

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 26 JULY 2020

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 **Being ready for worship**

Here we are at the end of July. While some aspects of life have the appearance of getting “back to normal”, there is a tentativeness about it all. News reports from overseas feature reporters wearing facemasks, with interviewees and passers-by doing the same thing. Outside Australia, in so many places, the pandemic continues its ugly work, wreaking havoc across the world, taking hundreds of thousands of lives, destroying whole industries and threatening the livelihoods, not only of individuals but of whole nations, while even here, recent spikes in Victoria, and threatening spikes elsewhere, remind us that things are not as they were, and that they may never be quite the same again. However, into the midst of our deepest concerns comes a reassuring and wonderful passage from Romans, which is our reading for today and the subject of this week’s reflection. So when you are ready to come before God in prayer, and to delve into the scripture to discover the hope that only is in God, begin.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

We took a break from hymns last week, but return with one this week which is so apt to our theme that it was irresistible. The English poet, William Cowper (1731-1800), wrote a great many hymns as well as secular poetry which is found in most collections of great English verse. Writing was therapy for him, for he had had a life of much anguish and suffering. Paul’s teaching that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him” can be very hard to hear when one has been through as much as Cowper had. Cowper’s mother died when he was only six years old. At school, he was bullied mercilessly, and later, his domineering father forbade him to marry the woman he loved, and forced him to study Law, which he loathed. Upon learning that his bar examination was to be before the House of Lords, he attempted suicide, and was committed to an insane asylum in 1764. Despite the horrors that such a place entailed in the 18th century, it was there that Cowper came to Christ through reading a Bible. After a year or so, he was released into the care of a Christian couple, where he began his writing career. Nevertheless, his suffering continued in the form of depression which dogged him for the rest of his years.¹

In God moves in a mysterious way, Cowper dared to recognise that, whatever the circumstances, God is in their our, wringing good out of even the worst that life could throw up. It is a very worthy prayer of praise and thanks to God for his endless mercy.

God moves in a mysterious way
his wonders to perform;
he plants his footsteps in the sea
and rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
of never-failing skill
he treasures up his bright designs,
and works his sovereign will.

¹ William J Petersen & Ardythe Petersen, *The Complete Book of Hymns. Inspiring stories about 600 hymns and praise songs* (Carol Stream, 2006), pp. 391 and 139.

You fearful saints, fresh courage take:
The clouds you so much dread
are big with mercy, and shall break
in blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
but trust him for his grace;
behind a frowning providence
he hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
unfolding every hour;
the bud may have a bitter taste,
but sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
and scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
and he will make it plain.
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.

God our father,
We come to you once again to confess that we have sinned.
We have not kept either of the two great commandments which Jesus gave us,
for we have not loved you with our whole being,
nor have we loved our neighbours as ourselves.
Our intentions have mostly been good,
but we have proven too weak to carry them through.
We ask your forgiveness for the times when we have failed to love as we ought to have loved,
for the times when our words have not been kind or uplifting,
for the times when we have been selfish and self-serving,
for the times when our greed has driven our behaviour,
for the times when we have ignored the good that we should have done,
and turned our back on those who needed us,
for the times both when our deeds have been wantonly wicked,
and those when we have sinned by our carelessness and inattention,
and for the times when our thoughts have betrayed the evil which is ever in us.
Forgive us we pray;
cleanse us of our unrighteousness,
and strengthen us for the temptations and times that lie ahead.
For we ask it in the name of Jesus, your son, who died that we might be forgiven,
and pleads our cause in your court of righteousness.
Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

There is good reason why John 3:16-7 is one of the most loved passages in all scripture.

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.
For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,
but to save the world through him.

In this great assurance, we can know that the sins of which we repent are forgiven.

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Romans 8:26-39

The other Lectionary Readings

Genesis 29:15-28

Psalm 105:1-11, 45b or Psalm 128

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

This prayer addresses the challenges facing the earth and its environment at present. In Australia, this year we have seen wide-ranging bushfires which caused extraordinary harm to native wildlife, as well as wreaking havoc in many towns and communities. Across the globe, we continue to experience new records – the hottest this, the earliest that, the most violent something else, the most southerly (or most northerly) something else again. The problem of microplastics infiltrating the oceans and being found throughout the food chain, the rapid melting of the icecaps, habitat and species loss and any number of other indicators bespeak a planet whose systems are under great stress. Our attention has been turned away by the pandemic, but the pandemic holds a very important lesson. Scientists usually do know what they're talking about. Nations that paid heed to their advice about Covid-19 have done comparatively well, those who labelled the science as a "hoax" or "just one opinion" have paid a terrible price. So this prayer is for our earth and its environment. You may choose to pray about other things that are important to you at the moment.

Our God,

We worship you as the creator of this bountiful planet which is our home,
and we recognise that you have appointed humankind as stewards of your creation.

In many ways, we have not done well in that responsible role,
and the earth is groaning under the heavy demands we have made upon it.

We come to you for your help, for we fear that, on our own,
we seem incapable of the degree of effective action that is required.

Our greed, our thoughtlessness and disrespect for nature, and our sheer numbers as a species
are an overwhelming burden for our planet's fragile systems.

So our first prayer is for a worldwide change of attitude,
that humankind might come to understand the peril of the planet,
and the danger in which that places ourselves.

May we listen to the desperate calls from scientists and ecologists to change our ways,
and may their warnings penetrate our profligacy, our greed and our self-serving lifestyles.

May we bring pressure to bear on decision-makers to bring about real change,
and make the path easier for governments

to legislate the tough measures that are now necessary.

May our own nation join a growing chorus of nations
to empower global initiatives that will help the health of our world.

And may we change our own attitudes,
which place our own convenience and satisfaction ahead of the well-being of the earth,
and champion profits over the sustainability of both living and non-living resources.
We pray for the many, many species that are under threat of extinction,
especially here in Australia, where the rate of extinction is particularly high.
Our prayer is not just for the sake of each species' integrity and place in the created order,
but also because we know that it is upon the rich variety and natural systems of that order
that our own health and well-being depend.
We pray for initiatives that will limit, and finally eliminate,
our net contributions to the carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere,
for we know that its effect is to blanket the earth
and trap heat that is slowly wreaking havoc with our climate and our ecosystems;
and that a dramatically warmer planet will be a more dangerous, less bountiful home
for humankind, and will even lead to the submersion of whole swathes of low-lying land,
including some whole nations.
Grant us rapid success in the quest for economic and practical energy alternatives,
and convince us that our habits and desires must change
to be better attuned to what our planet can accommodate.
Our own nation is in the front line of the effects of a changing climate,
with a longer bushfire season, scarcer water resources, more frequent droughts,
and rising desertification, so we pray for this nation of Australia in this challenging time;
but we pray even more so for other nations facing even more dramatic consequences,
particularly many of our Pacific and Asian neighbours facing inundation,
yet without the resources to do much about their predicament.
We pray for solutions to the seemingly endless pollution we inject into the earth's systems
– the gargantuan mountains of garbage that result from our profligate use of resources,
and our perverse economic systems;
the pollutants such as plastics and poisons that bespeak our love of convenience,
but at such a terrible cost to the earth;
the rubbish that is so carelessly discarded, yet which ends up destroying life in the oceans.
In all these concerns, our Father, may we recognise that change must begin with us,
yet must reach far beyond ourselves into systems and economies and governments,
and may we have the urgent resolve to heed the call and answer the need.

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 that awaits us will not always be an easy place, and we can be assured that there will be times of hardship, challenge and suffering. We do not welcome those times, but can be assured that, no matter what may befall us, it cannot separate us from the love that is in Christ Jesus, and that, out of the temporal bad, God will ultimately create good.
Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION

GOD IS FOR US

One of the very few things about which Lauris and I have disagreed was the proposed migration of the Powerhouse Museum from Ultimo to Parramatta. When the Premier announced a few weeks ago that the Government had determined instead to have *two* Powerhouse Museums, one on each site, we were both pleased. Apart from being a pleasing compromise, the new arrangement will have the effect of giving the museum – which is officially the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences – a huge amount of additional display space. I am delighted by that, because we once did a tour of a portion of the museum's storage facility out at Castle Hill. As we went from warehouse to warehouse, we were amazed by the treasures that are held there, not on display to the public except by special arrangement, and not curated as one would expect in a museum setting. No sooner did you digest the last amazing artefact that you'd spotted, than around the corner was an even more stunning item! The treasures just kept on revealing themselves.

We can only hope that the new Parramatta facility affords the museum the space to display some of these – and, may I add, to broaden its current fixation on being the leading museum of textiles and fashion in Australia.

Paul's letter to the Romans is a bit like roaming through the treasures of the Powerhouse Museum storehouses. No sooner have you digested the last pearl, than you encounter the next passage that brings even greater richness. You'll recall that these reflections have focused on Romans for weeks now, and yet we have far from exhausted the wonderful insights and teachings that Paul offered those who heard his letter read in the church in Rome. Today's passage takes us to yet another crescendo of poetic celebration of the goodness, grace and love of God.

There is so much in today's passage upon which one could make comment. I certainly don't intend to try to be encyclopaedic here, and will omit things that probably do require some kind of comment – such as the apparent support for the idea of predestination, which would take a few pages in its own right. I'll limit myself to just two aspects of this treasury of teaching.

I wonder if you can relate to Paul's statement, "We do not know what we ought to pray for." I can. Not that I am short of *topics* for prayer! I can readily come up with a long shopping list of problems about which I want to talk to God, everything from very personal matters about myself and my family, to concerns about my friends, to matters involving the various congregations to which Lauris and I relate, to problems that face our nation, other nations and the whole world. My list can go from the needs of my children to climate change, international conflicts and the pandemic that faces the world! No, I am not short of topics!

But, like many of us, I suspect, I want to give God the solutions that I have in mind. Against most of the items on my shopping list, I can tell God pretty much what he needs to do. That's what we do as humans. We face difficulties; we think up solutions. Our children come to us with a problem; we devise solutions and suggest them. The nation has a problem. We seem to be the only one who can see the best solution – if only the powers-that-be would listen to our wisdom! But of course a moment's reflection, and a smidgeon of humility, would remind us that, all-knowing, sage and just as we may think ourselves, we are simply not in a position to advise God on the solutions to the world's problems. God is far wiser, far more knowledgeable, far more patient and far more just than we could ever be. With maturity, we learn that prayer is about giving God the problem, not giving God the solution.

It's with that thought in mind that we should read Paul's words about prayer.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

What a release and an encouragement is this assurance of the work of the Spirit within us! All those ill-formed thoughts, uncertainties, and nagging anxieties that lurk in the back of our mind, which we have trouble crystallising even for ourselves, let alone articulating in prayer to God, are searched out and taken in prayer to the Father through the agency of the Holy Spirit. All those problems for which our own imagined solutions are, on reflection, often impatient, trite, naïve or even foolish, are gathered up for us by the Spirit and delivered to God. Paul refers to this communication as “wordless groans”. This might be taken as a reference to believers “speaking in tongues” – a practice which Paul certainly accepted, though with some caveats, but not one with which a great many of us feel comfortable – but that would be mistaken. It is Paul’s best attempt to describe the manner in which the Spirit prays to the Father. The Spirit prays beyond language, with all its limitations and ambiguities. As a groan comes from deep within, so the Spirit’s prayers come from deep within, at a level where there is complete openness and honesty.

Does this mean, then, that we need not bother with prayer at all, that the Spirit will do it all for us? Certainly not, of course. What it does mean is that we do not have to formulate fancy prayers, we do not have to search for the right word, we do not even have to be able to articulate everything that we want to place before God. What we must do is set aside the time for, and open ourselves to, prayer; to allow the Spirit to search our minds to find what is troubling us, and what we need. If anything, we need more concentration, not less, in our prayer time, to allow the Spirit to do his work on our behalf.

This agency of the Spirit in assisting our prayers is a portion of the greater theme that Paul is following here. It is a part of his declaration,

... we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

A few lines further on, he declares, “... God is for us.” That is the great theme of this whole passage. *God is for us*. So far as our prayers are concerned, God wants us to be able to pray effectively, to be able to unburden ourselves of all that weighs us down – and so the Spirit assists us to do so, because God is for us. When Paul says that “God works for the good of those who love him,” he is not suggesting that God oversees our every action, intervening to keep us from danger; or that God will not allow us to make mistakes, even mistakes with terrible consequences. To claim such a thing would be absurd. But just as, in prayer, God is able to wring something good and positive out of our stumbling inadequacies, so too we are assured that God will use all our experiences, good and bad, all our mistakes and all our sufferings ultimately to bring something good into being. We do not make mistakes because God ordains it; we do not suffer because God decrees it; but when these things occur, we are assured that, out of the bad, God will wring good, because *God is for us*.

And so Paul comes to the wonderful passage that is verses 31 to 39. It is worth recalling in its entirety:

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who

shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

*“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This passage could easily be a hymn, and has been described as such. It is a brilliant rhetorical flourish. We must hope that the person who read it aloud to the congregation in Rome was a good reader, able to do justice to this rapturous encomium. It explores and eulogises that basic declaration – God is for us!

It’s worth recalling that Paul was a man who had suffered a great deal for his faith. Last week, we recalled his statement in II Corinthians 11:23-7 in which he enumerated some of the ways he had suffered (you may want to look it up again). Paul was a man well educated in both the Jewish tradition and in Hellenistic culture; he had been an official of some significance in the Jerusalem Temple (Acts 9:2); he was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-28). In other words, Paul was one of the élite. He willingly gave up all of that for a life of hardship, danger, deprivation and ridicule. Why? To proclaim the great truth which had been revealed to him – that God is for us.

It is easy to overlook the profundity of Paul’s teaching here, and the extent to which it set him at odds with the tradition he had inherited. It is easy to think that Paul is merely enunciating what we have been taught all of our lives. But this is *not* what Paul had been taught. While the true nature of God does indeed shine through much of the Old Testament, especially in the words of the prophets, the mindset that is reflected elsewhere is predicated on a different understanding of God. Whenever something went wrong, the Jews believed that it came as God’s punishment for their sinfulness. So, for example, in what was perhaps the most definitive event in the history of Israel after the Exodus, the Babylonian defeat of Judah, the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, and the carrying off into exile of a great portion of the population at the beginning of the 6th century BC, the universal interpretation was that God had acted in just anger to punish the sins of his people. Indeed, God had deserted them (*e.g.* Jeremiah 17:1-18, Lamentations). So the worship life of Judah, and the whole point of the sacrificial rites in the Temple, were to atone for Israel’s sins, and to try to keep God on side. In this respect, Israel’s religion had grown to be not unlike the pagan cults, whose purpose was usually very similar to this.

But as God was to demonstrate, he had never deserted the Jews; he was with them in Babylon; when Cyrus the Great decreed their release, he led them back to rebuilt Jerusalem and the Temple. The truth was that the Jews had turned their back on God, not God on the Jews. Yet the national ethos persisted, that every misfortune must be God visiting punishment on his people for their sin.

That is why Paul’s declaration in Romans is as revolutionary for its Jewish hearers as it is for those who were Gentiles. God is not like that. *God is for us!* “... neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Nothing – nothing! – can separate us from the love of God.

It should be unnecessary to point out that the suggestion here is *not* that this is permission just to go on sinning. Paul dealt with that thought back in chapter 6, and to read this passage in chapter 8 as somehow contradicting that would be grievously to take Paul’s words out of context. What Paul is declaring is that the hardships which may face us in life, the suffering, persecution, setbacks, illnesses, injustices, are *not* signs of God’s anger and punishment. God does not will them upon us.

Because, whatever appearances may suggest for the moment, *God is with us*, not against us.

How can we know that this is true? God “who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” It’s an unanswerable argument. God *so* loved us that he sacrificed his son – it’s the same thought so famously articulated in 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.

How could anyone fear or believe that God were not with us when he went through such extraordinary pain and sacrifice for us, who were so undeserving of mercy and grace. “While we were yet sinners,” Paul wrote in chapter 5, “Christ died for us.” Here is the clinching, unquestionable proof that God is for us, not against us.

Nothing in this passage, or elsewhere in Romans, or indeed anywhere in the New Testament, suggests that the Christian life will be an easy one, or that Christians will be spared from hardships. The exact opposite is true, as we have previously seen. But the declaration here is that, no matter what may happen, whoever may accuse, persecute or harm us, whatever danger we may face, *God is for us*. And “if God is for us, who can be against us?” Whoever may condemn us for who we are, or what we believe, or what we do, only God can truly condemn us. Only God’s condemnation actually matters. And, through the grace of Jesus Christ, God has acquitted us, and Jesus himself pleads our cause. Because *God is for us*.

Previously, I compared exploring Romans to the experience of exploring the hidden treasures of the Powerhouse Museum. New, wonderful things keep on being revealed to us. At every point, Romans has exhilarated us with fresh statements of the wonder of the gospel. Our reading today certainly does not disappoint. We leave with the heart-stopping declaration that *nothing* “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Thanks be to God!