very essence of the gospel – led him to see the bankruptcy of the teaching of the mediaeval Church, and to be jubilant in his new-found freedom. "When I found this distinction between law and gospel, I *broke through*."

Our passage concludes with that verse which I nominated as my favourite:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

For me, this short passage epitomises the amazing generosity of the act of salvation. Our rescue was effected through the death – the *death* – of Christ; that is, through the *death* of one of the persons of the triune God. In human experience, says Paul, it's almost unknown for someone to lay down their life even for the best of people. But it was not for the best of people that Christ died, but for the very worst of us. Christ did not lay down his life at the point where we were making great strides towards achieving righteousness; he did not sacrifice his life for people who were on the cusp of getting there and just needed a final helping hand. We had absolutely nothing going for us. We were completely bereft of hope. We were drowning in the consequences of our sinfulness. But,

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

In those nine simple words (nine, at least, in English translation) is the core of the gospel. It was the source of Luther's inspiration. It was that distinction between law and gospel which saw him "break through". It is for the message of those nine words that we gather in worship and sing our praises to Jesus Christ, that we proclaim him our Saviour and Lord, our Hope and our Salvation.

It is hard not to think of the wonderful Charles Wesley hymn with which we commenced:

And can it be that I should gain
an interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain –
for me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Or of what must surely be counted one of the most deeply person hymn of all time, from John Newton:

Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.

⁸ *Op. cit*, p134.

As grace first taught my heart to fear
so grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed!⁹

I mentioned earlier a tendency, found in parts of the Church, to place greater emphasis on the justice of God than on the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are not called to be the world's police, let alone the world's moral police. Jesus warned us that it is not our role to judge others (Matthew 7:1-2), and Paul echoes that message in Romans (2:1). Both warn that, when we judge others, we establish a standard by which we, ourselves, will also be judged. We return to the quagmire of sinfulness, to the hopelessness that must be our lot when we choose to come under the justice of God.

Rather, as Luther saw, and spent the remainder of his life doing, we are called to point the drowning person to the rescuer's arm, held out to all who will place their trust in Jesus. We are in no position to be self-righteous about the justice of God; ours is a gospel ministry. For, like Luther, we have broken through to the truth of the gospel, that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us".

⁹ Both hymn extracts from *Together in Song* (Melbourne, 2000).