

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 8 NOVEMBER 2020

No 34

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 **Being ready for worship**

Here we are, well into November. There are two more Sundays in the Church calendar before we come to Advent. Today our passage is from Joshua, as we continue the story of the formation of God's people. Next week we dip into the period of the Judges; and then on 22nd we come to the Festival of Christ the King, which concludes the liturgical year. In today's passage, Joshua calls on the people of Israel to recall God's many blessings. That is always a good thing to do, but never more so than as the end of a year approaches. For each of us the year will have brought good and bad – the life of faith doesn't promise to insulate us from the ups and downs of life. But we are called to "count our blessings". In a year in which a global pandemic has left Australia comparatively unscathed – I emphasise the word "comparatively", and do not diminish the pain felt by those families who have lost loved ones to Covid-19 – it behoves us all to "count our blessings" and give thanks. When you are ready to come into God's presence and to give thanks, begin with the prayers below.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

As we shall read how Joshua recounted to the people of Israel the many blessings God had bestowed upon them, a singularly appropriate hymn to use as a prayer of thanksgiving and praise is the modern hymn, of American origin, Give thanks (with a grateful heart).

Henry Smith was a young seminary graduate when, in the late 1970s, he faced a very difficult situation in his life. Upon finishing his course, no work offered itself, while at the same time, Smith was faced with a degenerative eye condition which would eventually lead to his becoming legally blind. While many would be angry, possibly even angry at God, Smith instead took inspiration from Jesus. His pastor in Williamsburg, Virginia, reminded him of Paul's statement in II Corinthians (8:9), "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor so that you through his poverty might become rich." Smith understood the great sacrifice of Jesus, and so in 1978 penned Give thanks. He began performing it in his own congregation, where a visiting military officer happened to hear it, sought a copy, and took it to Europe, where it took off, first in Germany then across the Continent.

The song was picked up by Integrity Music, who published it in Hosanna Music, but with no attribution – "author unknown". The song was subsequently recorded by Don Moen on his Give Thanks album, again without attribution. The song's popularity drew Smith's attention to its commercial exploitation. He and Integrity Music eventually signed a writer-publisher agreement, beneficially to Smith because Give Thanks became the publishing house's best-selling release. Smith is said to have composed some three hundred hymns, but this is the only one that has been published.¹ Give Thanks is published in Together in Song in Australia, and provides a most appropriate prayer.

¹ <https://www.countrythangdaily.com/give-thanks-grateful-heart/>, accessed 24 October 2020.

Give thanks with a grateful heart
Give thanks to the Holy One
Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son

Give thanks with a grateful heart
Give thanks to the Holy One
Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son

And now let the weak say, "I am strong"
Let the poor say, "I am rich"
Because of what the Lord has done for us"

And now let the weak say, "I am strong"
Let the poor say, "I am rich"
Because of what the Lord has done for us"

Give thanks with a grateful heart (with a grateful heart)
Give thanks to the Holy One (to the Holy One)
Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son

Give thanks with a grateful heart (with a grateful heart)
Give thanks to the Holy One (to the Holy One)
Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son

And now let the weak say, "I am strong"
Let the poor say, "I am rich"
Because of what the Lord has done for us"

And now let the weak say, "I am strong"
Let the poor say, "I am rich (I am rich)"
Because of what the Lord has done for us"
Give thanks

We give thanks to You²

Amen

3 Prayer of Confession

Lord our God,
We confess before you that we do not give you thanks often enough.
We are keen to count our problems, but far less enthusiastic about counting our blessings.
We are quick to take credit for what has gone well,
but look around for someone else to blame when things have gone badly.

At times we even blame you.
 Forgive us, we pray, for our selective and half-hearted faith.
 We confess too that we have been reluctant to throw our whole heart into following Jesus.
 We remain tentative. We don't want to give up anything we treasure.
 In short, our Father, we want it both ways.
 We claim to be your people,
 and yet, when the price must be paid, when the going gets tough,
 we don't want to give up our other obsessions and devotions.
 Forgive us, we pray.
 We are a sinful people, too enamoured of ourselves and too enamoured of our world.
 Grant us the wisdom to know what is our true treasure,
 the courage to seek it,
 and the perseverance to last the distance.
 For we ask it in the blessed name of Jesus.
 Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

Hear again the words of the psalmist:

The LORD is merciful and gracious,
 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
 He will not always accuse,
 nor will he keep his anger forever.
 He does not deal with us according to our sins,
 nor repay us according to our iniquities.
 For as the heavens are high above the earth,
 so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
 as far as the east is from the west,
 so far he removes our transgressions from us.
 As a father has compassion for his children,
 so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.
 For he knows how we were made;
 he remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103:8-14)

*God's mercy was known in the person of Jesus Christ.
 In Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven.*

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-28 (Lectionary stops at verse 25)

The other Lectionary Readings

Psalm 78:1-7

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

2020 marks the 75th anniversary of the first use of atomic weapons in warfare – the American bombing of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While the Western Allies celebrated the victory over Japan which the weapons delivered, subsequent generations have come to realise the appalling destructive power of nuclear weapons. Such weapons form part

of the arsenals of a significant number of nations, all of which maintain that they would never be the first to use them. Despite the end of the Cold War, the world is, in fact, no safer than it was at the height of tensions between the USA and the USSR, and should a nuclear power miscalculate, a system go wrong, or weapons fall into the hands of terrorists, the consequences are quite literally unthinkable.

In October, it was announced that a UN-initiated treaty banning nuclear weapons had reached the critical fiftieth ratification which would see it become international law in January 2021. Sadly, none of the nuclear powers is a signatory to the treaty. Its efficacy will be limited, but it is still an important statement by the nations of the world that such horribly destructive weapons are regarded by the consensus of nations as simply too dangerous to be permitted to exist. Today's prayer is for further progress in this critical, but insufficiently recognised, danger to human life.

Lord our God,

We bring before you a problem of immense moment to the wellbeing of all humankind. Over millennia, we have shown ourselves adept at creating better and better ways to kill each other.

In every war, there seem to be more powerful, more accurate and more deadly weapons. And modern technologies have been turned to weaponry as well, with scientists applying their knowledge to the horrible art of killing others.

Today we bring before you the plethora of nuclear weapons held by a growing club of nations. They are held for reasons of national prestige;

they are defended as a deterrent, even as a foundation for peace;

and most of the nuclear armed nations say

that they are committed to bringing about an end to nuclear weapons.

But some of them have been saying it for fifty years,

yet have done nothing to realise the goal.

We have created a world in which fear rules,

and no one has the courage to make the first move.

Yet other nations surreptitiously work to join the nuclear club,

and terrorist groups conspire to try to get their hands on a nuclear weapon.

We stand on a knife edge upon which the simplest miscalculation,

let alone a deliberately provocative act, could lead to an unimaginable cataclysm.

We pray for an end to the madness of creating and retaining weapons

simply too powerful to be used;

of nations claiming that they would never use nuclear arms,

yet refusing even to consider ridding themselves of them;

and of the régime of fear which leads nations to be so suspicious of each other

that none will be the first to surrender its weapons.

We pray for the leaders of nuclear states,

that cool heads will prevail in times of crisis,

and that courage will overcome fear so that nations might finally lay down their arms;

and we pray for the custodians of those nations' arsenals,

that they will be vigilant in guarding the weapons,

and always have the integrity to resist the overtures of terrorists seeking to obtain them.

We pray for the success of the UN Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty,

expressing the heartfelt desire of the world's peoples

for the international outlawing of nuclear weapons.

May its ratification be the first step in the complete abolition of all nuclear weaponry,
and in the denuclearisation of all nations,
that humanity might be released from the frightening cloud of destruction
which so hangs over it now.

Father, our Lord was a man of peace.

We pray that the peace which he embodied might come upon the world,
and render the destructive capabilities of the nations simply obsolete and redundant.

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, recall God's blessings in your life, and say with Joshua,

"... as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

For God's blessing is upon you always.

Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION
THE COST OF THE KINGDOM

Last week we were at the beginning of Joshua, as the Israelites crossed the Jordan into the land of promise. Today, the occupation of the land is complete, and we find ourselves at the very end of Joshua, and at the time of Joshua's death. This year's commentator in *With Love to the World* describes today's passage as "a pivotal passage in the story of Israel".³ Indeed it is.

The setting is of great significance. Joshua has summoned "the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel" to Shechem. Shechem is a place of great significance in the history of the new nation. It was at Shechem that Abraham first received God's promise of the land of Canaan for his descendants. To mark the occasion, Abraham built an altar there to symbolise his faith in the one true God (Genesis 12:6-7). Later, Jacob, on his return from Paddan Aram, stopped at Shechem and buried there the idols which his family had brought with them (Genesis 35:4). Joshua himself had earlier built an altar at Shechem, where he also inscribed the law onto stone and reminded the Israelites of it (Joshua 8:30-35). Shechem thus symbolises a positive and deliberate choice to follow God, and a rejection of former and foreign gods. That same significance underlies our passage today, in which the leaders of Israel are asked, once again, to make their choice. Would they commit to the worship of God, and of God alone?

Joshua begins by reminding the people of the way God had blessed them as they had progressively occupied the new land. The verses which recount the story of the conquest are omitted in the Lectionary selection. The point is summarised in verses 11-13:

When you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I handed them over to you. I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not laboured, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant.

We grappled with the ethical issues involved in the story of the Israelites' conquest last week. The point here is that, now that they have settled in the land, the Israelites give thanks to God for their new home. It is a critical moment, then, for Joshua to remind the people to whom their true and full allegiance belongs; to challenge them to make that choice, and to make it without equivocation. There could be no "halfway" house. "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God," God had told his people (Exodus 20:5). If Israel was to choose to worship God, the choice must be a complete one, without compromise.

Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve

Joshua sets the example: "... as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD," he tells the leaders of Israel.

But words are cheap and easy, and Joshua knows it. Israel has already shown a propensity to hanker after foreign gods. The golden calf incident was perhaps the most blatant example of this (Exodus 32), but the fact that Joshua still has to refer to "the foreign gods that are among you" (Joshua 24:23) indicates that some, at least, had refused to let go of past loyalties. So Joshua really

³ Rev Rod Horsfield, *With Love to the World* xvi (2020) no 4, 4 November, p. 59.

challenges the Israelites, telling them that they cannot serve the LORD (v. 19). He makes it very clear to them that it's an "all or nothing" choice they must make, and really puts the pressure on, to make the Israelites realise the gravity of the choice that lay before them. When the people still protest that they truly will follow God, and that they are prepared to make the sacrifices that will entail, Joshua tells them that they are witnesses against themselves – to which they agree. He also enshrines the promise in a memorial stone, which appears to have inscribed upon it the Law. Its significance, however, is that it is to serve as an eternal reminder of the undertaking given by the leaders of Israel to be loyal to the one true God.

[Joshua] took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the LORD. Joshua said to all the people, "See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God."

There are two issues which strike me about this passage. The first is that this incident in Joshua underscores both the blessing and the cost of making a choice to follow God. Joshua reminds the people of God's many blessings which have brought them to where they are. And the location at Shechem is a physical reminder of the history of the promises of God, from the very first call of Abraham. Being there at Shechem, it is palpably clear that God keeps his promises. God honours his covenants. God brings many blessings upon his people. A choice for God is a choice for a generous and faithful God, who will never be wanting in the life of those who are his people.

But this God "is a jealous God". God will brook no rivals. What God offers is of immense value, but those who choose to follow God must give up all their other loyalties. For the Israelites, that means the gods of Egypt, the gods belonging to the Canaanites, the household gods they kept within their families. All that baggage must be given up. Israel cannot "have its cake and eat it". There is a choice to make, and a price to be paid.

I am reminded of nothing so much as Jesus' parables about the Kingdom of God. In Matthew's gospel, he describes what the Kingdom is like.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:44-46)

The treasure-finder sells everything that he had to obtain ownership of the field where the treasure was hidden. In the same way, the merchant sells all his other pearls to buy the one that is so fine that it is all he wants. In other words, they give up all that is precious to them, so they can attain the most precious thing – which of course *is* the Kingdom of God. That is precisely the choice which Joshua insists that the Israelites must make. If they want to be God's people, the other gods that are precious to them must be sacrificed. God does not brook half measures, or half-hearted commitments.

There is much in this aspect of the reading for Christians today. Perhaps we, too, need to be confronted from time to time about our own divided loyalties. So many of us claim to be the people of God, and yet we cling to the "gods" of this world. They are not idols or deities in the true sense, but they are no less alluring. We cling to our physical comfort, to our materialism, to our prosperity. Many of us have other obsessions – our career, our hobbies, even our family or our fitness. These things may not be, in and of themselves, bad, but if they cause our loyalty to God and what God requires of us to be compromised, they have become our own "foreign gods". We are demonstrating that we want to have one foot in Egypt and one in the land of promise. Joshua's challenge to the leaders of Israel, and Jesus' poignant descriptions of the Kingdom of God, are both passages which

we need to take to heart. There is no place for a lukewarm or half-hearted faith. God's faithfulness is absolute; we are called to the same standard.

The second issue which this passage from Joshua raises for me is about the generational transmission of our faith. The sin of the Israelites as they entered Sinai had led God to determine that none of those of the generation which had dwelt in Egypt was to enter the land of promise. Thus the wanderings in the wilderness had extended for a metaphorical forty years – that is, the number of years in a biblical generation. Even Moses had not been permitted to cross the Jordan.

That generation of Israelites had made a covenant with God, yet their sin had deprived them of the opportunity of reaching the land of promise. Now the subsequent generation of Israelites was making its own covenant with God. It appears from the symbolism of the stone tablets which Joshua set up that they understood their covenant to be binding on the nation in perpetuity. When the Athenians formed the so-called Delian League in the mid-fifth century BC, the covenanters lowered large stones into the depth of the ocean, undertaking that their alliance would last as long as the stones lasted. Joshua's monument seems to have had the same "feel" about it. The choice that had been made was being seen as for all time, the monument its guarantor.

And yet experience had already shown the Israelites that the undertakings of one generation had not apparently bound the next generation. No doubt the leaders of Israel whom Joshua addressed believed that they, too, were covenanting for all time and for all generations to come. But once again, the history of Israel was to belie that notion. The fact is that the faith of one generation cannot determine the faith of the next. Each generation must make its own covenant with God.

Once again, this is important for Christians today. Not that many Christians truly believe that their own faith has any particular relevance for their children (apart from setting an example), though some do. Some denominations quite literally believe that children will be saved by the faith of their parents, but it is not a common view. More common, however, is what we often hear from parents whose children have long abandoned the Church. Words to the effect that they may not go to church, but they have good Christian values and are good people would have a familiar ring to all of us. And no doubt it's true. But it's scarcely the same thing.

Our passage reminds us that, whatever we may hope, each generation must make its covenant with God. There is no "in perpetuity", from generation to generation. Our obligation is to hand on our faith, but each new generation must make its own choices, as the leaders who stood before Joshua had to make their choice. Each generation must sell all they have to obtain the richness of the Kingdom treasure; Each generation must sell their other pearls to buy the one of immense value.

So as Joshua reminded the people of Israel of the blessings God had bestowed upon them, our task is, and the task of every generation of God's people has been and always will be, to tell the story. Joshua recounted the many blessings of God to the Israelites. Our task too is to tell the story of God's many blessings in our lives. In that way, we present our children with a real choice. The pearl is indeed the most precious that can be had; the treasure is indeed worth the sacrifice of everything else we may hold precious. *We* know that; that is *our* story. But faith is always just a generation away from extinction.

The great story of our faith is that God has blessed his people mightily. As God, in Joshua's day, had brought Israel to the land of promise, so too God has sent Jesus Christ. God has done the work. Jesus died that we might be forgiven and might have the new life that only is in him. Nothing about the Kingdom depends on our efforts. Our task is to tell the story – the story of God's mighty blessings; the story of the treasure that is just too precious to pass up, of the pearl of such immense value that is worth sacrificing everything to obtain. Thanks be to God, the Kingdom does not rest on

our efforts; nor is it guaranteed by stones monuments we might hope will last for ever. The Kingdom of God is the gift of God. May each generation say anew with Joshua, "... as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."