

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 1 NOVEMBER 2020

No 33

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 **Being ready for worship**

The Christian scriptures can be challenging. Sometimes the challenge is that they honestly and forthrightly confront us with who and what we are. We see ourselves reflected in them, and we are discomfited by the truths they tell about us. Those are *good* challenges, and we should welcome them. At other times, however, the challenge can be of a different kind. In some passages, particularly in the Old Testament, we can find the way God and God's actions are described quite confronting. Such is the case – at least it was for me – with today's passage from Joshua. If you too find the passage disturbing, I hope the reflection helps you. Today is also All Saints' Day, far stronger in the Roman Catholic tradition than in Protestant practice. Nevertheless, understanding that all believers are "saints" (in New Testament usage), today can be a time to reflect on the faith and ministry of those who have been important to us and to our churches over time, and to give thanks for them. So when you are ready to embrace a rich time of reflection, begin with the hymn which forms our prayer of praise to God.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

It is not strong in the Protestant tradition to celebrate All Saints' Day, 1 November, immediately following Halloween – which isn't, or most certainly shouldn't be, part of any Christian tradition. Unlike our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, Protestants recognise all believers as "saints", which is in accordance with New Testament usage. Some years ago, I was involved in a situation where a small but venerable congregation closed its doors to join our larger congregation. At the first service, the life and witness of the closing congregation were celebrated, and the hymn chosen as the theme was For all the Saints. On this All Saints' Day, it is a very suitable prayer. It recognises the lives of believers who have gone before us, but in every respect reserves the glory for Jesus. And its author, Bishop William How (1823-1897), once said, "A good hymn should be like a good prayer – simple, real, earnest and reverent."

How composed For All the Saints for All Saints' Day in 1864. It was among his sixty hymns, all of which were theologically conservative, despite the Bishop's own liberal views. Whatever his theology, however, he was affectionately known as "the poor man's bishop" and "the people's bishop" in the city of London, genuinely living out the ideals he espoused for the episcopal office. On his pastoral staff he had engraved a quotation from St Bernard, "Feed with the Word; feed with the life".

The original version of the hymn had eleven verses, though most hymnals today limit it to eight, more than enough for today's less patient congregations. The tune used today is the composition of Ralph Vaughan Williams, "Sine Nomine" (which means "without a name"), which he wrote specifically for How's hymn. It is a sign of how the "music wars" in today's churches are nothing new, that "Sine Nomine" was initially rejected by many in the Church as "jazz music"!¹

For all the saints who from their labours rest,
who to the world their Lord by faith confessed,
your name, O Jesus, be forever blessed,
Hallelujah, hallelujah.

¹ Kenneth W Osbeck, *101 More Hymn Stories. The inspiring true stories behind 101 favorite hymns* (Grand Rapids, 2013), pp. 90-1.

You were their rock, their fortress and their might,
you were their captain in the well-fought fight,
in deepest darkness still their one true light,
Hallelujah, hallelujah.

So may your servants, faithful, true and bold,
fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,
and win, with them, the victor's crown of gold,
Hallelujah, hallelujah.

O blessed communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine,
all yours, all joined in unity divine.
Hallelujah, hallelujah.

And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
Hallelujah, hallelujah.

The golden evening brightens in the west:
soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest,
the peaceful calm of paradise the blest.
Hallelujah, hallelujah.

But see, there breaks a yet more glorious day:
the saints triumphant rise in bright array;
the King of glory passes on his way.
Hallelujah, hallelujah.

From earth's wide bounds and ocean's farthest shore,
through heaven's gate the holy people pour;
the Three-in-One for ever they adore,
*Hallelujah, hallelujah.*²

Amen

3 **Prayer of Confession**

Confessing our sins before God is of vital importance. The writer of I John tells us that, "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." If we fail to acknowledge our sinfulness, it cannot be forgiven. So pray this prayer, or your own, with candour.

Heavenly Father,
We know that if we say we are without sin, the truth is not in us.
We deceive ourselves, but never you.
So we confess before you and each other that we have indeed sinned.
We are guilty of the thoughtless word, and the word of comfort or healing left unsaid.
We have sometimes been careless or economical with the truth, or deceptive,

² Words from *Together in Song* (Melbourne, 1999), number 455.

telling ourselves that our motives are pure.
 We have been needlessly legalistic, when we should have been gracious.
 We have condemned or blamed, when we should have forgiven.
 We have been judgmental, when we should have been accepting;
 and we have judged ourselves by a standard different from that by which we judge ourselves.
 We have been neglectful of our relationship with you,
 when it should have been central to our lives.
 In short, Father, we have failed to love you with all our heart,
 and we have failed to love our neighbours as ourselves. We have sinned.
 Forgive us, we pray,
 and grant us the strength to be a people more worthy to be called your daughters and sons.
 For we ask it in Jesus' name.
 Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

The passage from I John reads more fully,

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. (I John 1:8-9)

So we can be assured that, in Jesus Christ, the risen one, our sins are forgiven.

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Joshua 3:7-17

The other Lectionary Readings

Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37

I Thessalonians 2:9-13

Matthew 23:1-12

All Saints' Day readings (also 1 Nov)

Revelation 7:9-17

Psalm 34:1-10, 17

I John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

In the spirit of All Saints' Day, this prayer gives thanks for the saints of times past, for the saints we have encountered in our own lives, and for the saints who continue to toil for the work of the gospel in all sorts of ways and places and degrees of danger. Perhaps you would prefer to use this time to pray about other things of importance to you at this time.

Lord our God,

We give thanks for the many labourers you have placed in the field to do the work of the gospel. We give thanks for faithful witnesses throughout the ages, who have brought the good news of Jesus to people across the globe.

We give thanks for those whose names history remembers – the earliest evangelists, the Church Fathers, the great reformers, the epic missionaries, and all the other sisters and brothers whose endeavours are well known.

Their faithfulness and witness are writ large for us all to see.

But we give thanks too for those whose ministry was not so public,

who worked quietly in communities,

who tended to the sick or aided the poor,

who spoke a comforting word, or upheld the suffering in prayer,

who toiled as ministers and priests, as Sunday School teachers and youth group leaders,

or simply proclaimed their faith within their own family and friends,
witnessing to Jesus Christ and the salvation which is in him.
In our own lives, Father, we give thanks for those who nurtured us in the faith –
for parents and family members, Christian friends, caring adults;
even for those who wrote or said things we came across and which made an impression.
We take a moment to name before you those whose ministry we cherish,
and to give thanks that they made it possible for us to know the gospel and to follow Jesus.

Finally, we pray for all those saints who proclaim the good news throughout the world today.
Some do so in very dangerous places, where governments or other faiths place them in peril;
some witness in increasingly secular Western societies,
in which the very notion of religion has been denigrated,
or hijacked by those with strange ideas about spiritual matters.
Again, Father, we recognise that millions of saints have quiet ministries,
of which we are unaware,
but their labour for the kingdom is no less important than that of those with a higher profile.
For all these saints, past and present, we give thanks.
And for those still labouring in the field,
we pray for courage, perseverance and faithfulness,
and that their ministries will be powerful witnesses to him who is the only hope for our world.

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, know that the blessing of almighty God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
rests upon his saints wherever you labour,
and will be with you always.
Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION
CROSSING INTO THE LAND OF PROMISE

Today the Lectionary takes us into the book of Joshua. Joshua was Moses' successor as the leader of the Israelites. God had told Moses that he would not be permitted to enter the new land. As we saw last week, he was allowed to view it from the heights of Mount Nebo, and having seen the Israelites' destination, he died, his baton passing to Joshua, son of Nun.

The book which is named after Joshua is an account of the movement of the Israelites into the new land, their conquest of that land, and their settlement within it. It can be a very disturbing book, because it appears to tell the story of a genocide perpetrated by the Israelites at the direct command of God. With only a handful of exceptions, none of the Canaanites is to be spared. So, for example, in the Israelites' first conquest, Jericho, only the prostitute, Rahab, and her kin are spared because she had aided two Israelite spies; everyone else is killed and everything they owned is burned, bar the precious objects which are given to God's treasury (Joshua 6:21-25; 2:1-21). As the book reaches its conclusion, God is reported to have said,

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 olive yards that you did not plant. "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. (Joshua 24:11-14)

Conservative commentators, unwilling to question the literal truth of any passage of scripture, are at pains to provide reasons why the complete destruction of whole peoples was only reasonable, even desirable. For example, FB Meyer defends the genocide by arguing that "the nations of Canaan had abandoned themselves to the most abominable immorality.... The destruction of the people by the sword of Israel was only the hastening of the natural results of their shameful vice." Alleging that the Canaanites practised spiritualism, Meyer waxes lyrical:

It is not simply the story of the conquest of Canaan; it is a fragment from the chronicles of heaven, giving an episode in the eternal conflict between light and darkness, between heaven and hell, between the Son of God and his great antagonist, the devil.³

I do not believe that it is hyperbolic to compare such a justification with how the Nazis sought to justify the Holocaust of the Jews in mid-century Europe. That too was hastening a process driven by the Jews' alleged inferiority and depravity; that too was portrayed in spiritual terms as a crusade for all that was pure and noble. Surely we ought not to have to resort to such devices in order to read a passage of scripture without choking on our moral repugnance.

Indeed, as 21st century Australians, heirs to the destructive effects of European advances on Indigenous populations in our own country, we should be particularly sensitive to the issues that inevitably arise when one people forcefully invades the territory of another, wreaks destruction and genocide upon them, and takes their land as its own. Some in the 19th century who sought to defend the Europeans' actions resorted to arguments not unlike those of FB Meyer, even using the advance of Christendom as justification for atrocities. However the eventual emergence of aboriginal tales of their atrocious treatment at the hands of the newcomers gave the lie to such arguments. We have been forced, rightly, to face our dark past, and the consequences of the legal fiction of *terra nullius*

³ FB Meyer, *Joshua: and the Land of promise* (Fort Washington, 2013), chapter 3.

used to underpin land seizures. One can only wonder how the Canaanites would have described their treatment at the hands of the invading Israelites, had any been permitted to survive to tell their story.

Other commentators on Joshua are less sanguine than FB Meyer. Carolyn J Sharp, for example, after fourteen paragraphs extolling the many wonderful things a preacher might find in our particular passage today, enthusing that “this passage offers magnificent riches for homiletics”, concludes by acknowledging, ever so briefly, its difficulties.

But the risks of this passage are grave and should be considered prayerfully. The story is bound up in the narrative of Israel's attempted genocide and colonization of indigenous Canaanite groups (explicitly named in 3:10). Responsible preaching here might celebrate the power of the Gospel as reaching across ethnic, regional, and religious markers of Otherness (Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-4; Isaiah 11:1-9, 19:24-25; Acts 10) to draw all creation into the knowledge and love of God.⁴

Just as quick to move on from the difficulty, another commentator writes,

It is difficult in our time to read this book without some abhorrence about what is deemed to be done under God's guidance and blessing. It is well to remember this story reflects what has been the norm in history for centuries and it is only in recent time that we are realising that the invasion of land and killing of its inhabitants is no longer acceptable.⁵

In both these cases, it would appear that the respective authors' consciences were assuaged by acknowledging the problem, but then quickly moving on rather than risking a deeper consideration of it. This year's commentator in *With Love to the World* also recognises the difficulty but unhelpfully sidesteps the question:

Whilst in the light of modern colonialism, readers today may ponder the ethics of Israel's dispossession of the original inhabitants, the theological point for the ancient editors is the belief that Israel received the land by the gift of God.⁶

It is certainly true that God has proclaimed through Isaiah, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” (Isaiah 55:8), but we should be more than uncomfortable when that dictum is used to justify alleged actions by God which even we, sinful creatures that we are, find morally repugnant.

As Christians we view the scriptures in the light cast on them by God's self-revelation in the Lord Jesus Christ. In Jesus' time, the Jews lived under the unwelcome rule of Rome. Messianic movements at the time sought to enlist God's help in rebelling against their overlords, eventually and tragically leading to the Jewish War of AD 67-70, the capture of Jerusalem and the complete and permanent destruction of the Second Temple. But Jesus pre-eminently eschewed such actions, and refused attempts by the crowd which pursued him to enlist him as another messianic leader (*e.g.* John 6:15). He famously counselled, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's” (Matthew 22:21), and taught his followers to love their enemies and to do good to those who hated them (Luke 6:27). It is simply inconceivable that the God revealed in Jesus would condone, let alone order, the extermination of whole peoples by previous Israelite generations.

So what are we to make of our passage from Joshua? One helpful approach may be that suggested by Robbie F Castleman. Castleman suggests that, when we read the scriptures, we should listen for three voices. The first voice is to understand what is actually reported to have happened. The second

⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1041, accessed 18 October 2020.

⁵ <http://otl.unitingchurch.org.au/index.php?page=joshua-3-7-17>, accessed 18 October 2020. The author is not identified.

⁶ Rod Horsfield, *With Love to the World* xvi (2020), no 4, 29 October (page 55).

voice is to recognise that the story is told by a human author, who brings his or her particular emphases, foci and assumptions to it. The third voice is to listen for what the story has to say to us in our own time and world.⁷ If that approach is taken with Joshua 3:7-17, would it help overcome the stumbling block we have encountered?

Castleman's first voice would tell us that, under Joshua's leadership, the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into Palestine, miraculously aided by God, and set about the conquest of the new territory. The second voice would acknowledge that there is a degree of interpretation in the telling of the story. The story is designed to convey two clear lessons: that Joshua is God's chosen leader, his position sanctified by the miracle; and that "by this you [Israel] shall know that among you is the living God". How the third voice is heard may not be quite so simple, but it is far more likely to speak to us of the faithfulness of God than it is to justify an horrific genocide. God was with his people in a time of challenge and change. The virtue of Castleman's approach is that it provides a degree of "wriggle room" for us to escape the otherwise shocking implications of a straight, literal reading of the text. We can acknowledge that the uncomfortable reading belongs to the interpretation given to the story by its ancient writer.

Another writer who specifically tackles the problem of Joshua head on is Douglas S Earl⁸. Unflinchingly recognising the dark implications of Joshua when the book is read literally, Earl argues that Joshua was never intended to be taken that way. He points out that there are other places in the Old Testament where things which are, of themselves, uncomfortable are not intended to condone or endorse the abhorrent actions, but to make a greater point. So, for example, the marriages of Abram, Isaac and Jacob, all incestuous under Levitical law, were actually intended to convey the importance of Israelites marrying Israelites, of keeping "within the clan"⁹. They ought not to be read as endorsing incestuous relationships, nor do we need to resort to legalism, that the Levitical law did not exist in the era of the Patriarchs, for example, to explain them away. The point that is being made is broader than that. In the same way, the focus of Joshua is not on a genocide, but on the broader point of God's faithful shepherding of his people.

Further, Earl points out the significance of symbols in scripture, arguing that a contemporary reader (or hearer) would not have taken the Joshua story literally, but would have resonated with the symbols that bespoke the deeper meaning of the text. Viewed through that lens, our passage from Joshua is richer, and far less disturbing that it appears at first sight, because it is replete with symbolism of importance to the emerging new nation.

First is the very symbolic act of crossing the Jordan River. Clearly this is an echo of the previous crossing of the Red Sea. That first crossing was a passage from servitude in Egypt into the wilderness of Sinai. The wilderness was a place freedom but also of chaos and danger; the Israelites led the life of nomads. The second crossing, over the Jordan into the land of Palestine, is the complementary bookend of the wilderness experience. The Israelites pass from chaos into order, from desolation into abundance, from wandering into settlement. Only once they are secure and settled can Israel take root as a nation. It is an epochal moment in the nation's history and formation.

Second, powerful symbols in our passage lay foundations for the prosperity and success of the new nation. Joshua tells the people,

"..... the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. When

⁷ Robbie F Castleman, *Interpreting the God-Breathed Word. How to read and study the Bible* (Grand Rapids, 2018).

⁸ Douglas S Earl, *The Joshua Delusion: rethinking genocide in the Bible* (Cambridge, 2011).

⁹ Pp 38f.

the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap.”

The Ark of the Covenant was the container which held the tablets of the Law. It is symbolic of God himself, and of God’s Law. It is the Ark which precedes the Israelites into the Jordan, clearly signifying that success will be achieved by following God. Despite the endorsement of Joshua’s leadership, this miracle is not his doing but God’s action. Israel is to trust in the power and leadership of God.

The Ark is to be followed by representatives of the twelve tribes, who are to form a line across the width of the river. So arranged, the representatives will form a human barrier which will hold back the waters allowing the Israelites to pass through safely. This is a powerful symbol of unity. The miracle will be achieved when all twelve of the tribes co-operate and act together for a single purpose. The history of the disunity which led to the divided kingdom, later in Israel’s story, proves the importance of the unity which eventually deserted the nation, and no doubt was in the mind of the redactors who brought Joshua to its final form.

So two symbols, taken together, speak of the need for the nation to trust its safety and future to God, and to maintain its unity. We might borrow the aspirations of the American nation: “In God we trust”, and “*e pluribus unum*” (“one from many”) as a modern comparison. Sadly neither Israel nor the United States proved able to fulfil these commitments.

Read this way, our passage today is altogether less disturbing; indeed it is very positive. The call to focus the life of the nation on God is the familiar refrain of the prophets. My own mind goes immediately to Micah.

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

And to Jesus’ response when he was asked what was the greatest commandment:

He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment.”

Inscribed on the tablets contained in the Ark of the Covenant, which figures in our passage, were the Ten Commandments, which began with the same injunction:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God (Exodus 20:2-5)

We know only too well how much better life is when it is centred on God; when we shunt God to one side and substitute either our own selves, or some other object, for our devotion, things go quickly and increasingly awry. No less than the Israelites who heard the book of Joshua in ancient time, Christians can readily recognise the symbolism in the story of the crossing of the Jordan as pointing to the importance of trusting in the leadership of God.

As we can also recognise the importance of the point the story makes about unity. We have very few actual prayers of Jesus, and so those we do have should be treasured and honoured. In John’s

gospel we find,

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

The Church gains no strength and no credibility from its endless divisions and thousands of denominations. There are denominations, and individuals, whose principal focus is to proclaim that only *they* have it right, and to explain why all others are wrong. They are advertisements for disunity, and do no good for the gospel. In times past, wars fought over religion cost hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives. Victories won in the name of Jesus did little to exemplify the gospel of love, forgiveness and grace. So the symbolism of the twelve representatives of the tribes of Israel acting together in unity to bring about a powerful thing also resonates with us.

But probably the most powerful message of our passage from Joshua is its proclamation that the miracles which God brings about are not dependent on anything *we* do. It was God who led the Israelites across the Jordon. Joshua was God’s ordained leader, but Joshua does no more than convey God’s commands. And the twelve tribal representatives merely acted on God’s instructions. God wrought the miracle. God’s actions do not depend on *us*. *We* depend on *God*. All we are required to do is place our trust in God, for the saving actions are God’s.

Followers of Jesus Christ will immediately recognise the truth of the gospel in this assertion. Nothing we can do can bring about our salvation. Like the Israelites, we were lost and wandering in a chaotic and dangerous place. God reached out to us. God did the work, through Jesus Christ. The saving action was God’s initiative, and God’s work alone. And like the Israelites at the Jordon, all that God requires of us is to trust him, and we too will pass unscathed through the Jordon to the new life that God has promised in Jesus Christ.