

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 27 SEPTEMBER 2020

No 28

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 **Being ready for worship**

Here we are at the end of September, a month into spring. Next weekend sees the start of Daylight Saving. Whether you like it or not – I confess that I love it – Daylight Saving is the harbinger of summer and Christmas. And still the pandemic continues. So it is good to immerse ourselves in the scriptures, with their assurance that God is always with his people. There have been far worse times than these in the past, and God has always been faithful. God's people down through the ages have discovered that in God, and only in God, is true life. Our Bible passage today takes us there, so when you are ready, begin with the prayers below.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

So many of you let me know that you enjoy revisiting favourite hymns as prayers of adoration, and reading about their authors and provenance, that I am encouraged to keep this up most weeks. As we have moved to Exodus in the Old Testament, a hymn which uses the symbolism of Exodus seemed appropriate. I know that, for many people, it is a favourite hymn.

If you have ever been to Wales, you will know the strength of Welsh nationalism, and the pride the Welsh take in their native language, which survived English attempts to extinguish it. Guide me O thou great Jehovah was originally composed in Welsh, by a roving preacher by the name of William Williams (1717-1791). Williams had originally intended to train for a career in medicine, but was converted to Christianity by a powerful sermon delivered by Howell Harris, a Welsh contemporary of the English Wesleys and George Whitefield. Entering the ministry, Williams found the Established Church of England an uncomfortable fit, and chose instead to become a roaming preacher, with all of Wales as his congregation. He travelled over 150,000 km around Wales over forty-three years. During this time, he gained the reputation of being a powerful preacher, but more so, a splendid hymnist. He wrote some eight hundred hymns in Welsh, most of which have not been translated into English, and few of which are now remembered. Guide me O thou great Jehovah is probably the only one of his compositions which is now well-known.

The hymn originally had five verses, with a sixth being composed at a later date. Most hymnals now print only three of these, all of which draw on symbolism from Exodus to describe the Christian journey. "Jehovah" was a contemporary attempt to anglicise the Hebrew name of God, YHWH, which is now usually rendered "Yahweh". In the Together in Song version, and some other modern hymnbooks, "Jehovah" has been replaced by "Redeemer" which, while understandable, does rob the hymn of part of its Old Testament flavour. The tune now universally used for this hymn glories in the wonderful Welsh name Cwm Rhondda, and was composed by John Hughes (1873-1932). The translation into English was the work of Peter Williams (no relation) (1722-1796).¹

The words that follow are from Together in Song² except that I have reverted to the original "Jehovah", to retain the flavour of Williams' original Old Testament focus.

¹ Kenneth W Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories. The inspiring true stories behind 101 favorite hymns* (Grand Rapids, 2012), pp 81-2.

² Melbourne, 1999, number 569.

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
hold me with thy powerful hand:
bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
feed me now and evermore,
feed me now and evermore.

Open now the crystal fountain
whence the living waters flow:
let the fiery, cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through:
strong deliverer, strong deliverer,
be thou still my strength and shield,
be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan
bid my anxious fears subside;
death of death, and hell's destruction,
land me safe on Canaan's side:
songs of praises, songs of praises
I will ever give to thee,
I will ever give to thee.

Amen

3 **Prayer of Confession**

It is important, after we recognise the greatness of God, to make our own confession before God. This prayer may help, or you may prefer your own more personal prayer.

God our Father,
We are indeed weak, "but thou art mighty".
In our inner being, we crave for the life which we know to be only in you;
and we want to be followers of Jesus,
who alone is the trusted shepherd who can lead us to that new life.
Yet we confess before you our doubts and our uncertainties and our lack of faith.
We are so influenced by the world around us:
we allow its troubles to undermine our faith,
and we allow its values to corrupt what we hold to be precious.
We get cold feet when it comes to owning our beliefs,
and look back instead of forward when the going gets tough.
Strong deliverer, lead us all our journey through, we pray.
Forgive us our sinfulness and our lack of faith,
and remind us that Jesus has risen from the dead,
a sure sign that he is your chosen shepherd,
that he is indeed our redeemer.
Bid our anxious fears subside,
and hold us in your powerful hand,
that we might be faithful to our master.
For it is in his name that we pray.
Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

While the Old Testament witnesses to the goodness of God, we are people of the New Testament and of the New Covenant written in the blood of Jesus. So we are assured by the first letter of John,

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins,

he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So we are assured that, in the risen Christ, our sins are forgiven.

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Exodus 17:1-7

The other Lectionary Readings

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

Today, believe it or not, is World Tourism Day. I guess this comes around every year and slips by unnoticed, but this year, it surely has an ironic poignancy about it. It's hard to think of an industry which has been harder hit by the pandemic than travel and tourism, with people either not permitted to travel or understandably very reluctant to do so. So the prayer for others this week is focused on the travel and tourism sector, not to seek God's endorsement for our self-indulgent desire to travel, but for the sake of the many thousands, if not millions, of people worldwide who have lost jobs, whose businesses are struggling and whose livelihoods are threatened. You may, of course, choose to pray about other things that are important to you at the moment.

Heavenly Father,

We have prayed about many aspects of the pandemic over these months of difficulty, but today we bring before you all the many people who work in the travel and tourism industry.

Father, travel is so much a part of our lives.

We do love to see new parts of Australia, and to revisit loved locations over and over again.

We seek the respite and relaxation of time away from home and from the immediacy of our cares and concerns.

And Australians are also great overseas travellers, loving to explore fabled locations and experience new cultures.

But our prayer is not for ourselves, Father.

We have faith that the opportunity to travel will come again, and we realise that there are far more serious effects of the pandemic than our inability to enjoy travel.

Our prayer is for those whose livelihoods have depended on travel and tourism, and on the hospitality industry which is their partner.

So many have lost their jobs, or have had their hours drastically reduced.

So many businesses are struggling, wondering if they can survive the economic slump.

In Australia Virgin Air almost went to the wall,

and even though it was taken over, its workforce was greatly reduced.

Qantas too has resigned itself to a much smaller future, and has shed staff.

Across the world, all airlines are struggling to survive the worst downturn in their history.
So we pray for all those who have lost their jobs,
and all those who are just holding onto theirs.
The same is true for all forms of transport:
the cruise industry has been largely idle for months,
epic train journeys like the Indian-Pacific and the Ghan
have not run because of border closures,
tourist coaches have been unable to operate or have done so with half-empty coaches,
and even taxis had had far fewer clients because so many people continue to work from home.
We pray for all the business owners and the employees,
and the former employees, of these industries.
We pray too for all involved in the hospitality industry.
With people unable or reluctant to travel,
hotels, motels, holiday lettings and resorts have seen hugely reduced custom.
Restaurants have had to operate, if at all, with greatly reduced capacity.
So many employees have been affected, again with job losses,
or from being stood down, or with reduced hours.
So we pray for cleaners, for wait staff, for bar staff, for chefs, for reception staff
and for all others who work in the multiplicity of roles encompassed by this industry.
And we pray for the business owners, so many of whom are small business people,
with limited financial resilience,
who have worked for many years to build successful businesses,
and who provide employment for so many others in their communities.
Our prayer too is for tour operators,
from the small operations that work at a local level,
to the large companies with multifaceted concerns.
They too have suffered badly,
and their staff have been victims of the same malaise and the same outcomes.
We pray for all those in these industries, our Father,
that, for their sake, conditions might soon allow businesses to return to more prosperous levels,
so that people's livelihoods might be restored,
along with all the carry-over effects for their families and communities.
May the effects of the pandemic soon be ended.

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 have reflected on the new life that only is in God,
and on our deep yearning for that life,
which Jesus Christ will satisfy for those who place their trust in him.
So respond positively to that age-old injunction: *Choose life!*
And know that the blessing of almighty God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
is with you and will abide with you evermore.
Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION
LIVING WATER

At first glance, this incident in Exodus 17 appears to be a rerun of the problem in the previous chapter about food. Now the people of Israel have journeyed further into the wilderness and have reached Rephidim. Here there is no water, and their desperate thirst triggers similar behaviour to what they had shown in the Wilderness of Sin. Again the Israelites complain to Moses and Aaron: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” On this occasion, Moses interprets the complaint a little differently. In the Wilderness of Sin, while the complaint was *directed* to Moses, it was clearly *against* God himself (their apparently-impending death would be “by the hand of the LORD” – 16:3). At Rephidim, however, the complaint is not only *to* Moses but also *about* Moses. This is very evident from Moses’ words to God, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” He says nothing about the complaint representing a rejection of God.

What is going on here?

As well as any people, Australians understand what scarcity of water means. Parts of our nation remain in drought, while other areas have had a desperately needed reprieve, though in many of those areas nobody would be foolhardy enough to proclaim as yet that the drought has broken. And great tracts of Australia are in almost perpetual drought, with the seemingly endless dry periods only occasionally punctuated by the “flooding rains”, of which Dorothea McKellar famously wrote. It is not hard for many Australians to relate to the plight of the Israelites as they travelled deeper into the wilderness of Sinai. And they would find it difficult to be too hard on the Israelites for the desperation which led to their challenge to Moses. Depending on physical health and on the surrounding environmental conditions, human beings can only survive for two to perhaps five or six days without water. In the short term, water, far more than food, is life. The Israelites were worried that their lives were in immediate danger because of where Moses had led them.

So it is Moses’ leadership which is at stake this time around. Verse 7, which is usually taken to imply that the Israelites’ complaint was really against God rather than against Moses, actually should be read somewhat differently.

He [Moses] called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

A rejection of God would not have been a “quarrel”. By all means a rebellion or an insurrection, but this appears to be a quarrel about Moses’ leadership. The Hebrew words translated by the NRSV as “Is the LORD among us or not?” literally say, “Is the LORD there? Perhaps the LORD is not there.”³ Read that way, the focus of the question is really on Moses. Is God with this man, or is God not?

That this is the correct reading of the text is shown by two things. First, God demonstrates no anger at the Israelites’ complaint. Only a few verses back, when the Israelites had disobeyed the commandment not to collect manna on the Sabbath, God had expressed his frustration if not anger (16:28). If the complaints about water had represented a rejection of God, there is no reason at all to think that God would have not expressed at least some irritation about the situation! But there is nothing of the sort. God springs to action to resolve the argument.

Indeed the second point is that the way God responds to the Israelites’ complaint is ever so clearly intended to demonstrate to the Israelites that Moses really is God’s chosen agent.

³ James K Bruckner, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, 2008), p. 157.

The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.”

“Go on ahead of the people” could equally be translated, “Walk in front of the people.”⁴ So Moses is to walk in full view of the congregation of the Israelites, and he is to take “some of the elders of Israel” with him. This is to be a public demonstration, which can leave no doubt as to Moses’ authority. The elders represent responsible witnesses. Moses is to take his staff. This staff is a kind of symbol of his authority. It is the same staff with which he had struck the Red Sea to trigger the parting of the waters (14:16). Interestingly, it is also the staff which was Moses’ instrument in turning the River Nile from a life-giving stream into a river of blood which killed all the fish and was undrinkable for the Egyptians (7:14-21). With his staff, Moses is to strike a designated rock and fresh water will flow to satisfy the thirst of the Israelites. In front of the whole people, and under the close scrutiny of the elders, God fully endorses Moses’ authority. It is a highly effective way of putting paid to the arguments which had arisen about whether God was actually with Moses. The names given to the location, Massah (place of testing) and Meribah (place of quarrelling) commemorate the closure of the matter.

As God was shaping his people in the Wilderness of Sin, he is here at Rephidim cementing Moses into his role of leader of his people, as the Israelites look ahead to the ordeals that will face them throughout the journey across Sinai. Indeed, the next ordeal – the attack of the Amalekites in which Moses’ leadership was crucial – was just around the corner (17:8-16). And the giving of the Ten Commandments through the agency of Moses was also on the near horizon (20:1-21).

But there is more going on here than “just” the endorsement of Moses’ leadership, important as that undoubtedly was. In chapter 16, the issue had been food and the discomfort of hunger. In chapter 17 the issue is water. As Australians, we understand that water is life. In the biblical tradition, water is highly symbolic. More than life-giving and life-sustaining, water is almost a symbol for life itself. In the first creation hymn in Genesis 1, on the fifth day, we read,

And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. (Genesis 1:20-21)

In this account, the waters of the oceans provide the cradle of all life. In the second account of creation, the seminal role of water is presented somewhat differently, but no less emphatically.

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground.... And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.....A river flows out of Eden to water the garden.... (Genesis 2:4-10 emphases added)

In these creation stories, water is thus more than essential for life; it is the *source* of life. In the Exodus account, this is clear once again. In the first plague which is visited upon the Egyptians, referred to earlier, when the Nile River is turned to blood, it ceases to be the source and the sustainer of life and becomes instead a toxic menace to both sea life and human life. Again, when

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

the waters of the sea part to permit the escape of the fleeing Israelites, only to crash in on the pursuing Egyptian army, they secure the life and freedom of the fugitives.

These appearances of water are recollected in the Sacrament of Baptism, in which, in the New Testament context, water symbolises the new life which is in Jesus Christ. That context, of course, was unknown to the writers and redactors behind our text of Exodus, but nevertheless, for Christians, it underscores the deep significance of water as life-generating and life-affirming.

If we bear this symbolic role of water in mind as we reread the account of Exodus 17, it reveals a new and far more profound dimension to the story. Permit me a liberal paraphrase:

The Israelites camped at Rephidim, but the people were uncertain that they were travelling towards new life. The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, "Assure us that you are leading us to new life." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" But the people thirsted there for life; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to a place where perhaps there is no life?" So Moses cried out to the LORD.... The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and the waters of life will be revealed, so that the people may know that the new life which is in me travels with you."

Perhaps this paraphrase is a trifle clumsy, but it makes the point. The Israelites want to be assured that Moses' leadership is taking them to the new life of freedom which they had been promised. They want to know that Moses truly is God's agent in leading them on a life-giving journey. Will all the hardships and all the sacrifices be worthwhile?

It is hard not to be reminded of the evocative passage in Deuteronomy (30:19-20) in which Moses, at the end of his life, sets before the people of Israel the choice between life in covenant with and obedience to God, and death should they abandon the covenant.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

It is a powerful plea. "Choose life!"

Today's passage from Exodus shows the Israelites uncertain of the pathway to life. Its resolution is God's public demonstration that to follow Moses is to journey forward towards true life, and that true life is found in God and in God alone. Life is the freely given gift of God. All that is required of the Israelites to be granted life is to place their faith in Moses.

Last week we found that our passage from Exodus 16 provided a clear parallel with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Is that not the case once again here? The new life that is in Jesus is the freely given gift of God, something we cannot earn for ourselves. All that is required of us is to place our faith in Jesus, whom God has marked out as his son and servant by raising him from death (Acts 17:31). Jesus can lead us to the new life which alone is in God. The pervasive symbolism of water comes back to us. In John's gospel, Jesus promised the Samaritan woman at the well that "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14).

The response of the Samaritan woman was simple: “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty...” It is exactly the longing that motivates the Israelites’ in Exodus. “Give us water to drink.” It is the same deep yearning that draws us into the arms of Jesus, for in Jesus, and in Jesus alone, is the living water, to drink of which quenches our deepest longings for true life.

A simple story of testing reminds us that, for all time and in every circumstance, true life is the gift of God. Moses injunction to his people is Jesus’ injunction to us: Choose life.