

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 13 SEPTEMBER 2020

No 26

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1 **Being ready for worship**

It is always good to hear from those who receive these notes, and to know that, at least for some of you, they are helpful in keeping you engaged with the community of faith during this time of pandemic. When churches first closed back in March, which of us ever thought how little the situation would have changed fully six months later. When I entered “No 26” above, I realised that that milestone was being passed. Certainly many churches are providing on-line services – livestreamed or posted to a site like youtube – and some have reopened physically with strict Covid-safe protocols in place, the church looks very unlike that which we departed six months ago. Many of us have become used to worshipping privately, on our own or with family or close friends, in our homes. We passed Easter that way; we now are potentially looking at passing Christmas in the same manner. But wherever we may be, we are always in the presence of God, and God reaches out to us, beckoning to us to reach back towards him. When you are ready to do that, begin with the prayers below.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

The psalms were the hymns of the Jews – the hymns that were used in the synagogues where Jesus, Paul and all the disciples attended. Psalm 114 is set by the Lectionary for this week. It is a hymn of praise for the might of God in the ancient history of the people of Israel. With Jews over countless generation, pray this psalm as you prayer of adoration, and as you do so, thank God for his presence in your own life and history.

When Israel went out from Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,
Judah became God’s sanctuary,
Israel his dominion.

The sea looked and fled;
Jordan turned back.
The mountains skipped like rams,
the hills like lambs.

Why is it, O sea, that you flee?
O Jordan, that you turn back?
O mountains, that you skip like rams?
O hills, like lambs?

Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
who turns the rock into a pool of water,
the flint into a spring of water.

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.

We worship you, Father,
for we know how unworthy of your love we are.
We are unlike you in every way.
Our sins condemn us to a place of darkness,
and we hide there, for your light exposes our shame.
Forgive us our sins, we pray.
Forgive us for the unworthy and unloving things we do.
Forgive us the times when we are so sure of our own rectitude
that we offend the beliefs and the faith of others.
Forgive us if we have ever been a stumbling block to the faith of another.
Forgive us for our half-hearted worship,
and our soon forgotten repentance.
Forgive us for the thoughts that make us ashamed
and reveal the depths of our iniquity.
For we are sinners, Father,
utterly dependent in your grace.
Forgive us, we pray,
for the sake of Jesus Christ, our saviour,
who died that our sins might die with him,
and rose to new life that we might leave the life of sin behind.
Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

We have been reading Romans for some weeks now. Recall these words from Paul's greatest letter (8:14):

Hear the good news! Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us.

Believe the good news of the gospel. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven!

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Romans 14:1-23 (Lectionary is only 14:1-12)

The other Lectionary Readings

Exodus 14:19-31

Psalm 114 *or* Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21

Matthew 18:21-35

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

This prayer is for the leaders of our nation. As I write this, on Sunday 6 September, Daniel Andrews has announced to the people of Victoria that Stage 4 restrictions are to continue for another fortnight – not easy news to deliver, and not something that the citizens of Melbourne will welcome. Whether hindsight and history will judge that they made good or bad choices, our leaders have been and remain under enormous pressure, and need and deserve our prayers. You may choose to pray about other things that are important to you at the moment.

God our Father,
We hold before you the principal leaders of our nation at this very difficult time of Covid-19.
We acknowledge that the decisions which they have had to make,
often with little lead-time and with inadequate information,
have been very difficult – decisions which none of us would want to have to make,
and none of them would ever have chosen to have to make either.
They have had to gaze into an unknowable future,
to try to discern the coming course of events to inform their thinking,
but all they have seen is fog and mist and mystery and uncertainty.
Yet they have had to decide the fate of millions of Australians.
They have had first and foremost to value human lives,
but at the same time to seek to maintain some kind of healthy community life,
and to keep the national and state economies functioning as healthily as possible.
They have had to make decisions,
completely unaware of for how long they would apply,
and at what cost they would come.
They had had to try to predict unintended consequences and guard against them,
to try to maintain fairness and equity within and between communities,
while at the same time laying the foundations for recovery when the pandemic has passed.
They have taken on an undoable job, Father, and we pray for them.
We pray for the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, and the Federal Treasurer, Josh Frydenberg;
We pray for each of the Premiers and First Ministers,
for Gladys Berejiklian in NSW, for Daniel Andrews in Victoria,
for Annastacia Palaszczuk in Queensland, for Mark McGowan in Western Australia,
for Steven Marshall in South Australia, for Peter Gutwein in Tasmania,
for Andrew Barr in the ACT, and for Michael Gunner in the Northern Territory.
Be with each of them in the loneliness and responsibility of their roles, we pray.
Grant them courage, wisdom and empathy.
May their focus remain on the public good,
both at their own particular level, but also across the whole nation.
May they not be condemned for mistakes made in good faith,
by reason of lack of information or genuine honest human error,
and may they be given credit for their courageous and difficult decisions.
May their political opponents not act opportunistically,
but work co-operatively and helpfully for the public good.
Be with the Chief Medical Officers in each of the jurisdictions too.
On their shoulders rests enormous responsibility,
to provide expert advice in the face of varying professional opinions
and great political and economic pressure.
Be also with all those in government and in public service
who are part of these decision-making processes,
that they too might be blessed with wisdom and foresight and empathy.
Father, the fate of our nation and of its people rests in the hands of these people.
We pray your blessing upon them,
that through their work, we might all be blessed.

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**

As you conclude, reflect that Christ died for you, and that Christ rose for you.
Against that overwhelming truth,
the molehills that we turn into mountains shrink into utter insignificance.
And our quibbles with those who see things differently from us
look more like potential stumbling blocks for the faith of people
for whom Christ died.
No less do they have the assurance than we, that
The grace of the Lord, Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit are with us,
and will abide with us ever more.
Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION *STUMBLING BLOCK*

We all have stories from churches where we've worshiped. Stories about molehills and mountains, and how we so easily confuse the two.

Let me share a couple of mine. In a former congregation, the minister wanted to move us on to some newer music. The first volume of *As One Voice* had just been published, and a group got together to learn some of the new songs. Armed with their new repertoire, they'd be able to lead the congregation forward in embracing some more recent hymns.

Nice idea. But members of the traditional choir felt that they'd been gazumped; and anyway they weren't going to sing *choruses*. They only sang *real* music. And what's more, *As One Voice* drew on a variety of traditions. Some congregants weren't going to have anything to do with those *Catholic* hymns!

So the minister and the innovators started a new service. 9:00 am, an hour before the traditional one. That seemed like a good solution – but no! First, the turnover time was too tight, so 10:00 am was put back to 10:15. Grumbles. Then 10:30. More grumbles. And the 9:00 am gathering proved increasingly popular, with more people attending than at the later service – which saw itself as the *main* service. More grumbles again. Lots more.

That church would be far from the only one where music genre has occasioned division and unhappiness.

Let me tell you another story. I was involved in the amalgamation of two nearby Uniting Church congregations quite some years ago. It made no sense for two congregations, neither of which was as large as it had once been, to have separate existences with different ministers. The matter was, I'm proud to say, very well handled, carefully negotiated, and ultimately extremely successful, even down to the sale of one of the properties. But that's not to suggest there weren't stumbling blocks along the way – but not the big-ticket items you might think!

One of the congregations had a Presbyterian heritage; the other came from Methodist roots. In the Methodist Church, with its origins within the Church of England, the people came forward for Communion and knelt at a communion rail. In the Presbyterian practice, Elders took the elements to the people as they remained in their pews. How was the Sacrament to be celebrated in the combined congregations – especially as its initial home was the former Presbyterian church which had no Communion rail? That issue, probably more than any other, proved to be the hiccup which occasioned the most controversy and angst.

Situations like these sound innocent enough, but if you've been around churches for a while, you'll know their potential to cause division, unhappiness and even schism within congregations. Definitely mountains out of what might seem only to be molehills.

It's about a situation like these in the Roman church that Paul writes in today's passage. There are two issues at stake. One is about what foods it's okay for Christians to eat. The choice is between eating "anything" and eating just "vegetables". To 21st century ears that may sound like an ideological dispute between vegans or vegetarians and meat-eaters, but that's not very likely. The issue is most probably Jewish food laws, and sensibilities about the provenance of meat. Torah laid down a large number of rules about clean and unclean foods. In the ancient world, only the wealthy could afford to eat meat in any quantity, and for many people it was a luxury, even a very occasional one. However the cheapest and most readily available meat was pork, which was

forbidden to Jews under the Law. Also, a common source of the meat on sale in the markets was what had been offered to pagan gods in the nearby temples. That too would not be acceptable to Jews since it would appear to be honouring a false god.

Paul, of course, had taught that Jews who became Christians were no longer subject to the Law; and further, that all foods were thus okay for Christians to eat. They were all God's provision and should be eaten with thanksgiving. However, we know that the status of the Law was a perennial point of disagreement in the early Church; not everyone by any means agreed with Paul about the Law. So it is very easy to think that those who were restricting themselves to "vegetables" (which we should understand to include grains and fruits as well) were Jewish converts who were unconvinced that they were no longer subject to the Law. They would not touch pork, and did not want inadvertently to eat meat offered to pagan gods.

Paul describes them as the "weak". Yes, there is no doubt a touch of criticism in that word, and very obviously Paul identifies with the "strong", but there is certainly no condemnation. They are simply "weak" because they have not allowed the new teaching about freedom from the strictures of the Law to change their lifestyle. They've acted with noble intentions and in good conscience, seeking to do the right thing.

The other issue in the Roman church concerns special days. "Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike," wrote Paul. Both the Roman and Jewish worlds held particular days to be special. For the Jews, of course, there was the weekly Sabbath day, as well as the other festivals throughout the year, of which Passover was by far the greatest. However, the Roman calendar also had numerous days set aside for various matters including religious festivals. Most of these festivals, even if their apparent purpose was games or other secular activities, were actually held in honour of pagan gods. Non-Jewish people thought the Jews lazy for refusing to work every seventh day; no doubt the Jews wanted no part in festivals which honoured pagan gods, even obliquely. In a congregation including both Jews and Gentiles, it is not hard to see the potential for conflict.

These disputes in the 1st century are clearly not that far from the kind of problems that we still have in the Church. Before, I mentioned music and the manner in which we take Communion. Perhaps as more direct parallels, I might mention the division in some congregations about alcohol, especially its consumption on church premises; and the celebration by some Protestant churches of the special days – long celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church – in the liturgical calendar, such as Ash Wednesday, the Festival of Christ the King and Advent. Pureblood evangelicals usually want nothing to do with such "popery". Whatever issue we look at, the point is that we can readily identify with the kind of problem Paul is dealing with.

So Paul's teaching about matters of this kind is as relevant and important now as it was the day he penned it in his letter to Rome.

Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord.

Remember that the last chapter of Romans focused on love. Love was the complete fulfilment of the Law. So, as this passage follows on, Paul's emphasis remains on the love which must characterise the Christian community. And nothing has changed in his warning that Christians must not sit in judgement of others. Different ideas about what foods are acceptable, or whether

particular days are special or not, are in no way an excuse to jettison the imperative to love, and instead to embrace despising others and sitting in judgement on them. If there *is* judgement to be passed, it will be God's own judgement, because we are *all* servants of the Lord Jesus and of God. And recall that Paul has already argued that God will place more store on our motivation than on what we end up actually doing. So, if those who mark particular days observe them "in honour of the Lord", that is, believing that they are doing the right thing, they will not thereby face judgement. There are no grounds for the "strong" to despise them; nor are there grounds for the "weak" to judge those who have reached a different conclusion from them. *Not* marking special days in good conscience is no more sinful than doing so. Love of each other should govern the situation. Paul concludes this specific teaching with these words:

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

Indeed. The standards by which we judge others – if we dare do so – will be applied equally to us. It's a stern warning to be sure.

As is so often Paul's style, he again moves from the specific to the general. Because special foods, or special days, are symbolic of a much greater danger to the Church and to individual Christians – that, by investing such matters with a significance they do not warrant, we may be placing a stumbling block in the path of our fellow believers. You may recall that Jesus gave a very stern warning about doing just that in Matthew's gospel.

If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! (Matthew 18:6-7)

It would be hard to give a clearer caution than this. Jesus is talking about causing children to stumble in their faith, but it's easy to see how Paul's "weak" could be seen as like children, in the sense that they are immature in their faith. That Jesus' warning is taken by Paul to apply to the "strong" in Rome is made very clear by him.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. ... Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble.

Paul sees the dire consequences of one Christian thinking that his or her understandings and practices are somehow more enlightened ("stronger") than someone else's. What may initially cause someone to stumble can lead ultimately to the "ruin of one for whom Christ died". If you are so assertive of your own superior understandings, "you are no longer walking in love". We need to discipline ourselves if we are the strong (to use Paul's terms) to respect the beliefs of those whom we regard as weak. Equally, the weak must not pass judgement on the strong for doing what they believe is in accordance with the gospel. What matters are love of one another, and the building up of the community of faith. None of us would want to have on our conscience that we allowed our own self-righteousness to destroy the faith of another. None of us would want to incur the frightening fate which Jesus said would come upon those responsible for such stumbling blocks.

I began with some stories about simple matters of disagreement that have been part of my own experience. No doubt you have stories of your own. Thinking about them in light of Jesus' and Paul's teaching about stumbling blocks, they do not appear quite as simple or innocent as perhaps we regard them. Whose faith have we harmed by our stubborn music choices? Or the manner we take Communion? Or by insisting on our right to a glass of wine? Or by celebrating particular days? Please God none, but the conscience stirs uneasily. Have you been a stumbling block? Have I?

Because, of course, the principle in Paul's writing goes far beyond simple practices and ideas which may have been a part of our church life. Let there be no mistake: Jewish dietary rules, and different ideas about the Sabbath and other sacred days, were far from the innocuous issues we may think them. What was at stake was not just a polite difference of opinion. Not only did these issues have the potential to tear congregations apart, but for individuals, they had the potential also to be such massive stumbling blocks that they may well lead to a crisis of faith.

Let's take a Christian of Jewish background as an example. This person has been raised to look upon all Gentiles as unclean, and beholden to pagan gods. Their company was to be shunned. In their own practice, the Jews took pride in distinguishing themselves from the Gentiles by their strict adherence to the Law, including the keeping of the Sabbath, and following the dietary rules. Our Jewish person hears and believes the gospel of Jesus, and takes the courageous step of joining a congregation which includes both Jews and Gentiles. They hear some Christians, like Paul, preaching that adherence to the Law is not required of Christians, but they feel more secure in maintaining their observance. They have to swallow very hard when they see Gentile Christians eating foods that they regard as forbidden. The situation is fraught with danger, but the danger can be managed if love governs the behaviour of both parties. However, if the Gentile starts asserting that the Jew is "weak" for not having the courage to embrace the freedom of the gospel, or if the Jew condemns the Gentile for not following Jewish ways, the bitterness that would result could easily cause our Jewish Christian to lose their faith. How could they remain faithful when fellow Christians abuse them as "weak" and deliberately flaunt their own behaviour in the face of the offended Jew to show that their faith is stronger?

There is a commensurate issue within the Church today, and it's one that catches me out, to my shame. Within the Christian Church, there is a great diversity of theological understandings. Much of this comes back to how each Christian, and each denomination, regards the Bible. Some are very fundamental in their view, and tend towards a literal interpretation of every passage. The Bible has one author – God – and one genre – revelation. Others, on the other hand, see the Bible very differently. For them, the Bible is a collection of sacred writings, whose provenance spans a considerable time period, whose authors were human, and which represent their authors' sincerest attempts to explain their experience of God in their lives and in the life of their nations and communities. Both these viewpoints are well represented in the Uniting Church, which is both one of our strengths, and one of our potential problems. If we all accept that not everyone sees things as we do, but respect both the views and the faith of those who differ from us, it is a strength. However, I am certain we have all experienced – and, in my case, participated in – situations where each side digs in around its view. The fundamental camp accuses the others of not being true to the Scriptures, while the liberal camp accuses their opposite numbers of being held back by their limited understanding. And to borrow Paul's words, it can certainly devolve into power plays between the "weak" and the "strong" – though which side is which probably depends on the actual situation, and what side you're on.

I said this catches me out. It does. I belong to the more liberal camp, and I have certainly been known to be impatient with those who see things differently. I repent of this. The last thing I would want, and no doubt the last thing any of us would want, would be for our attitude in a matter such as

this to cause a stumbling block for a fellow Christian. I would be aghast if words I had spoken in impatience to those who regard the Scriptures differently from me had led anyone to question their faith. I certainly have reason to heed Paul's teaching here. I wonder if you do too?

Once again, to return to Paul's terminology, any dispute of this nature within the Church is about power, and more especially, the abuse of power. We may think ourselves stronger because of our theology, our learning or our faith – whichever side of the argument we find ourselves on. But to abuse that power by trying to force others to agree with us is nothing less than an abuse. That is not to say, of course, that robust discussion is not a good thing, but only if it is carried out in a spirit of love, and only when it does not involve an abuse of our power. Love seeks gently to persuade, not to conquer.

Ever so sadly, the Church has seen some horrendous abuses of power over time, and including in our own time. Paul's warning extends far beyond diet and days, and sounds a stark warning in every aspect of the life of the Church. None of us must ever act in such a way as to "cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died". Could our sense of our own self-righteousness possibly be worth that awful price? Can we not respectfully agree to differ with people of a different mind, so that love, rather than our overbearing conviction of our own infallibility, is the supreme value driving us?

"Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?" Paul demanded of his hearers. For the fact is that we are all servants of the Lord Jesus, each valued and loved by him. To try to use our strength to lord it over our fellow Christians is to identify with the request of James and John to sit at Christ's right hand (Mark 10:35-45). It is to place ourselves in the position of the unforgiving servant, who begged that his own debts be forgiven by the king, but refused the same kindness to a fellow servant (Matthew 18:21-35). To sit in judgement of others who are no less servants than we is nothing short of an impertinence. I Corinthians 13 brings us up short: no matter how impressed we may be by our own correctness and virtue, if we fail to act with love, we are no better than a "noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (I Corinthians 13:1).

What we may think of as our strength – be it our belief in the correctness of our doctrine, or of our biblical understanding, or in the superiority of our musical tastes, or of our liturgical and sacramental practices, or for that matter in our dietary choices and celebration (or not) of special days – any strength we think we have is but weakness compared to the strength of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet Christ chose never to exercise that strength, never to abuse the "weak", never to seek to force his understandings upon his followers. Instead, Christ epitomised exactly that for which Paul calls. Everything that Christ did was done in love.

Let us recall the things that divide us have already been defeated by the love of Christ. Christ's overwhelming love set aside all the strength inherent in the One who came as God among us. Christ allowed himself to succumb to human "strength" with all its hatred and anger and bitterness. All of humanity's "strength" was pitted against Jesus Christ, and had its horrible but ephemeral triumph, for Christ died. But Christ rose. In his rising, what had seemed to be humanity's "strength" was revealed to be humanity's weakness. Only Christ is strong. That strength now cuts through all of our petty squabbles, our bitter differences and our self-aggrandising power-plays. The work has been done by the free gift of God in Christ. Love is triumphant. We all stand equally before the most loving of masters, privileged to be called his servants. That is the gospel. Thanks be to God.

It is surely only in that light that Paul's injunctions to the Christians in Rome make sense;

Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord.

God has welcomed us all. May whatever we do be done in honour of the Lord, and in love for each other.