

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 23 AUGUST 2020

No 23

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 Being ready for worship

Whether you are on your own, with a friend(s) or family member(s), set this time aside now to be conscious of the presence of God. Be still, and ask that God be close to you. Repeating several times the words of the psalm, *Be still and know that I am God* (Ps 46) can be a helpful way of settling yourself and clearing your mind. It may also help you to listen to some Christian music, if you have a recording of hymns, or search for hymns on youtube, or simply tune into *Songs of Praise* on ABC1 at 11:30 am. Begin when you feel settled and ready.

2 Prayer of Adoration

Yes, you guessed it – another hymn. So often, as I’m preparing the reflection, an appropriate hymn suggests itself, and having had several people say how much they enjoy using hymns in this way, and reading something of their backstory, the temptation is usually irresistible.

Karen Lafferty is an American Christian musician, and was born in New Mexico in 1948. Following her graduation from Eastern New Mexico University, she embarked on a musical career. Moving to California, she performed at Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa, launching her career in Christian music. She released an initial two albums, followed by two more, through a music label founded by Calvary Chapel, and began tours to Europe, initially to The Netherlands. Realising that, while American Christian musicians were popular in Europe, most were unable to tour on a financially viable basis, she founded Musicians for Mission in 1981, to train Christian musicians for live tours. The organisation was based in The Netherlands, and Lafferty eventually relocated to that country to direct its operations. In 1995 she returned to the USA, to Santa Fe to support her elderly parents. She also relocated the headquarters of Musicians for Mission to that city. Lafferty has led many multinational music tours to more than fifty different countries, and has conducted many training events to prepare Christian musicians.

Lafferty has been a lifelong Christian, although like all Christians, she has grown and matured in her faith. One seminal experience for her was working as a nightclub entertainer, where she felt called to witness to the people who frequented the bars. There was more to life than this. In Amsterdam, this passion also saw her involved in missions to prostitutes and street people.

Lafferty’s best known composition is without doubt Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, which is found in most modern hymnals, including Together in Song (No 745). The hymn is based on Matthew 6:33, 7:7 and Deuteronomy 8:3, and sits most appropriately with the theme of today’s reflection from Romans.¹ It reminds us that righteousness is not attained through our striving, but is the gift of God when we open ourselves to him by seeking first his Kingdom, and that finding that “there is more to life than this” is a matter of opening ourselves to God’s leading.

Seek ye first the kingdom of God
and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added unto you.,
Allelu, alleluia.

¹ <http://karenlafferty.com/bio>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_Lafferty;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maranatha!_Music, all accessed 10 August 2020.

Ask and it shall be given unto you,
seek and you shall find,
knock and it shall be opened unto you.
Allelu, alleluia.

We shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word
that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.
Allelu, alleluia.

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.

Lord our God,
We confess before you that, while we earnestly desire to be people of the Kingdom,
we all too often remain beholden to the world around us.
We are imbued with its values,
and we embrace its norms.
Our faith is tentative and uncommitted;
so when we hear talk of sentimental religiosity,
or proclamations that all religions are somehow the same,
we too easily go with the crowd
and confuse mindless “spirituality” with our Christian faith.
When we are challenged about our beliefs,
when we encounter hard core atheists or sceptical agnostics,
philosophical theists or feel-good sentimentalists,
we become tongue-tied and awkward,
unsure of where we truly stand, and uncertain of the true foundations of our faith.
Forgive us, we pray, for our uncertainty, our equivocation and our doubt.
Grant us the muscle, not to succumb to the alluring values of the world around us,
but to see with penetrating clarity their bankruptcy and their shallowness.
Build our spiritual muscle to be truer and stronger followers of Jesus,
that we might know the boundaries of our faith,
and be its proclaimers, its defenders and its disciples.
For we ask this in the precious name of Jesus,
our only lord, our only master, and our only saviour.
Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

What else is the gospel but the proclamation of the good news of Jesus?
From earliest times in the Church, the apostles preached only of Jesus,
not a biographical account of an inspired preacher or passionate social reformer,
but the one who defeated death, who was resurrected,
and who revealed the grace of God and the forgiveness of sin.
If we trust in Jesus, our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be to God.

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Romans 12:1-8

The other Lectionary Readings

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

Psalm 124

Matthew 16:13-20

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

Although it is important to pray about a great many things, the fact is that the Covid-19 crisis dominates our news broadcasts, and our national and international affairs – and for many of us, our daily thoughts and concerns too. So this week we return to prayer for the situation in which the world continues to find itself. You may choose to pray about other things that are important to you at the moment, of course.

God of all nations and peoples,

We are now in the eighth month since we began to be concerned about a new virus which had appeared in China.

How little most of us imagined how profoundly that would change our lives and the whole world.

Today, as we sit on a veritable knife edge in NSW,

and the situation in Victoria continues gradually to improve from its alarming depths, we come before you in prayer for our communities, our nation, and for the world.

First, Father, we pray for those everywhere who have been bereaved by Covid-19 – hundreds of thousands of people around the world who have lost loved family members, partners or friends.

Be with them; be their consolation; be their peace.

We pray for all the nations in which the virus has overwhelmed the public health system, and now rages out of any real control –

for Brazil, for India, for South Africa, for the United States, and for a host of other nations beyond our radar, but whose peoples are just as severely affected.

We pray too for those nations experiencing a resurgence in the illness, after thinking that they had it under control.

Be with the victims, not just in their initial struggle, but in the ensuing months which, for many, can still involve debilitating symptoms, even permanent and life-threatening threats.

In every nation, this pandemic has the potential to cost many thousands of lives, but also to devastate economies, public health infrastructure, and governments.

May wise, compassionate and effective policies be put in place, and may lives, health and well-being be valued over all other considerations, irrespective of the power of other priorities to influence policy.

And we pray for the successful development of a vaccine, not just for the wealthy few nations, but available and affordable to all.

Only with a widely adopted vaccine can the world begin to return to normal, and people be released from fear and isolation and economic hardship.

We pray for our own nation of Australia.

Father, we give thanks that we have been spared the terrors of so many other nations, and yet our death toll in the hundreds still bespeaks the destruction which this virus can wreak.

So we pray for all our leaders, at every level,
as they struggle to meet the incredible challenges confronting them.
We pray particularly for our Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, and Treasurer, Josh Frydenberg;
for our Premier, Gladys Berejiklian,
and for the Premier who has had the greatest challenges,
and had to make some of the very hardest decisions, Daniel Andrews.
Be with all our leaders, we pray,
including with Opposition leaders, that they will be constructive and fair,
not seizing upon this time of crisis to score political points.
We pray for our health care workers, who also have borne a very heavy burden,
and faced the dangers of Covid on a daily basis for months now.
We pray for the citizens of Melbourne, still in the midst of a long lockdown period;
be particularly with those who find these times testing or even dangerous,
but be with them all, as they experience an impoverished life and social isolation.
Finally, Father, we pray for the recovery.
The world, and our nation, and most of us as individuals, will emerge poorer and less affluent.
May we be grateful that we *do* emerge, and not count the economic cost;
but for the sake of the many thousands of unemployed and under-employed people,
we pray that the nation's economy will recover quickly,
and that the prosperity which alone can pay for social welfare and equity will return.
We know that whole industries will never look the same again,
but we pray for new industries which will embrace the future and create the future,
that our nation might continue to be the blessed place to live that it has been.
We pray for all aspects of this pandemic,
trusting that you are always there in the suffering,
and that out of the very worst situations, you can bring blessing and goodness.

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 spend little time on the short letter of Jude in the New Testament, but it concludes with a wonderful blessing, with which we conclude today:

*Now to him who is able to keep you from falling,
and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing,
to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord,
be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever.
Amen.*

BIBLE REFLECTION
BE NOT CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD

A few weeks ago, when I visited the Blood Bank, a matter came up in my interview. “I can’t decide that,” said the lady looking after me. “I’m only a nurse’s aide.”

“You’re not *only* a nurse’s aide,” I objected. “You *are* a nurse’s aide.”

My wife would have laughed. People sometimes ask me if I’m a retired minister. I find myself replying, “No, I’m just a lay preacher.” Lauris never fails to correct me: “You’re not *just* a lay preacher,” she’ll say. “You *are* a lay preacher.”

We do so easily fall into thinking the way the people around us do. Our world is certainly very hierarchical. I taught in a school in which virtually every boy wanted to go to university, not because it was necessarily the best choice for him, but because graduate jobs were more highly esteemed than trades and other career choices. The handful of boys who actually wanted to have a different future usually kept quiet about it. Because they were *only* going to TAFE; or they were *only* going into a trade.

Most of us would have little trouble knowing how our society would rank a list of professions. If we had to place in order, from most highly esteemed to the most lowly esteemed, for example, a nurse, a specialist doctor and a cleaner, most of us would know the doctor would head the list, followed by the nurse then the cleaner. We all know that. And the cleaner knows it too. Like my nurse’s aide, he or she is very likely to say, “I’m *just* a cleaner.”

The world around us is very powerful in shaping our thoughts, our values and our ways of living, and it is often not a benign influence which it exercises upon us. In fact, it can be very destructive. Paul was well aware of that, of course. In Romans chapter 12, he tackles the issue head on.

Chapter 12 has been described as the pivot point in Paul’s longest letter. Chapters 1-11 have involved a deep and detailed explanation of righteousness, grace and law. Chapter 11 concluded with a warning to those Gentile converts to Christ who might grow complacent about their place in the Kingdom of God. So chapter 12, our pivot point, begins with the word “therefore”. “Therefore”, after all I’ve said to you; “therefore” now you have come to understand the extraordinary gift of God’s grace and mercy; “therefore”, now you realise that your lives must change, that you must respond to God’s goodness to you; “therefore”, now you know you must not grow complacent – *this* is what you must do. The rest of Romans is predicated on that pivotal word “therefore”.

The first thing which Paul addresses is that issue of the powerful influence of the world around us on our faith and our thinking. He delivers a stern warning.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

“Do not be conformed to this world.” Paul certainly has a great deal more on his mind than a highly stratified society, although that was certainly *part* of his concern about the norms of “this world”, and one which he specifically addressed. Paul’s was a society in which birth, wealth and power counted for everything, the poor counted for nothing, and slaves were mere chattels. Every honour, every privilege, every consideration went by right to a small élite, while everybody else eked out an existence as best they could in a world which accorded them no value whatsoever, except as its labourers and its foot soldiers. Paul’s world also had a culture of ostentatious display. The wealthy and powerful advertised their importance to their communities in any number of ways. No act of benevolence, no civic endowment, no public achievement escaped being exhibited to the public gaze through prominent inscriptions, statuary, even magnificent tombs. The best seats in the theatre

and the amphitheatre were reserved for the well-to-do, whose expensive and distinctive clothing marked out their prominence. Humility, which we regard as a virtue, simply did not enter into that way of thinking. Men – for it was a very patriarchal world – were proud of their prominence and their achievements, and used them to leverage political power and social influence.

Yet the Christians whom Paul was addressing in Rome were almost certainly a cross-section of Roman society – slave and free, poor and rich, women and men. The norms of “this world” must not be allowed to dictate the life of the Church, in which all stood equally before God, saved by the blood of Christ who died for rich and poor, slave and free alike. The Church must “not be conformed to this world”. Paul had a very different vision for how members of the community of faith should relate to one another. To explain his vision, he used the analogy of the human body.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

This was a completely counter-cultural way of viewing society: to tell someone that they ought not to think of themselves too highly ran utterly against the way of thinking of the élite, whose training and culture since their birth had emphasised the appropriateness and importance of publicly distinguishing themselves, and reaping the benefits of doing so. But if there is to be any distinction in the society of the Church, it is to be “the measure of faith that God has assigned”, something of which all, irrespective of their status in the world outside, could be the beneficiaries.

That the Church is “one body” with “many members” emphasises the equality and importance of all its members. The analogy works because a body cannot function without *all* its components, which all have their part to play – thus “not all members have the same function”. And the body is only complete when all its many members are present and performing their respective roles. That way they are together “one body in Christ”, but not only that, they are mutually dependent on one other – “we are members of each other”. Such an image was totally at odds with the way the society in which the Church found itself thought and acted.

Paul gives just a handful of examples of roles within the Church – prophecy, ministering, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading ... and surely the most touching, those whose contribution is simply their compassion shared through their cheerfulness. How very different to the world outside was such a way of thinking.

Like the first century Church, the Church of the twenty-first century is also called to be counter-cultural. It is so easy to carry into the community of faith the values, prejudices and assumptions of the world that surrounds us. Indeed, most of us do it quite unconsciously. How many times have we heard a member of our congregation say words to the effect, “I don’t do anything here; I’m just on the morning tea roster;” or heard people talking about the minister or the congregational “leaders” as if they were the ones who really counted? How much do we value and acknowledge the quiet ministries carried out by those who lend a listening ear, whose age equips them with wisdom to share, who pray for the community and for those in need, who come by in their own time to clean or maintain the premises – and yes, who tirelessly make cups of tea and provide food to facilitate the socialising that is essential to the community’s life? Many of us need to heed Paul’s stern warning, “do not be conformed to this world”. The Church is not to be like that.

Once, when I was preaching on the parallel passage in I Corinthians², we left the passing of the

² I Corinthians 12:12-30.

peace until after the sermon. That was back in pre-Covid times, when we could still move about, shake hands and even hug! On that occasion, instead of the usual words, I asked people to thank each person they greeted for their contribution to the community of faith. It was a salutary exercise in providing a reminder of the importance of each and every member to the wholeness and health of the whole body, and quietly affirming them by acknowledgement.

How do we overcome the attitudes which are so ingrained in us, which we inadvertently carry with us into the Church? Paul's answer is that we need to make ourselves open to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit – “be transformed by the renewing of your minds”. Only then will you be able to “discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” The imperative for the Christians in Rome to allow this transformation to take place within them went far beyond the evil of allowing ideas of social class and privilege to creep into the Church. There was far more about the world at large to which Christians must not conform. Paul had already told his hearers that the people of “this world” had been given up to a “debased mind”.

They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. (Romans 1:28-31)

We cannot read the words of chapter 12 without these damning words in chapter 1 coming back to us. Paul's original hearers would have heard the letter in a single sitting, not in dribs and drabs as we deal with it; and they would have vividly recalled this absolute condemnation of “this world”. The way of righteousness, Paul is saying, must leave behind all these evils; the Church must not succumb to the dog-eat-dog values of faithlessness, heartlessness and ruthlessness. It must not “be conformed to this world.” Only through the power of the Spirit can the Church overcome the power of the culture in which Christians lived their everyday lives.

Paul illustrates what is involved in making oneself open to the Spirit by a powerful metaphor. Most of the cults of the ancient world, including of course, Judaism itself, involved animal sacrifice. To take Jewish practice just as one example, an animal was slaughtered, and offered to God on the altar in the Temple. The sacrifice ceased to be the property of the worshiper, and was given to God. So Paul's words,

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship,

are particularly vivid. It is not the sacrifice of a slaughtered animal which is to be given to God; that is the way of the world. What is required to be presented to God are the very lives of believers. Like the sacrificed animal, their life is to cease to be their own and to be given to God. In so giving their lives in service, they will be opened to the leading of the Holy Spirit, that their minds might be renewed, and they can gradually come to understand what is the will of God – “what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Their attitudes will be reshaped; they will find it far easier to resist the power of “this world”, and they will be transformed from within to live the counter-cultural life to which they have been called.

The power of the Spirit to change hearts and minds is certainly no less today than it was in the time of Paul. If we too are to resist the cultural norms that surround and shape our lives and attitudes, we too must be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. That means that we too must offer our lives to God in his service. It requires a step out in faith, trusting that our service will make us more open to the leading of the Spirit; that the more we give of ourselves, the more the Spirit will give to us. For as we give ourselves as a “living sacrifice” to God, we surrender our barriers and our fears, and we allow the work of transformation to begin.

“Do not be conformed to this world.” There is so much in our world which we must leave behind. It is far more than ugly attitudes to different people’s value and status. Ours is a world of materialism, of selfishness, of conditional love and disposable relationships, of “my rights” being valued ahead of the public good; a world where, for all the goods we can accumulate, and all the “friendships” we may have on social media, ever more people are lonely, lack satisfaction or even purpose in their lives, spend their days looking for the “next best thing” that will bring them some sense of contentment, and too often resort to dangerous behaviours in a desperate attempt to find fulfilment. The Church is not to be like that. We are not to be conformed to the ways of the world. Our calling is to change the world, not to succumb to it. Only through the power of the Spirit is that possible.

Paul’s admonitions at the beginning of this second part of Romans are as relevant and as urgent today as they were to the early Church community located in the bustling metropolis of Rome. We are not to live or to think as the world around us does. We are to seek righteousness, and in that quest the Spirit will be our helper, if only we heed the words, “Do not be conformed to this world”, and offer up our lives “as a living sacrifice”, which is our “spiritual worship”.