

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 16TH AUGUST 2020

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 **Being ready for worship**

Well, as I write this on 4th August, two announcements from our Premier have set churches on the back foot. On Sunday, people attending places of worship were very strongly advised to wear facemasks; by today, Tuesday, that strong advice has been replaced by equally strong advice that all places of worship either remain closed, or reclose if they have managed to reopen. So we continue as we have been for months now, discovering that, while we absolutely miss the physical gathering of God's people, faith is stronger than the pandemic, worship can continue, we can meet God in prayer, and we can be conscious of the fellowship of all believers in Jesus Christ throughout the world. While the virus wreaks its havoc and takes lives and ruins economies, nothing is firmer or surer than God. "Be still and know that I am God." Begin when you are ready to enter into that sweet fellowship of belief.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

The theme that we will explore in Romans today suggested a much more modern hymn to me, to use as our prayer of praise and adoration. Its modernity meant that it was covered by none of my books on hymn stories that have served so well for many weeks. Thus what I have is very incomplete(!) and was scratched from various snippets of information on the internet.

God Gives Us a Future was composed by Elizabeth J Smith, who was born in 1956. These days, if a Google search elicits no results on a person, one seriously doubts whether they ever existed. (Just joking.) Nevertheless, we have this excellent modern hymn which extols the new life that is to be found in Jesus, and enjoins the Holy Spirit to help us through troubled times, to choose God's life and to find our future there. So we must regard Elizabeth J Smith as a woman of mystery, who does nevertheless write excellent hymns. The hymn is both apt for the Scripture, and equally apt for this time of a pandemic.

The tune, Camberwell, for which the words were written, was composed by John Michael Brierley. Brierley was born in 1932 in the British city of Leicester. He was ordained as a minister of the Church of England in 1960 after studies at Lichfield Theological College, and completed a Bachelor of Divinity through London University eleven years later. However he also had a significant career as an organist and musician. From the 1950s onwards, he was involved with others in the 20th Century Church Light Music Group, for which he also composed several melodies including Camberwell. Brierley died in October 2019.

God gives us a future,
daring us to go
into dreams and dangers
on a path unknown.
We will face tomorrow
in the Spirit's power,
we will let God change us,
for new life starts now.

We must leave behind us
sins of yesterday,
for God's new beginning
is a better way.
Fear and doubt and habit
must not hold us back:
God gives hope, and insight,
and the strength we lack.

Holy Spirit, teach us,
how to read the signs,
how to meet the challenge
of our troubled times.
Love us into action,
stir us into prayer,
till we choose God's life, and
find our future there.¹

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 have just sung these lines:
*We must leave behind us
sins of yesterday
Fear and doubt and habit
must not hold us back.*
How deeply these words touch us,
for we know that there is so much that we must leave behind us,
and that we are indeed held back by fear and doubt and habit.
We sometimes lose the zeal that came upon us when we first believed;
we have sometimes become complacent,
content to go through the motions of our faith
while we allow our lives to be dominated by our worldly concerns.
We sometimes count ourselves as already "in",
when we should be continuing everyday to strive for the prize of your salvation.
Forgive us our half-heartedness and our equivocation, we pray,
rekindle the passion that bespeaks a faith that has taken root,
and energise us every day to live out our love for Jesus
in our every words and our every deed and our every thought.
For that is who we profoundly want to be.
We ask for your forgiveness and strength in Jesus' name.
Amen.

¹ Words from *Together in Song* (Melbourne, 1999), No 687.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

God is indeed merciful and kind.

There is nothing that is beyond his grace.

He makes the foulest clean, the blackest white, the darkest shine.

There is always a way back, and God is ever beckoning to us to return to him.

When we respond to his call and come in repentance, our sins are forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 (The reflection covers 11:1-6, 16b-36.)

The other Lectionary Readings

Genesis 45:1-15

Psalm 133

Matthew 15:10-28

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

When I pray for people I know who are in some kind of need – illness, relationship issues, loneliness, bereavement etc – I often struggle to think of all those whom I know. Yet, when I tell people that I shall pray for them, I truly mean it and intend to do it. I would guess there are many of us like that. Yet it really is important to pray for those in need, yes for groups, even nations, of people, but also for individuals, by name. We can certainly tell God what we think should happen, or what we would like to happen, but it is wiser to give God the problem, not the solution. How many times have we seen a prayer answered in a way that had never occurred to us? So today, my suggestion is that our prayers for others begin with some time deliberately set aside to recall the names of all those for whom we want to pray. Perhaps write them down. Then fit them into the structure of the prayer below. Of course, you may feel the need to use this time in another way, to bring other matters on your heart before God.

Lord our God,

You encourage us to bring our needs to you,

and today we want to pray for the people we know personally,

or who are known to us,

who are in need of your blessing and help.

We are confident that you answer our prayers,

and that your blessing can change everything.

So, Father, we name before you:

You are wiser, more knowing, and more powerful than we.

We hope for certain answers to our prayers,

but are content to pray your blessing upon those we have named.

Grant them the peace, the healing, the safety, the answers that you know to be best for them.

For we ask it in the blessed name of Jesus, the man of peace, the healer, the protector,

the man of Godly wisdom.

And we conclude our prayer with the prayer that he 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**

As we return to our everyday concerns, we have been cautioned not to allow them to dominate our lives, and subvert our true allegiance to Jesus Christ. Think for a moment about how you will live out the gospel later today. And tomorrow. And the next day. Resolve to do so. Run the race to win the prize!

And as you do so, you can be assured that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the companionship of the Holy Spirit,
will be with you always.
Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION

The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable

Jesus once told a parable about labourers in the vineyard. The owner of the vineyard hired some workers early in the morning for a set wage. Later, he hired more workers at 9:00 o'clock, more at noon, more at 3:00 o'clock and even some at 5:00 o'clock. At the end of the day, he absolutely kept his contract to the first workers, and paid them exactly what he had promised. But he also paid the same amount to all of those who had come later, even to those who had been hired at 5:00 o'clock. When the first labourers to be hired objected, the owner replied, "I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"²

How do we respond to this story? It undoubtedly depends on with which labourers we identify. If we see ourselves as those hired first, we may share in their resentment; but if we align with the later-comers, we surely must be struck by the owner's generosity. And, if we do share in the resentment of the first, we really can't argue with the owner's rejoinder, that he had kept his promise and delivered in full.

It's a story about the generosity of God; and we're not far from the theme of Jesus' parable when we approach the reading from Romans 11 today. The Jews would be cast as the first-chosen labourers, with a sense of entitlement, deeply resentful at the generosity of God for permitting latecomers to share equally in his blessings. The latecomers, of course, are the Gentiles to whom Paul, in particular, had carried the gospel. The Jews' opposition to Paul's ministry was precisely because it was focused on Gentiles.

You'll recall that Paul embarked, in chapter 9, on a detailed excursus into thinking about the fate of his own people, the Jews, who had rejected Jesus as Messiah. We saw his absolute anguish at the stubbornness of his people, his willingness to lay down his own life if only it meant that they could be saved, and his eloquent appeal to believers to tell the great story of the gospel. In chapter 11, Paul concludes his long examination of his own people's place in relation to the Kingdom of God. He deals with the Jews' resentment at the gospel being proclaimed to the Gentiles, and with the question of where they stand in relation to Christ.

After all his anguish over the Jews, the beginning of chapter 11 is good news indeed. "I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!" He compares the despair which he has expressed earlier to the despair of the Old Testament prophet, Elijah.

Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars; I alone am left, and they are seeking my life." But what is the divine reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal."³

As in the time of Elijah, when God preserved to himself a remnant of Israel who remained true to him, so now, Paul writes, God again has provided a remnant. Paul himself is one example: "I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin." But so too are many, indeed most, of the other first Christians, who were Jewish. They constituted that remnant, or at least a part of it. So, "by no means" had God rejected his people.

The argument in chapter 11 is very complex, and this is not the place to attempt a line by line

² Matthew 20:1-16.

³ Paul alludes to the story in I Kings 19.

interpretation of Paul's thinking. A good commentary will do that. What is intended here is to focus on how Paul is able to accommodate and explain how the "later labourers", the Gentiles, and the "first-hired", the Jews, are all accommodated in the Kingdom of God. At the very heart of his thinking, of course, is God's grace.

... at the present time there is a remnant [of faithful Jews], chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

As it is by grace that Jews such as Paul find themselves in the remnant which God has kept for himself, to too he reminds his hearers in Rome – no doubt a combination of Jews and Gentiles – that they too "stand only through faith". The grace of God, which comes to those who place their trust in God, is the gift that places Jews and Gentiles equally before God. It is the same wage that was paid to all the labourers, irrespective of whether they were in the original team or one of the later-comers.

Paul compares the people of God to an olive tree. The original tree is Israel, and, he reminds any of his Gentile hearers who may have become sceptical about the Jews because they had failed to accept Jesus as Messiah, "if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy." Yes, he says, some of the branches have been severed because of their disobedience; and yes, new branches – the Gentiles – have been grafted onto the olive tree. But the root is holy. And there are stern reminders to these new branches.

... remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.

A Gentile Church cannot pretend that it can be independent of the Jews; indeed it can only be nourished *by* the Jews. It can only have an existence as a part of God's wider people.

Second, Paul warns,

You will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you.

Pride, of course, is the opposite of grace. Pride proclaims that we have done something special. In this case, pride would reflect an attitude of entitlement, or a belief that the Gentiles had somehow earned their place in God's Kingdom. That would be to deny grace, and thus to warrant the strong warning that God may treat such Gentiles exactly as he had treated Jews who thought similarly about their entitlement. "You stand only through faith." "Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off."

Finally Paul points out that there is still plenty of opportunity for the Jews to regain their place in the Kingdom through faith.

And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

These are indeed stern warnings.

However, what may be salutary and necessary warnings to Gentile Christians are, on the other hand, good news for the Jews. A verse or so further on, Paul declares, "all Israel will be saved." It is quite clear that he does not mean every individual Jew, because only Jews who "do not persist in

unbelief” will be grafted back onto the tree. He had, after all, declared in chapter 9, “For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel” (9:6). But the point is that God has not written Israel off. A remnant of Israel will be saved – just as a remnant of Israel had returned from the Babylonian captivity to reoccupy Jerusalem and recreate the nation of Israel. Had not God called Abraham, and made a covenant with him, and with Isaac and with Israel? Were they and their descendants not promised a special relationship with God. God does not go back on his promises; and so Paul declares, “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” What is required of the Jews to be heirs to the promises are faith, belief in Jesus as the resurrected Lord, and surrender of any sense of entitlement that circumcision, heritage and the Law were in some ways guarantors of a place in the Kingdom of God. Given that possibility, the urgent appeal to mission which Paul expressed in chapter 10 becomes all the more imperative. The gospel must be taken to the Jews!

All of this is important for our understanding of God’s purposes. It is not unnatural for Christians to have serious questions about the place of the Jews in the Kingdom of God, and how they stand in relationship to the promises made to the patriarchs. After carefully following Paul’s argument through chapters 9-11, we have arrived at a wonderful reassurance. “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” However, in each of the preceding chapters, we have found good news that goes beyond an academic assurance about a situation which is quite remote from our own. We have found encouragement in our own Christian lives.

The same is most certainly true again in today’s passage from chapter 11.

Which of us has not stumbled in our faith? Which of us has not, from time to time, grown complacent? Which of us has not made excuses for our lack of zeal and our disobedience? Which of us has not found ourselves thinking that all the good we think we have done should somehow accrue to the credit side of our ledger? Which of us has not lost something of the fire that glowed within us at the time when we first believed?

Or are there not those among us who have developed something of a sense of entitlement? Not that they would agree with that description, of course, but I do worry when I hear Christians declare that they *know* they are saved and *know* where they’re going when they die. Not even Paul expressed such confidence! He wrote to the church in Corinth,

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.⁴

For Paul, it was an everyday battle, an enslavement, to the work of the gospel, in the hope of winning the great prize. He certainly had no sense of entitlement!

Few of us would not be able to identify with one or more of these descriptions. And each of us who can – and that most certainly includes me – is also identifying with the Jews of Paul’s day. So many of them had a strong sense of entitlement, that being a child of Abraham, having the Law, being circumcised, set them apart and guaranteed them a place in God’s Kingdom. Many certainly counted their good deeds, or their strict adherence to the Law, and expected these to impress God somehow; while they chose to ignore the great appeals of the prophets to justice, to compassion, to faithfulness and to love. The zeal of those who were zealous was largely misdirected, while complacency in the things that truly mattered won the day in all too many.

⁴ I Corinthians 9:24-27.

So the good news that Paul delivered for his fellow Jews is also good news for us: “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” There is always a way back. If we have severed ourselves from the olive tree through our disbelief or our half-hearted belief, we can always be grafted back on again. No matter how far we have strayed, or for how long, we will be welcomed back. We can be the prodigal returning to the loving arms of his father. God’s promises are eternal, and God keeps his promises. As his promises to Abraham could not be annulled by the disobedience of his people, so his promises through Jesus Christ are sure and firm.

And our way back into the promises of God is through faith. Faith is the pervasive message of Romans. Nothing we can do can earn God’s favour. But if only we believe, we are gifted with God’s grace. As Paul desperately wanted his people to respond to the gospel and come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, so God desperately wants us also to trust his promises, and to put our faith in Jesus, and that faith will be counted to us as righteousness.

We have heard Paul’s warnings. God’s grace is not “cheap grace”. It is wrong to pronounce that all are saved, though disturbingly one hears this in churches from time to time. But it is absolutely true that all *can* be saved. All can be grafted into the Kingdom of God. However much our faith has become no more than habit, no matter how cold the fire of our belief has grown, no matter what sense of entitlement or privilege has crept into our thinking, all God asks of us is that we return to him in penitence and faith. And we can know that his promises are sure.