

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 19TH JULY 2020

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1 **Being ready for worship**

Thank you to those kind souls who have taken the time to contact me to express appreciation for these notes. Messages like that fuel the resolve to keep going, which I intend to do as long as there is a reasonable need. While some congregations are re-opening, others are moving more slowly, each making decisions which are appropriate for its situation and its people. I am aware that, especially now, some will be using these notes as a complement to other provisions, while for some, they will remain their lifeline to the community of faith. However you use them, and with whomever, I pray that they will help to resource you as God's people in the world, and remind you that, whatever your situation, God's love is the one constant upon which you can always rely.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

The Lectionary this week offers us Psalm 139, which – apart from a few lines that I've omitted – is a wonderful prayer/hymn of praise, and an alternative to the many hymns we've been using over the weeks. You will immediately realise that you are familiar with this psalm, or at least some of it.

You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.

You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

You discern my going out and my lying down;

you are familiar with all my ways.

Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.

You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"

even the darkness will not be dark to you;

the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

For you created my inmost being; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;

your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw my unformed body;

all the days ordained for me were written in your book

before one of them came to be.

How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them!

Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand—

when I awake, I am still with you.

Search me, God, and know my heart;

test me and know my anxious thoughts.

See if there is any offensive way in me,

and lead me in the way everlasting.

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.

Against you, Father, we are so unworthy.

We are sinners, all, who hide from the light,
for we are ashamed.

Remind us of just who and what we are.

Our deepest thoughts are selfish and often evil.

Even when we appear to be acting selflessly,
our motives are often less than worthy.

And despite our good intentions, we continue in sin.

We seize opportunities when we think we shall go unnoticed.

And we sin unthinkingly, so ingrained is the habit.

So, Father, we come humbly before you once again,
to confess our sins.

In the name of Jesus Christ,

who died to deal with our sin once and for all,

we ask for your mercy and forgiveness.

Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

The gospel is not about condemning us, but about saving us. That is why it is such joyful news. It can be said in so many ways. It's truth is always the same.

If we have died with Christ,

we believe that we shall also live with him.

So we must consider ourselves dead to sin,

and alive to God through Christ Jesus.

So we can be confident that our sins are forgiven.

5 **Selected Lectionary Readings**

Romans 8:18-25

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The other Lectionary Readings

Genesis 28:10-19a

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

You may choose to pray about anything that is important to you at the moment, of course. This prayer acknowledges that the month of July has been the ABC's "My Mental Health Month". The national broadcaster gave mental health this focus because of the emerging difficulties that have been wreaked by lockdown, unemployment and insecurity of the last four or five months.

Lord our God,

You reach out to us in compassion, and with infinite care.

Today we bring before you

the issues that relate to mental health in our community.

We have not been good at acknowledging mental health issues in the past,
and perhaps we're not much better at it yet.

So our first prayer is for all of us,
that our individual and our community attitudes might change,
so that we recognize that we are all vulnerable to mental illnesses,
and also so that sufferers might not be reluctant to seek the help they need.
We pray for all those who do suffer from any kind of mental illness or disability.
We think of schizophrenia, autism spectrum disorders, depression,
eating disorders, borderline personality disorder, addictions, PTSD
When we start to list them, we remember just how many there are,
and we're reminded that all of us know someone – maybe lots of people –
who are suffering from one of these, or have done in the past.
So we pray especially for those whom we personally know.
We know that a number of conditions are more prevalent in rural areas,
and are terribly aware of the suicide rate among farmers, especially in hard times,
so we pray for all who live in rural communities,
that the causes of such suffering may be addressed,
but also that services might be increased, to assist people to recover.
We pray too for young people,
among whom certain conditions are more prevalent;
and for the aged, for whom depression and Alzheimer's are very real issues.
But we do not turn a blind eye to all those around us,
in our own families, among our friends, in our workplaces,
where anyone can be suffering, often in silence, and in need of help.
Give us the heart to care, the sensitivity to notice, and the wisdom to help,
wherever we may encounter mental illnesses.
So our prayer is also for community initiatives, such as RUOK;
for services that seek to assist, such as Life Line and Beyond Blue.
Finally, we pray for the professionals who seek to treat the mentally ill.
Often their caseloads are undoable, and their resources scarce.
So we pray that government health budgets might fund mental health
with the same generosity as our nation funds physical health services;
and we pray for the psychiatrists, psychologists, mental health nurses,
counsellors, and all those whose professional duty is to look after,
and bring healing to, the mentally ill.
Grant them compassion, wisdom, time and resources to keep them going
at a task where healing may be rapid,
but may also take a long time, and be hard to see – or may never come at all.
May this month's focus by our national broadcaster
focus the attention of all of us on this problem
that we are so often reluctant to recognise.
For you care for all those who suffer, and we are called to do so too.

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**

The world of our everyday beckons now to us. God has not promised us an easy passage or a charmed life. We all go now to encounter the difficulties that life throws at us. Our real world is populated by both wheat and weeds, as the whole creation groans, awaiting the coming of the Kingdom of God. May we not spend our time identifying who are the weeds and who the wheat, but focus instead on ensuring that, at the time of the harvest, we are counted among the wheat. And as we go, we have the assurance that the blessing of almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, will be with us, and will remain with us for evermore.

So we go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION

There are times when people of great faith – very likely greater than mine – trouble me very deeply. Not that I am being critical of them, but I think some very faithful people can be quite mistaken about how God is present in the world. One so often hears such people say things like, “I know nothing will happen to me, because God is looking after me,” or “God is in charge of the world, and everything that happens has been ordained by him,” or “God has a plan and its being worked out. There are things that he has made to happen that we don’t understand, and which we just have to accept on faith.”

Early in the pandemic, I saw a report from one of the southern states of the USA. A Christian congregation had gathered, against all advice, for a communion service. Expressing this same kind of faith – misguided faith, in my view – their pastor told them that communion was holy, and so they *couldn't* contract the virus while participating. God would not allow that to happen at his sacred meal. Of course, the inevitable happened. Perhaps some of the worshipers *were* happy to accept that, for reasons they could not know, God had ordained that they catch Covid-19, and perhaps even that they should die. I’m afraid that I just can’t accept that view.

I’m sorry, but such faith is misplaced and misguided. I hesitate to say that, because the very last thing I ever want to do is to be responsible for undermining someone else’s faith. Jesus gave us a very stern warning about that¹, and it is not lightly to be disregarded! But the fact is that there is just so much wrong with such naïve trust. For one thing, we are also very sternly warned not to put God to the test.² Knowingly placing ourselves in harm’s way, so that God can intervene in nature to protect us, is surely none other than putting God to the test – almost daring God to show his hand and rush to our protection.

For another thing, Christianity is not *magic*. We don’t deal in spells and magic potions. Those are rightly called the “dark arts” and they are roundly condemned in the New Testament.³ Communion wine – whether it’s real wine or grape juice – is not a magic elixir. The bread and the wine are symbols – symbols of profound meaning, no doubt, but still symbols. They remain just bread and wine. One of the great and wonderful things about the Christian faith is that it lives in the real world, and that it is (sometime brutally) honest about the world, and the life we live in it. It does not subscribe to magical incantations, mysterious spells or any of the other weird and bizarre elements of sorcery.

Thirdly, and very importantly, if we convince ourselves that God will intervene to look after us, no matter what risks we may face or embrace, because of our Christian faith, we are left with no choice but also to *blame* God for all the bad things that happen all the time to all people, including Christian. Do we claim that God saved *us* from Covid-19? Then what does that mean about our sisters and brothers, in other nations as well as here, whom he *didn't* save? Why did God choose *not* to look after them, despite their faith?

And if we assert that God is in control of everything that occurs in the world, are we seriously going to claim that God deliberately visited Covid on the world? That God let loose a virulent contagion to kill indiscriminately, and cause the suffering or death of millions from disease, and millions more from social and economic dislocation? Are we really going to lay the blame for all this suffering at God’s feet?

¹ Mark 9:42.

² Matthew 4:7, Luke 4:12; cf Exodus 17:2, Deuteronomy 6:16.

³ Acts 8:9-25.

One of the more disgraceful claims I have heard made from a pulpit was in 2004, the year of the South-East Asian tsunami. Some 230,000 people were killed indiscriminately by the massive surges of water which swept over a number of nations. Some were western tourists, of course, but by far the greater majority were locals, people just eking out an existence, some in the tourist industry to be sure, but mostly not. And the vast and long-lasting economic damage was virtually *all* borne by the locals. A well-known Sydney cleric pronounced that the catastrophe had been God's judgment on the "fleshpots of Asia". If your belief is that God controls everything that happens in the world, then I guess that's as good an explanation as any other, but can we possibly truly believe that God acted in such a manner? If you follow that line of reasoning – and *even if* you do censoriously subscribe to the idea that the holiday spots that were affected were, in fact, built around the business of illicit sex – then you are left with a God who wreaked his justice totally disproportionately on the poor and vulnerable, most of whom had nothing at all to do with the tourist trade; and on others who, if the tourist trade really had been sullied by sexual improprieties, could only be described as the *victims* of wealthy western sex tourists. Yet this same just God largely spared the very people whose wealth and evil desires actually created and fuelled the offensive trade.

It's for reasons like that that I can't subscribe to the notion that God sits in control of everything – or that God will protect his own, no matter the danger. I'm sorry, but no matter how many faithful Christians make such claims about God, I cannot agree with them; and I believe they misunderstand the manner in which God is present in his world. I assure you that I most certainly don't place myself in danger, in the mistaken belief that God will intervene in nature to after me. And you will never find me trying to comfort a bereaved person by assuring them that their loved one's death was "God's will."

The fact is that nothing Jesus or the apostles ever taught either claimed or implied that Jesus' followers would be immune from danger. In fact, quite the opposite. They – we – were promised hardships and persecutions and suffering. The fact that we are blessed to live in a nation like Australia, and most of us have not had to endure such suffering, does not make it any the less real for our sisters and brothers in many other parts of the world, and down through the ages.

I could offer you a number of passages that make that point, but those the Lectionary gives us today that will do very nicely. Both our readings today – from Matthew's gospel, and from Paul's letter to the church in Rome – give us much firmer foundations upon which to base our understanding of the world we live in, and how God chooses to deal with it. It is not difficult to recognise our world in their descriptions of it.

Let's start with Matthew, and the so-called "Parable of the weeds". The field that has been sown with good seed is polluted by enemies, who come by night to add the seed of weeds. As the plants germinated, both wheat and weeds appeared in the field. Removing the weeds could potentially cause damage to the wheat crop, so both are allowed to grow side by side, until the time of harvest. Only then are the weeds uprooted and disposed of. *The field is the world*, Jesus later explained to his disciples, *and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one The harvest is the end of the age*

The picture is pretty simple. The people of the Kingdom will be surrounded by others who are not of the Kingdom. And just as weeds can sap the nutrition from the soil, and grow so profusely that they can choke the life out of the good plants – as any gardener! – so too the people of God should expect to find themselves in a world that is not perfect, and where there is real danger surrounding them. That strikes me as a pretty realistic understanding of the real world in which we live. Granted it's talking about people who pose a danger to Christians, not about natural phenomena like tsunamis or pandemics, but the point remains that the world Jesus envisaged for us was a dangerous one. There was no guarantee offered or implied that God would intervene to ensure safety.

Paul, of course, most certainly lived in the real world. In our passage from Romans, he speaks of the suffering of Christ's people in that real world. He does not, in this passage, specify the cause or the nature of the suffering. If we read his letters and the book of Acts, however, we can quickly identify some of the things he had in mind. In his second letter to the church in Corinth, he has reason to recount his sufferings. He says this:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (II Cor 11:23-7)

It's a pretty daunting list – and it contains suffering inflicted both by other people (the weeds in Jesus' parable), and by natural forces, most notably by the sea.

Nobody could pretend that Paul's was other than a very dangerous world, particularly for Christian believers. And lest someone point out that Paul had survived all these afflictions, and so must have been preserved by the hand of God protecting him, it's worth noting that Paul himself seems to have taken the dangers he faced as very real; and let's recall that, later, Paul almost certainly perished by a unutterably cruel death during the persecution of the Christians by the emperor Nero in the mid-60s. Their deaths were horrendous. The Roman historian Tacitus reports,

They were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to pieces by dog, or they were fastened to crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night.⁴

So when Paul speaks of “our present sufferings”, he knows a thing or two about it. Like Jesus' parable, the expectation is that the world will, indeed, be a dangerous place. So dangerous, in fact, that Paul personifies the very creation to emphasise just *how* dangerous. The creation is “in bondage to decay”, it is “groaning as in the pains of childbirth.” It too is waiting “in eager anticipation” for its liberation.

Surely we all recognise our own world in this powerful description. Lauris and I make it a point to view the BBC World News most nights. It has an unparalleled international coverage. Without wishing to depress you, the cacophony of reports on the Covid pandemic; political dysfunction in some nations, the rise of authoritarian dictatorships in others; the seemingly endless litany of conflicts great and small, with their extraordinary cost in human life and human suffering; an economic crisis that is promising to be longer and deeper than anyone first imagined when the world first had to shut itself down; to say nothing of droughts and other natural phenomena, the greatest of which is undoubtedly the existential threat posed by global warming – the sum of all these disturbing or downright frightening things that surround us – can only lead one to conclude that the world is in a mess, and that it is an increasingly dangerous place. Paul's metaphor of it “groaning as in the pains of childbirth” seems particularly apt!

It is with very good reason that, in the prayer Jesus taught us, we are to pray, “Thy Kingdom come.” The words are a recognition that the world is indeed a dangerous place, a place where God's people are not safe, where perils lurk about which we can do all too little. The words are also a clear

⁴ Tacitus *annales* xv.44, John Jackson, trans. (Loeb Classical Library) (London, 1969) V.

reminder of where our faith and trust in God should lie. We have not been promised miraculous protection from all dangers; we *have* been promised a dangerous world, one in which we can expect to be in peril. But we have also been promised that the world will, one day, be put right. The harvest will come, and the dangers will cease to be. In Paul's metaphor, "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay." "In this hope," he says, "we were saved."

In our prayers, it behoves us most certainly to give thanks to God when he has protected us from the dangers that surround us, and to pray that he will continue to do so, while we play our own part in seeking our safety; but those words that we so often just gloss over, as of habit, "Thy Kingdom come," should be said with fervour, sincerity and urgency. For therein is the promise that God has, most certainly, made to us!