

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 2 AUGUST 2020

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1 **Being ready for worship**

Some of us have returned to congregational settings. If that is the case, and you are still using these materials, I am grateful for the vote of confidence. However, churches are being, very understandably and prudently, cautious about reopening. So we are all in different situations, but we come together around the word of God, and in prayer, knowing that, whatever our situation, we are all the sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ. Let this time be a thanksgiving for that blessing.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

You may find the following prayer helpful, but God does not require fancy language. If you choose instead to praise God in your own words, and to thank him for the things that make you grateful, that will be a wonderful prayer.

All glory and honour and praise be to you, almighty Father,
for you were before the beginning, and shall be beyond the end of all things.
You are eternal; you are the creator of all that there is, seen and unseen.
By your mighty acts were brought into being the endless universe,
with its billions of stars in each of its billions of galaxies,
in dimensions and numbers that our human wisdom simply cannot comprehend.
Yet you gave your attention too to the microscopic world,
to the beauty that dwells beyond our ability even to see it
without the aid of powerful instruments.
You breathed your spirit into mute matter to create life,
in all its variety and beauty.
You created humankind from the very dust of the earth,
and entrusted to us your created world, to be its stewards and guardians.
You are greater, more majestic, more powerful and wiser than it is within our ability to grasp;
yet you look kindly upon us, who are so unworthy,
indeed so insignificant in the scheme of things,
and bestow upon us blessings beyond our counting.
In our troubled desperation, you reached out to us in inexplicable love,
offering the hand of the rescuer in the person of your very son, Jesus Christ.
Our God, we worship and adore you.
There is none like you.
Amen

3 **Prayer of Confession**

Again, 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.

Yet, our Father,
we must confess before you that we have proven unworthy of your great mercy.
As we look back upon our lives, we know the things that we have done
and the things that we have thought,
and we know the things that we have left undone,
and the things that have not even occurred to us to contemplate.
For, despite our earnest desire to live as you would have us live,
we continue to be the sun in our own little solar systems,

expecting the rest of the creation to orbit around our wants, needs and conveniences.
We have not loved you with anything like our whole heart,
and we have not loved our neighbour as we love ourselves,
because we love ourselves far too well,
and shape our lives around what suits or is best for us.
Yet, our Father, like Paul, these things are not what we wish to do,
but the things that we do not want to do,
and we come to you seeking your forgiveness
because our earnest desire is to live as you would have us live.
Forgive us we pray,
and grant us the strength and resilience to do better in the future,
for we ask it in the blessed name of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

Can you hear these words too often?

*God so loved the world that he sent his one and only son,
that whoever believes in him might 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.*

If we belong to Christ, then we are assured that our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be to God!

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Romans 9:1-8, 30-33 (Lectionary is only 9:1-5)

The other Lectionary Readings

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalms 17:1-7, 15

Matthew 14:13-21

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

This prayer is for the Church, the universal Church, the Church here in Australia, and for our own Uniting Church. You may of course choose to pray about other things that are important to you at the moment.

Heavenly Father,

We pray at this time for the Church.

Like every place of gathering, the Church throughout the world,
and congregations in every nation and in every community,
have been hit very hard by the pandemic of Coronavirus.

People have not been able to gather in safety for worship,
so many congregations have closed, and even where they have remained open,
many have stayed away out of fear, or a sense of responsibility for the public good.

Yet, nothing could daunt the spirit of your people,
called to worship you and to seek you in prayer.

The Church has embraced every kind of innovation to connect Christians in their isolation.

We give you thanks for the new technologies which have made that possible,
but we give you thanks too for the communications systems
that have allowed even the written word to be communicated to Christians,

to encourage them and connect them with the body which is your Church.
We give you thanks that an emergency has jolted us out of our complacency and habit,
helping us to realise that the Church can take different forms,
and can connect with far more people if it offers the flexibility that we have now discovered.
So we pray for the Church, as around the world it begins, tentatively, to regather.
May we not now forget all that we have discovered.
We pray that we shall not have lost people along the way,
but that others, who have joined us in new ways, will remain as part of the body of Christ,
and that we shall know how to sustain them
even as many will not become part of a traditional congregation.
So we pray for the Church universal, for all denominations in all places,
for all who gather in the blessed name of Jesus to seek your forgiveness and grace;
and for all who lead the Church,
from busy lay people struggling to contribute around their other life commitments,
to those whose vocation is full time work in ministry.
For our own nation, we pray the same prayer.
Bless our Anglican, Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian brothers and sisters,
indeed those who belong to all worshipping congregations and denominations
in this most secular of societies.
May your Spirit reign throughout your Church,
and may we trust that you will never leave yourself without witnesses.
We pray for our Uniting Church,
for our President, Dierdre, our Moderator, Simon, our General Secretary, Jane,
for our Presbyteries and Councils,
for all our congregations, large and small,
and for all who lead in congregations and elsewhere, lay or clergy.
Bless the ministry of the Uniting Church;
bless our Covenant with Australia's First Peoples,
and may the vision of our founders,
that the divisions within the body of Christ be gradually healed,
ever be in the forefront of our thinking, and never be relegated to the "too hard basket".
Father, we pray for the entire Church,
that it might bring worship and praise to you,
and never lose its fire to bring the good news of Jesus before all peoples.

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**

Wherever you find yourself as you use this material, and to whatever activity of commitment you now go, know that God is always with us, even, perhaps especially, when we are unaware of his presence. So know that the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the companionship of the Holy Spirit are yours for evermore.

Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION *WHAT OF ISRAEL?*

There's a story that floats around the internet, and which found its way into Bill Bryson's book on the English language¹, that an American Senator or Governor (versions vary) declared, "If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it's good enough for me." Whatever we may think of Americans, the story is not true, but let's face it – it could be. The Jesus whom we encounter in popular thought, and even in some religious writing, is often a construct designed to suit our own purposes and agendas, largely unanchored in the actual New Testament. Jesus has been endlessly remoulded, often beyond all recognition from the person who was the subject of the gospels.

In 1973, Géza Vermes, an Israeli scholar, published a book, now a classic, entitled *Jesus the Jew*. A quick search on-line will reveal that there are now a number of similar titles published in more recent times, but Vermes' book was – bizarrely – quite revolutionary, because it was a timely and necessary reminder that Jesus of Nazareth *was* a Jew, and more than that, he was a Jew of the 1st century AD. Such a corrective ought never to have been necessary, but the fact of the matter is that it was. Much of the thinking of the world's largest religion had grown apart from its roots in Judaism, and had lost sight of the fact that Jesus was born and executed as a Jew, that his lifestyle, education and religious practice were those of a Jew, and that virtually his entire ministry was to the people of the Galilee and Judaea.

It is a dreadful part of the heritage of modern Christianity that, for much of its history, Christianity was a hotbed of antisemitism and persecution of the Jewish people. Even in the gospels, the Jewish people are often portrayed negatively, with all the accounts of the crucifixion carefully crafted to lay at the feet of the Jewish authorities the entire blame for Jesus' execution, which was carried out under Roman law by the Roman Governor. In the gospel of John, Jesus' opponents are often slated as "the Jews", as if the whole Jewish people were his enemies – despite the fact that all the disciples, not to say Jesus himself, were Jews!² That seed which had arisen in the early Church and found its way into parts of the New Testament germinated and took root, to the point where the Jewish people were branded, among other things, the murderers of the Messiah, literally as they who had killed God himself. The fruit of such attitudes was the tragedies that were visited upon the Jewish people across Europe over many centuries. One of the dark character traits even of Martin Luther was his vehement antisemitism, born of his failure to convert those he met to Christianity.

That is all important background as we come today to continue our way through Paul's letter to the Romans, and we encounter what Paul had to say about the Jews. Chapter 9 is the first part of a three chapter excursus on the Jewish people, so we shall return to it in subsequent weeks. But today's passages are a most important foundation upon which the rest of Paul's argument is built.

Now like Jesus himself, it seems sometimes that Paul's own Jewishness escapes the consciousness of many Christians. It is true that, in the account of Paul's work in Acts, he is often opposed by "the Jews"³, to the point where, attacked yet again in Corinth, he declared, "Your blood be on your own heads! ... From now on I will go to the Gentiles."⁴ Paul's reputation as the "apostle to the Gentiles", and the centrality of his writings to Protestant Christianity, could almost lead one to see him as a modern evangelical! But, like Jesus, Paul was a Jew, and very proud of his heritage. In his letter to the Philippians, he strongly asserts his Jewish pedigree. He was, he said,

¹ Bill Bryson, *Mother Tongue* (London, 1990).

² See for example John 3:22, 9:22, where one could be forgiven for thinking that the main protagonists in the accounts were not Jews at all.

³ For example Acts 13:45; 14:2; 14:19; 18:5f.

⁴ Acts 18:6.

*circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.*⁵

In Acts, he makes much the same assertion to a gathering of people in Jerusalem, adding that he had been educated by the highly esteemed Pharisee, Gamaliel.⁶ Paul was a Jew, through and through, and utterly proud of it.

So when Paul comes to consider the fate of his own people in light of the gospel, and their failure to recognise in Jesus the promised Messiah, he did so with great disappointment and heartfelt compassion. He was not blind to the seriousness of this rejection. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, he wrote,

*You [the Christians of Thessalonica] suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.*⁷

Yet, far from condemning his people, far from renouncing his own heritage, and even further from the thought of seeding antisemitic attitudes among the people of the church in Rome, Paul approaches the question of the Jews with anguish and sadness. Lest people doubt his sincerity, he assures them by asserting that he is speaking the truth in Christ, and that his clear conscience is confirmed by the Holy Spirit. He then goes on,

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

This is an extraordinary passage for several reasons. Paul emphasises that these are his “own people”, his “kindred according to the flesh,” and in no sense does he disown them. There is no condemnation here, no recrimination, no cry for justice. Instead there is a recognition of the unique and blessed status of the Jewish people. It was they, and only they, who were adopted into a covenant relationship with God, only they to whom the Law was given, only they who were the heirs to the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and only they who had the privilege of birthing the messiah. So there is only anguish in his heart for what his people have done in rejecting God’s Messiah.

So deep is that anguish, that Paul would willingly change places with his people. “For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people.” If it meant that the Jews could come to Christ, Paul would exchange his own salvation for theirs. In effect, he would give his life for the lives of the people of Israel. Surely here, we encounter the teaching of Jesus. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” Jesus had taught⁸; and Jesus had given his own life as a sacrifice for the many.⁹ Paul is so far from condemning his people that he is willing to lay down his own life to bring them to faith in Jesus Christ. In this is only love. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”¹⁰ In itself, that is an inspiration to all who struggle to live life as a follower of Jesus.

⁵ Philippians 3:5f.

⁶ Acts 22:3f.

⁷ I Thessalonians 2:14-16.

⁸ Matthew 5:44.

⁹ Matthew 20:28.

¹⁰ John 15:13.

However Paul's exploration of the future of his people does not end there. While our hearts might leap at the self-sacrifice which Paul would willingly make to save his people, that willingness is nevertheless born of his despair and anguish at the choice they have made. Yet the gospel is not about despair and anguish. Chapter 7 ended with that triumphant declaration that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." It would be a terrible thing if the one exception to this wondrous outflowing of love were the people of the promise. And what would that say about the trustworthiness of the promises of God? So Paul then embarks on an exploration of all the questions thrown up by the situation of the Jews. As James R Edwards lists them,

Why did God's chosen people reject the Messiah, and, having done so, what further role do they play in God's plan? What is the relationship between the old and the new covenants, and between Israel and the church? If Israel has rejected its calling, has God rejected Israel? Does Israel's rejection of God's Messiah thwart God's providence and Israel's election?¹¹

In the remainder of chapter 9, we only encounter the first portion of Paul's answer to these complex questions. Nevertheless even in that part of the answer, we continue to encounter the gospel, in the theme that has sustained Paul's argument right through Romans. We hark back to that pivotal moment, when Luther realised the distinction between Law and grace and "broke through". We recall the reason why it is possible for us, who remain in sin despite our earnest wish to break free, to receive God's grace and gift of new life. While, like the rest of Romans, chapters 9-11 are complex, they are full of good news.

Paul wants to make it clear that, simply being able to name Abraham – or Jacob (Israel) – as an ancestor gives no *entitlement* to God's salvation. Jesus had warned about relying on such a pedigree when he told his listeners, "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."¹² Paul points out that, just as not all the descendants of Abraham were his "true descendants" – because there were the lines of descent through Ishmael, and through Esau – so too even some of those who regarded themselves as "Israel" were not truly people of Israel.

This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants.

"Children of the promise." The focus is on the promise, the word of God. Paul had asserted in v. 6 that "It is not as though the word of God had failed." He spends some time defending God's prerogative to grant his mercy where he saw fit. If that included the Gentiles, then that had been foretold through the prophets, and so fully accorded with the promises of God. So the problem for Israel is that they had depended too much on what they regarded as a birthright, and not on the actual word of God. Indeed, it all came down to a question of faith.

What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works.

Faith is trust in the word of God. The word of God had not failed; Israel had failed to trust in it. They had sought to earn their own righteousness by obedience to the law, but as Paul has been pointing out throughout Romans, that is not possible, for sin prevents us from perfect obedience. Only through grace, granted to those who trust the promises of God, can people be saved. No birthright, no inheritance, no culture or particular religious practice can take the place of the need for faith in the promises of God.

¹¹ James R Edwards, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1992), pp. 228f.

¹² Matthew 3:9.

If you'll forgive a "spoiler alert", good news is coming for the Jews, but we have a way yet to go with Romans. But already two shining stars radiate from this first part of Paul's exploration of the situation of the Jews. First is Paul's own demonstration of his faithful Christian love, in declaring his willingness to give up his own life for that of his people, people who had opposed him and accused him and attacked him. That must be an inspiration for us all as we seek to be the followers of Jesus. The second is that reaffirmation, that nothing we can do can purchase our salvation; and that all that God requires of us – Gentile or Jew – is to place our trust in the promises of God. That is the very core of the gospel, and the reason why we come into the community of faith to worship and adore the triune God, whose love has made it so.