

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 20 SEPTEMBER 2020

No 27

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 **Being ready for worship**

The Old Testament can be challenging. So much so that some Christians throughout history have sought to jettison the Old Testament altogether, and retain only the New Testament as the Christian scriptures. While not many would go that far, there is a very strong tendency to preach on the New Testament, and to ignore or pay little heed to the Old. But we can't do that. The challenge is to find the God revealed in Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. Today we begin that process by turning from Romans to Exodus, which commenced as the Old Testament passage in the Lectionary a couple of weeks ago. When you're ready for that challenge, begin with the prayers that follow.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

A well-known hymn which emphasises the continuity of God's revelation over time – Old and New Testaments included – is God has spoken by his prophets. Despite the popularity and ubiquity of this hymn, none of my very comprehensive hymn backstory books deals with it, or indeed with its author, George Wallace Briggs (1875-1959). However, a brief entry in Wikipedia saved the day¹.

Born in Nottingham, Briggs graduated from Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and entered the Royal Navy as a padre. Returning to civilian life, he served as an Anglican clergyman in Norwich and Loughborough, before becoming Canon of Leicester Cathedral. At his retirement he was serving as Canon of Worcester Cathedral.

Briggs had attended Loughborough Grammar School as a boy, and later wrote its school hymn, Our Father by whose servants². There is a even room within Loughborough School's Music Department named after him. However his most well-known hymn is God has spoken by his prophets, set to the tune of Beethoven's Ode to Joy. This hymn emphasises the continuity of God's word throughout all time. It is a most fitting prayer of praise for today.

God has spoken by his prophets,
spoken his unchanging word,
each, from age to age proclaiming
God, the one, the righteous Lord.
In the world's despair and turmoil
one firm anchor holds us fast:
God is king, his throne eternal,
God the first, and God the last.

God has spoken by Christ Jesus,
Christ, the everlasting Son,
brightness of the Father's glory,
with the Father ever one;
spoken by the Word incarnate,
God from God, ere time began,
Light from Light, to earth descending,
God, revealed as Son of Man.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G._W._Briggs, accessed 8 September 2020.

² http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/hymn-lyrics/our_father_by_whose_servants.htm, accessed 8 September 2020.

God is speaking by his Spirit,
speaking to our hearts again,
in the age-long word expounding
God's own message, now as then,
through the rise and fall of nations
one sure faith yet standing fast;
God still speaks, his word unchanging,
God the first, and God the last.³

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 confess our own sinfulness to you.
Hatred is never far from our being.
We are quicker to hate than to love;
more prepared to think ill of others than to see good;
more ready to fight than to reconcile.
Our sense of justice champions our own causes,
and we are blind to the rights and prerogatives of others,
and insensitive to their needs and aspirations.
We are a people whose primary sin is our selfishness,
with our inflated egos placed at the centre of our universes.
Forgive us our sinfulness, we pray.
Give us the wisdom, the vision and the heart to see ourselves as others see us,
and to give others the care and importance that we so readily invest in ourselves.
For we would be the people you want us to be.
In the name of Jesus our saviour,
Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

When we bluster and are belligerent, we push God from our side,
but when we come before him in penitence,
when we confess our sin and our shame,
God is indeed at our side and on our side.
God is merciful and kind, and will forgive us our sins
for the sake of Jesus, who died that we might be forgiven.
In Christ Jesus, our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be to God.

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Exodus 16:1-30 (Lectionary is only 16:2-15)

The other Lectionary Readings

Psalms 105:1-6, 37-45

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

³ Words as per *Together in Song* (Melbourne, 1999), No 158.

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

Tomorrow, 21 September, is the International Day of Peace. With the world in a state of greater foment than for some years, and with persistent international conflicts, it is always a good time to be reminded to look past our most immediate concerns, to pray for peace. You may choose to pray about other things that are important to you at the moment.

Lord our God,

We bring before you the many conflicts that are happening in our world.

In Australia, we are too seldom even aware of war zones, because they seem “beyond our radar”, and do not receive much press coverage here.

And yet, for those who are caught up in them, they are real indeed.

As it has been for all of history,

wars involve death, and bereavement, and pain, and suffering, and injustice, and deprivation.

Their victims extend well beyond the combatants,

and so often include civilians, innocent people who simply got in the way,

or who are ruthlessly used as bargaining chips by one side or the other.

So we pray for peace, both in the areas of which we are aware,

and in the areas that are beyond our ken,

some of them places we couldn’t even point to on a map.

No matter where the conflicts are, Father, the suffering and destruction are the same.

So we pray for Yemen, for Syria, for Afghanistan, for Libya, for the Palestinian Territories, for the Ukraine;

and we pray for those nations where the conflict is internecine –

for Belarus, for Myanmar, for Lebanon, for Brazil, for Venezuela, for India, for Sri Lanka.

Indeed, we pray for every conflict zone,

that peace might come, not at any price, not because one side is crushed,

but because both sides see reason, and understand that war has no ultimate victors,

that the resources squandered on weapons and armaments

could so often resolve the issues at stake and remove the very causes of conflict.

We pray for all who live in fear; for all who shelter in refugee camps;

for all who have been maimed, or orphaned, or bereaved, or traumatised by war,

military and civilian alike.

We pray for the diplomats who labour to bring peace and reconciliation,

often a job of endless frustration.

May they never lose hope.

We pray for the day when it is no longer necessary for nations to prepare for war,

when the vast sums spent on warfare and preparations for war

can, instead, resolve the issues which cause wars in the first place.

For only in a world of peace can there be justice and prosperity and human dignity.

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 we've moved to the Old Testament, it is appropriate to recall the Aaron blessing. It actually comes from Numbers 6:23-27), not Exodus, but it has offered assurance to faithful people for many hundreds of years.

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious unto you.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
and give you peace.

Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION
MANNA FROM HEAVEN

There is generally a common thread that runs through the legendary stories of the origins of nations. Whether it's the establishment of the United States of America by the revolutionary "Founding Fathers", or the rebellion of the Estates General against the King to create the modern French Republic, or the beginnings of the modern Chinese nation with Mao's Long March, or, for that matter, the founding of European-dominated Australia by a hardy bunch of marines and miscreants, founding myths usually enshrine a story of courage and determination by people pursuing a visionary future.

Not that I am suggesting that such stories can or should be accepted at face value. The later twentieth century through to our present time has amply demonstrated that national foundation stories tell only one side of what is always a far more complex story, with losers as well as winners, and with "heroes" who, upon examination, no less than the rest of us, were frequently very flawed characters. This year's commemoration of two hundred and fifty years since James Cook mapped the east coast of Australia and took possession of its lands for the British Crown amply demonstrated that every heroic legend has another side.

But the point is that the foundation myths of nations are usually stories of people, almost always men, whose vision and courage led a people to embrace its identity. What is so striking about the foundational story of the people of Israel is that it is not like that at all.

The Lectionary moved from Genesis to Exodus a few weeks ago. The overlap with the completion of Romans meant that we have missed a couple of passages from Exodus. We encounter the story today at a very important point, in the Wilderness of Sin. The book of Exodus is the story of the formation of the people of Israel. What we have is the final redaction of the account, which was probably put together at some time after the Jews' return from exile in Babylon. Scholars have identified that Exodus involves the careful intertwining of two earlier accounts of Israel's Sinai experience, one, in the broadest terms, "historical", the other "priestly". So, in Exodus, clearly what we have is a mature and considered account of how Israel understood its national origins to have been forged.

The story of Exodus begins in Egypt, several generations after Genesis left off. The Hebrew people have grown in population, and through fear of their numbers, the Egyptians have enslaved them. God selects Moses, a man from the tribe of Levi, to rescue his people from their bondage. Aided by plagues visited upon the Egyptian people by God, Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt, into the wilderness of Sinai, eventually to commence the journey to the land which God had promised to Abraham generations earlier. Once the Israelites have miraculously passed through the Red Sea, God causes the pursuing Egyptian army to be destroyed and the fugitives are finally safe. At first, the wilderness sustains the escapees – at Elim, they camp at an abundant oasis. But life in the wilderness cannot remain so bountiful for long.

So today we pick up the story in chapter 16. Israel has moved on into the Wilderness of Sin. The name "Sin" is not the English word "sin" at all and has nothing to do with wrongdoing; it is most likely a contraction of "Sinai"⁴. Some very misleading interpretations of today's story have resulted from assuming that this is a place characterised by sinfulness!

Soon the fugitives are affected by hunger:

⁴ William Johnstone, *Exodus 1-19* (Macon, 2014), p. 329.

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

So begins one of the most well-known stories of the Old Testament. However, it is easily missed just how carefully this account is constructed. If we know the story best from hearing it as a child in Sunday School, it definitely warrants another, much closer examination.

Notice that it is "the whole congregation of the Israelites" who make this complaint. It is the voice of the nation, not just some noisy whingers. The story is about the whole people. Notice too that they don't just complain *to* Moses, but *against* Moses. On the face of it, they are complaining about where Moses has brought them, but in reality their complaint is about God. What they see as their impending death is "by the hand of the LORD," and so they say that, if he was going to kill them all, they'd rather he'd done it in Egypt where – at least as they now recall – food had been plentiful. The Israelites have started to idealise their servitude in Egypt; rose-tinted hindsight, in which the past always seems to have been better than the present, is not a new phenomenon! They know perfectly well that it is God who has led them into the Wilderness of Sinai, but they don't have the courage to complain directly to or even about God. They cast the blame onto Moses. He is their scapegoat.

God, of course, is not fooled, and nor is Moses. In the following passage, God recognises who is the subject of the complaint, but there is a good deal more going on here:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not." So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?" And Moses said, "When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD."

Moses and Aaron twice eschew any importance for themselves. "What are *we*, that you complain against *us*?" they ask. "Your complaining is not against *us* but against the LORD." It is absolutely clear that the person shaping events here is God. While Moses may have been revered later as Israel's greatest prophet, it is not he who is forging the new nation of Israel. In this legend of national creation, we are not dealing with Founding Fathers or revolutionary leaders or intrepid settlers. Israel was not the creation of heroic men or women; Israel was the direct creation of God himself. And Moses and Aaron are absolutely clear that they are not trying to portray themselves as having any role whatsoever to play.

This is a story about learning to trust. The people are in an apparently barren wilderness. They see no hope of food and are convinced that they are to die. But God promises to provide for them. There will be provision in the evening so that "you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt." This provision turns out to be a one-off. That evening, the camp is bedecked by quail, who provide meat for the ravenous Israelites. However, the greater provision is to be in the morning, when "you shall see the glory of the LORD." In the morning, the Israelites awaken to find the ground covered with "manna". This is described as a "fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground." Later, in verse 31, we're told that manna "was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey." The word is essentially untranslatable, and even the similes used to describe manna involve rare Hebrew words whose precise definitions

are unclear⁵. It sounds a little like the Hebrew words for “What is it?”⁶, which emphasises the peculiarity of the manna. But whatever it was, it was food, and nutritious enough to sustain the Israelites for the entirety of the forty years they subsequently wandered in the Sinai wilderness. Without any doubt, this peculiar and almost indescribable food was “the glory of the LORD.”

But God is not just feeding the nation; God is shaping the nation. Israel must learn to trust God. The story began with complaints against God, implied accusations that he was bringing about their destruction. God’s provision of food was reassuring, but would his people learn that they could place their faith in him, that they could trust him with their very existence?

Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.’” And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.”

“Let no one leave any of it over until morning.” There was the test. The Israelites were to gather only so much as they needed for that day, and to trust the LORD that the manna would appear again the following morning. It was quite a test, for people who had been hungry, and who were still in the middle of a desolate wilderness. How tempting to hoard a little extra, just to be on the safe side.

And that is precisely what some of the Israelites do.

... some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them.

There was a further test. On the sixth day, the people were to gather twice their normal amount. The extra would not become foul and could be kept for the following day, the Sabbath, on which no work was to be carried out. Would the Israelites obey? Sadly,

On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. The LORD said to Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? See! The LORD has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day.” So the people rested on the seventh day.

Israel was being shaped. The nation was being taught that it not only could, but must, trust in God, who provided for them; that they must keep the Sabbath which God had decreed for their benefit. God was forging Israel into his people.

This whole episode is a critical moment in the foundational story of the people of Israel. Unlike so many nations, the author of this story is not a group of heroic men and women, or a single giant of history. This nation is being shaped by God himself. Furthermore, the people are not portrayed as somehow superior to others – no sense of American “exceptionalism” here, or anything like it. The Israelites are very honestly shown to be highly fallible and untrusting human beings, having to learn the hard way, and over and over again. It’s refreshing to find a national mythology which is so unflattering about its subjects, and gives the entire credit for the nation’s emergence to God. Could we not all learn from such an example?

The story, of course, goes well beyond Israel. It may be the nation of Israel which is being shaped, but it is God who is doing the shaping. What do we learn of God in this story? What is God doing?

⁵ Johnstone, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

⁶ *Ibid.*

God has reached out to a people who were enslaved. God has provided a means by which they can escape their bondage and find a new life of freedom. God has showered this benefit on a people who are far from perfect, who readily blame God when things don't go their way, who disobey God through their lack of faith. God's impatience with these people turns into God's forgiveness of them. God sticks with them despite their backsliding and mistrust.

There are those who complain that the God revealed in the Old Testament is very different from the God of the New Testament. There is no doubt that there are passages in the Old Testament which are very challenging. Here is not the place to address those difficulties, but the God whom we have found in this passage from Exodus is so recognisably the God of Jesus Christ that it is unmistakable. My previous paragraph above is surely no less than a statement of the gospel of Jesus Christ. God is shaping a new people, who were enslaved by sin, but who have now been set free by the death and resurrection of Jesus. We certainly were not chosen for our virtue, and we continue to stray from God's commands, but God blesses us with his forgiveness. God never gives up on us. We can do nothing to earn our salvation; our freedom from bondage is the free gift of God, who reaches out in love to his suffering creation. All God requires is that we trust in him. God is acting to create a new nation which will remake the world. That's the same story as Exodus, but is there anything here that we have not found in Paul's long exposition of the gospel in Romans?

For the entire story of the Bible is the story of the love of God for humankind. It cries out to be shouted from the rooftops, because that story is good news indeed.

Amen