

## PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 30 AUGUST 2020

No 24

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### 1 **Being ready for worship**

In 1967, the Beatles released a double EP set (some readers will have no idea what that was!) called *Magical Mystery Tour*. It included one of the perennials of their music, “All you need is love.” While it was far from being a Christian song, its sentiments were pretty sound, and it was that not far from the theme we pursue in Romans today. Love is at the centre of our passage, as indeed it is pretty much at the centre of Romans as a whole. We should sing the hymn, “A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you”, more often; it is a challenge to us every time we sing it. “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you have love, one for another,” we sing. In our reading Paul challenges us about what that love is to look like. Singing that simple but powerful hymn to yourself several times would be a good way to prepare yourself for worship today. Then begin with these prayers.

### 2 **Prayer of Adoration**

*Pursuing that theme of love, there is perhaps no better hymn in Together in Song that bespeaks God’s love than Love Divine. This is another of the (approximately six thousand) hymns of Charles Wesley. Wesley (1707-1788) and his brother John were, of course the founders of the revivalist Methodist movement and giants in the history of the English-speaking Protestant Church. Charles was an itinerant preacher, travelling throughout the country on horseback. As he rode, he composed hymns, which he wrote in shorthand, only to grab paper and pen on his arrival at his lodgings for the night, and write the new compositions out properly lest they be lost. Love divine goes to the metre of John Dryden’s King Arthur, and extols the miraculous, literally overwhelming love of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> It is an excellent prayer of praise to the son of God.*

Love divine, all loves excelling,  
joy of heaven, to earth come down,  
fix in us thy humble dwelling,  
all thy faithful mercies crown:  
Jesus, thou art all compassion,  
pure unbounded love thou art:  
visit us with thy salvation,  
enter every trembling heart.

Come, almighty, to deliver,  
let us all thy life receive;  
suddenly return, and never,  
never more thy temples leave:  
thee we would be always blessing,  
serve thee as thy hosts above,  
pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,  
glory in thy perfect love.

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<sup>1</sup> William J Petersen and Ardythe Petersen, *The Complete Book of Hymns. Inspiring stories about 600 hymns and praise songs* (Carol Stream, 2006), p. 516.

Finish then thy new creation,  
pure and spotless let us be,  
let us see thy great salvation,  
perfectly restored in thee:  
changed from glory into glory,  
till in heaven we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before thee,  
lost in wonder, love and praise.<sup>2</sup>

Amen

### 3 **Prayer of Confession**

*As always, 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.*

Lord Jesus,  
Your love is divine; it does indeed all love excel.  
We confess that our own love is far from divine;  
indeed it is ever so human.  
We have a stunted understanding of love.  
Our love is reserved for those who will love us back,  
or at least for people who are like us.  
Even then, our love is conditional, equivocal and ephemeral.  
We refuse to heed your call to love those who hate us or would do us harm.  
We shrink from loving the stranger and the outcast.  
We fall into line with the way the world thinks,  
and allow hate to take root and fester within us,  
feeding our sense of our own worth and our desire for revenge.  
We hesitate to take even the first steps toward living as truly loving people,  
for we let our fear drive us, and we prioritise “fitting in” over obedience.  
Forgive us our reluctance and our self-importance, we pray.  
Grant us the courage to embrace the way of love to which Jesus calls us,  
and guide our first steps to help us discover the power of truly loving others.  
For we ask this in the name of Jesus,  
who was and is the very embodiment of love,  
and whose own love was so powerful  
that he gave his life that sin and death might be no more.

Amen.

### 4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

*The writer of I John wrote this to his hearers:  
Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.  
God’s love was revealed among us in this way:  
God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.  
In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us  
and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (I John 4:8-10)  
So we are assured that, if we believe, our sins are forgiven.  
Thanks be to God.*

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<sup>2</sup> Words from *Together in Song* (Melbourne, 2000), number 217.

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Romans 12:9-21

**The other Lectionary Readings**

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalms 105: 1-6, 23-26, 45b

Matthew 16:21-28

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

*The world at the moment is in a state of foment. It is a long time since there was such widespread discontent around the world. That is not necessarily a bad thing – there is much in the world that is in need of change, and a better world may emerge as we enter the future. But it may not. Protest movements are invitations to authoritarian governments to crack down, often at great cost to their peoples. Remember the so-called “Arab Spring. They can also be opportunities for other nations cynically to intervene. Our prayer today asks for God’s oversight of the popular protest movements in so many places – Hong Kong, India, the United States, Thailand, Belarus, Brazil, Argentina, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Mali, Sudan ... to name but a few. Of course you may choose to pray about other things that are important to you at the moment.*

Lord our God,

We bring before you the peoples of so many nations  
who are expressing their deep discontent with their governments.

Without doubt,

authoritarian and corrupt governments are on the rise around the world,  
and without doubt,

the collapsing world economy is wreaking havoc on many nations.

People are rising up to state their concern, to demand their rights  
and to express their frustrations and indignation.

We pray for your oversight of all the nations experiencing this foment.

We certainly do not pray for peace at any price;

our prayer is not for the protection of authoritarian or repressive  
or corrupt governments.

Indeed we pray for the protection of the protestors,

from all evil forces arraigned against them –

from their own governments, military forces and police,

but also from cynical political manipulators

who would hijack unrest for their own ends.

We pray too that the powerful nations of the world

not seize opportunities to expand their influence by backing repressive regimes;

that, if they do intervene, it only be for benign reasons,

genuinely to assist nations in trouble,

to bring humanitarian relief, and to nurture good governance,

independence and freedom.

Father, your prophets throughout history have called for justice,

and we look ahead to the time of the world’s remaking by your hand,

when justice and mercy will reign.

It is these things that most protesting peoples are seeking –

basic freedoms, genuine justice, an end to corrupt regimes,

economic fairness, good governance.

So we pray for their success and for their safety.  
We pray that, from the protests and the rallies and the unrest  
a new and better world might emerge;  
and we pray earnestly for your oversight,  
that dictators, and would-be dictators, and oppressors of their peoples,  
and corrupt, self-serving governments do not win out,  
but instead succumb to the demands for justice resounding in their capitals.  
God, unrest and change can be unsettling, even frightening,  
and there is always a temptation for people to cling to the *status quo*,  
for no better reason that is what they know  
and they fear the unknown;  
but we pray that neither nations nor peoples succumb to this temptation,  
but endorse the values and aspirations of peoples seeking justice.  
For we pray for a world  
in which the values you have made known as your own reign,  
in which people live with dignity, with justice and with economic fairness.  
May your kingdom come, we pray.

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**

*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*  
It is a challenging call with which to finish.  
What will it mean in your life this week?  
How will you make a start?

We are not on our own.  
The Spirit is our helper, if only we will open ourselves to his leading.  
When we do, we share in the blessing:  
The blessing of almighty God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
will be with us now,  
and will abide with us evermore.  
Amen.

**BIBLE REFLECTION**  
**OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD**

Movies, television, cable services and streaming services are all around us. They're pretty hard to avoid, and most of us don't actually want to avoid them. They are very much a part of the world we live in. And when we do tune in to one of these media, there's no doubt that what we see pretty accurately reflects back to us the prevalent values and attitudes of Western society. It's an interesting question to ask whether filmmakers simply hold up a mirror to how we actually are, or whether they subtly shape our attitudes by powerfully portraying their own as normal. It is hard to know which way round it works, but either way, the values we see on the screen are well and truly the values embedded in the world around us.

I'm not a great film buff myself, but I see enough movies to have a pretty good grasp of some of the ways the world is portrayed on the silver screen. The world we see on film is basically divided into good guys and bad guys. The bad guys might be anyone from criminals, to other nations, to other ethnicities, to domestic terrorists or political conspirators. Whoever the bad guys are, in movieland most often the good guys win. And most often, the climax and the catharsis of the film entail a decisive victory by the good guys over the bad guys; and that victory frequently entails spectacular violence or some other deeply satisfying outworking of our desire for revenge and tangible justice. We love to see our side avenged.

Imbuing this celebration of "our" moral superiority and ultimate triumph over all those who are against us, is a sentimental, feel-good portrayal of love. Love, in movieland, is usually romantic love or familial love. In movieland, love loves its own – that is, we love those who are like us and love us back. That representation of love is placed on a celluloid pedestal. It is portrayed as perhaps our highest value. Love is always more powerful than the forces arrayed against it. Love matches are "made in heaven". Love is the sentimental counterbalance to the inner strength and righteous determination of the good guys; and as an apparently incomprehensible emotion to the bad guys. Love on film is a feeling, an emotion, a sentiment. That "sacred" sentiment is even portrayed as what makes us human.

I'm not sure how well I've managed to encapsulate the Hollywood understanding of love, which seems to pervade the world we live in, but I hope I've done it well enough that you'll recognise what I'm talking about, and so recognise the contrast with the description of love given to us by Paul in today's reading from Romans.

One commentator on this passage wrote that it would be impossible to deal with this whole reading in one go – that pretty much every verse was so intense that it would demand a discrete reflection of its own. Even though I recognise the force of that comment, perhaps foolishly, I think that we can do some justice at least to the passage as a whole in one sitting.

To understand what Paul has to say, there are two things that need to be established first. In common parlance, we usually think of loving as a more powerful version of liking – love is *really* liking someone a great deal. However on one occasion when Martin Luther King Jr was speaking about love, he emphasised the *difference* between liking and loving. We are called to love others, he said, including our enemies and those who hate us. Thank goodness we are not called to *like* them, he went on, because some of them were extremely unlikable. It's an important distinction. That's the first thing: liking and loving are not just degrees of the same emotion; they are different behaviours altogether. And that relates to the second thing: for Martin Luther King, as for Paul, love is not an emotion or a feeling. Love is action, a doing word. You *do* love, you don't necessarily *feel* love. You can love someone without in the least bit liking them.

With those understandings, let's look at what Paul has to say about love. The first words in our passage are directed to the life of the church.

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

What does genuine love within the community of faith look like? It is completely dominated by concern for others. It is about an unflinching devotion to what is good, and absolute rejection of evil. No convenient compromises. No "just this once" moments. Genuine love will adhere to righteousness, even though it will be difficult, because evil always has its victims. Love will be self-effacing and modest, and will put the other first, outdoing "one another in showing honour" to each other. Love will be devoted to serving the Lord Jesus, zealously and ardently, even when that is hard, even when there is fatigue or resistance. Love will not be daunted or extinguished by adversity – it will be "patient in suffering", will always rejoice in hopefulness, always be prayerful. Love will be generous, contributing to the needs of others in the community, and offering hospitality even to strangers.

Genuine love, in other words, meets and embraces the hard things in life. It makes no demand that we like or welcome or enjoy the tough challenges we face. Love will overcome dislike; love will overcome fear; love will persevere in the hardest circumstances. This love is not a simpering emotion shared between people just like us, but a robust set of attitudes and behaviours that take on a world of adversity. And pre-eminently, love is not about us.

Christians not only live within the community of faith; we live in the real world, with all its challenges. The world is a far from perfect place. For whatever reason, some people will not like us, and some will hate us – sometimes, perhaps, with good reason! Some people will deliberately set out to take us down. When these things happen, our innate desire to defend, and to avenge, ourselves wells up. We dream of those spectacular endings to movies, when the good guys – and we always identify ourselves as the good guys – are vindicated and have their revenge over those who have opposed them. We want to share in that feeling of everything turning out in our favour, as we stand vindicated and triumphant over those who have hurt us.

That's not the way of love, says Paul. He deals with how Christians should relate to these difficult life situations in the second part of our passage.

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. .... Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. .... Beloved, never avenge yourselves... No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Remember those two principles: loving is different from liking, and love is an action, not a feeling. Paul is *not* saying that we should somehow develop a *liking* for those who hurt us and hate us. That would be an impossible task. We are not built that way. What he *is* saying that we must swallow our dislike and act with loving actions towards our enemies. We must not indulge our desire for vindication and vengeance by cursing them and wishing them harm, but pray God's blessing upon them. If they are hungry or thirsty, we are not to gloat over their misfortune, but meet their need for food and drink. He sums up this teaching with the important conclusion, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good".

That last sentence is significant, because it draws our attention to what lies behind Paul's teaching

here. Yes, it is certainly a good thing in and of itself not to act in ways harmful to others, even those who harm us; but it is also good for ourselves. “Do not be overcome by evil.” When we indulge our hatreds, when we allow ourselves to be motivated by revenge, we unleash in ourselves a destructive force, which gradually eats away at us and poisons us. Hatred comes to define and dominate us. The thought is captured nicely by a sign in the window of our local Buddhist Temple – “To forgive others is to be kind to yourself,” it reads. It’s pretty much a paraphrase of what Paul says. Not only is it healthier for the community; it is also healthier for us. We must not allow evil to overcome us.

Paul has some other advice to offer in relation to how Christians are to live in the world.

*Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

“Harmony” is an undervalued word, at least in today’s world. Once again, harmony does not imply that we have to like everyone, but we must learn to live with everyone. The world is not about us; it has a place for all, and our job is to find how to live so that we do not rub up against each other. One way we can cause friction is by thinking ourselves better than others – wealthier, more sophisticated, smarter, nicer, more morally upright and so on. All of those bespeak haughtiness. No, says Paul, we are not to allow our inflated view of ourselves to poison our relationships with others. “... associate with the lowly,” he wrote – or at least those whom we regard as lowly. One of the characteristics of Graeco-Roman society was the huge disparity between rich and poor, and we know that this caused problems in some of the early churches. Perhaps that’s what Paul is thinking of when he speaks of those who think too well of themselves, but the point certainly goes beyond that. We all love to find ways to think ourselves better than others. It feeds our insecure egos. Paul’s words are for all of us.

Paul is a realist. “*If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all,*” he writes. Our own actions alone cannot create harmony, but we should never be party to causing *disharmony*. As far as it is possible, we should strive for concord among people.

To Paul’s hearers in the church in Rome, this was a counter-cultural way of living. And so it is for us too. Compare this teaching about love and hate with the Hollywood portrayals which permeate the modern Western world. In movieland, love is a schmaltzy emotion we feel towards people who are just like us, while we are encouraged to indulge our hatreds as we long to “get back” at those who we believe have done us harm. In our world, love is an emotion; and hatred is justifiable reason for vengeful action. Completely counter-culturally, Paul’s teaching cuts right across the way we have been taught to view the world. It turns the values of the world upside down. It challenges the way we think and act. It banishes hatred as a way of life, and places harmony and goodness at the centre of how we are to live.

Is Paul’s teaching hard? Undoubtedly. It is not how we have been brought up. It is not what we see around us. It does not align with the values championed in our society. And it demands of us that we do things that we would probably prefer not to, things that might suggest to others that we are weak or spineless. It deprives us of the sense of entitlement to revenge which we hold so dear. But the fact that it is hard does not mean that it is not a better way to live. Remember that maxim – to forgive others is to be kind to yourself. “Do not be overcome by evil.” If conditional love, and the indulgence of hatred, really were a healthy way to live, the world would undoubtedly be a far happier place than it is.

Jesus came to turn the world on its head. His teaching is echoed in Paul’s words in Romans. The breaking in of God’s Kingdom is going to run counter to the business-as-usual way the world runs. If we choose to follow the way of Jesus, Jesus asks us to live differently, to place love at the very

centre of how we live our lives. We can start small. Someone once pointed out to me that, if you smile – yes, even *force* yourself to smile – at someone, it is impossible to remain angry at them. It's true. So we can begin by smiling. Jesus called on us to pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). Praying for our enemies is a bit like smiling at them. When you pray for someone, you begin to understand them a little better, and at the very least, it's hard to maintain your anger at them. If you're asking God to bless them, how can you not do the same? These are little actions that we can all do, and they can grow into bigger actions. We can gradually change the way we think, the way we view the world. We can join Jesus in turning the world on its head, and banishing the hatreds that benight the way we live. We can join in the remaking of the world.

The good news is that God loves the world despite all the evil we do. Have you ever thought that perhaps God doesn't *like* us very much. It is hard to imagine that Jesus felt a warm flush of liking towards those who stood mocking him at the base of the cross. Yet God *loves* us, and Jesus so loved his persecutors that he prayed for their forgiveness, and he died for them. Hollywood's portrayal of romantic love as an unstoppable force is clearly a misrepresentation. Our human experience belies that myth. But true love, love that is a doing word, love that banishes the very soil that breeds hatred, love that releases us from the captivity of our vengefulness, love that is not just for people who will love us back, but is for those who would spit in our face – *true* love is, indeed, a force so powerful that it *can* remake the world. *That* is the love by which we are called to live. *That* is the love that is at the heart of the gospel. *That* is the love which is in Christ Jesus. *That* is the love of which the writer of John wrote when he famously penned,

*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.*