

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 29 NOVEMBER 2020

No 37

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1 Being ready for worship

Here we are on the first Sunday of Advent. Advent commences the liturgical year, and is a period encompassing four Sundays, and ending on Christmas Eve, during which Christians anticipate and prepare both for the celebration of the coming into the world of Jesus Christ, and for the eventual return of Jesus in the future. The Latin word *adventus* translates the Greek word *parousia*, which the New Testament uses of Christ's Second Coming. Our time today will begin this annual pilgrimage of preparation and prayer, a needed discipline as the secular world ramps up its very different celebration of Christmas as one of a retail extravaganza and hollow sentimentalism. When you feel ready to begin the Advent journey, start with the prayers that follow.

2 Prayer of Adoration

Perhaps the quintessential Advent hymn is O come, O come, Emmanuel, which makes a fine prayer with which to commence Advent. Although it has a surprisingly catchy tune, the hymn does not sound at all modern, and it isn't. Indeed, it most probably dates back at least to the mediaeval Roman Catholic Church of the 12th century, but it may even be earlier. In mediaeval times, psalms were preceded by an antiphon which might, for example, refer to the Lord Jesus by one of the various "titles" used of him in the Bible. Our hymn began as a series of such antiphons. Only five verses are typically printed in modern hymnals, and these refer to Christ as "Emmanuel", "great Lord of might", "key of David", "branch of Jesse" and "dayspring". Of course such an ancient hymn was originally in Latin. During the nineteenth century, there was an effort in some quarters to rescue such ancient hymns by translating them into English versions. O come, O come, Emmanuel was translated from the original by Rev. John Neale (1818-1866), who was also responsible for translating several other hymns including All glory, laud and honour. Neale is himself worth reading about¹ The tune, Veni Emmanuel, is similarly ancient, dating from perhaps the 13th century. It is essentially a chant – that is, plainsong, the earliest form of singing in the Church². Its supplication that the messiah come to his people makes it singularly appropriate for Advent.

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice!

Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O come, great Lord of might
who to the tribes on Sinai's height
in ancient times did give the law
in cloud and majesty and awe.

Rejoice! Rejoice!

Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

¹ See https://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Biographies/john_mason_neale.htm.

² Kenneth W Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories. The inspiring true stories behind 101 favorite hymns* (Grand Rapids, 2012), pp. 178f.

O come, O key of David, come,
and open wide our heavenly home,
make safe the way that leads on high
and close the path to misery.

Rejoice! Rejoice!

Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O branch of Jesse, free
your own from Satan's tyranny;
from depths of hell your people save
and give them victory o'er the grave.

Rejoice! Rejoice!

Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O dayspring, come and cheer
our spirits by your advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night
and death's dark shadow put to flight.

Rejoice! Rejoice!

*Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.*³

Amen

3 **Prayer of Confession**

The following Advent prayer of confession gives you the opportunity to make your own personal confession before God. You may find this prayer helpful, or perhaps you'll choose to pray your own prayer of confession. Whatever form it takes, God is always ready to hear our confession.

Our Father,
Advent celebrates the light which broke in upon the world in Jesus Christ,
a light which reaches into the darkest corners of sin
and exposes the world for what it really is, not what it pretends to be.
So we confess before you that,
while we would be people of the light, and we yearn for the light,
we are, so often, people of darkness.
We choose to hide in dark places,
cringing in our evil selves,
because we are, indeed, sinners.
But you invite us to confess our sins,
acknowledging just who and what we are,
and acknowledging our utter dependence on your mercy and grace.
So now, we offer our personal confession for the things we have done
and for the times we have failed to live as your children.
Father, please forgive us our sins,
for the sake of our saviour, Jesus,
who died for us, that we might be forgiven.
It is in his name that we pray.
Amen.

³ Words as per *Together in Song* (Melbourne, 1999) no 265.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

The psalmist gives us this reassurance of God's mercy.

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. (Psalm 103:8-12)

*God demonstrated his love for us in Jesus Christ.
It is in Jesus Christ that our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be the God.*

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Isaiah 64:1-9

The other Lectionary Readings

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

I Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

Wednesday was International Day for the elimination of violence against women. Sometimes we associate such violence with other nations, with different cultures and different faiths, but tragically violence against women is extremely common in Australia and other “Western” nations. It is found in all suburbs and towns, in all socio-economic groups, in all kinds of families. According to the Victorian Health Department, one in three Australian women has suffered physical violence since the age of 15⁴. Every week a woman in Australia is murdered by a past or current partner⁵. Violence against women is very much our issue, right here in Australia, and is the subject of this prayer. You may choose to pray about other things that are important to you at the moment.

⁴ <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/-/media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/PVAW/Violence-Against-Women-Research-Overview.pdf>

⁵ <https://thewest.com.au/news/australia/femicide-in-australia-may-proves-deadly-month-for-women-killed-by-domestic-violence-ng-b881563422z#:~:text=One%20woman%20is%20murdered%20by,total%20to%2023%20so%20far.>

Lord our God,
there are so many tasks to be tackled as we endeavour to build the Kingdom;
but we are so often reminded of the prevalence of violence directed against women,
both here in Australia and in many places around the world.
So today we pray for women everywhere.
We pray for women who are trapped in violent domestic situations;
we pray for women in places where even the laws provide no or little protection,
and places where a mostly-male police force sides with perpetrators rather than victims,
and where courts are reluctant to intervene in domestic situations,
even when women's lives are endangered.
Father, we ask ourselves how this can be in today's world,
but we know it is, and that there are many causes – none of them excuses.
So we pray for men and women who live under cultural or religious traditions
which relegate women to subservient status,
and which empower men to be violent towards them.
We pray for violent men who are imprisoned by their own demons,
who lash out at the women in their lives as a substitute for facing their own problems.
We pray for women who are exploited in the sex trade,
or in slave labour, the result of the evil greed of powerful men.
We pray for women who have been so abused that they have lost their self-respect,
even lost the sense of their own personhood,
even come to defend the ones who abuse them.
Strengthen our arm, we pray, to change such situations of abuse and violence;
may forces for good everywhere never be daunted by the magnitude of the task,
but work to change laws, to change attitudes, to change hearts and minds.
For no one, man or woman, should live in fear of violence and danger of death
for no more than being who they are.

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**

How many shopping days is it until Christmas?

How many gifts are there still to buy?

How many cards still to write?

When must the pudding and the cake be made, and the ham ordered?

Our waiting is full of stressful tasks and impatient frustration.

But let it not be like that for you.

Be faithful and know that the Saviour will, once again, come to his creation.

Resolve this week to wait upon the Lord with patience and faith.

Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION

It was a time of disappointment. The exile of the Jews had ended when the Persian King, Cyrus, ordered that they be permitted to return to Judah and to reoccupy Jerusalem. Those who returned had done so with such expectations, such high hopes. What they believed had been God's punishment for the sinfulness of their ancestors had finally come to an end. God's anger was spent. Ahead must lie a time of blessing, a time just like the period when the Israelites had first come to occupy the land of promise, when God's presence had been evidenced by his mighty deeds on their behalf.

But they did not return in triumph. The sacred city of Jerusalem lay in ruins, its Temple a mere memory. Resources were scarce; there were disputes between those who had remained and those who returned; progress was excruciatingly slow. The dream had been stillborn. Where was God? Where were his anticipated blessings? Why was their suffering being continued?

Our passage today is part of a longer lament, regretting this unhappy situation. The last section of Isaiah is known as Third Isaiah, and was written in post-exilic Jerusalem. In contrast with Second Isaiah, who was full of hopeful anticipation about the Jews' imminent repatriation, the prophet who finds himself among the returnees struggles with the reverses the Jews have faced. Yet he still seeks to find hope in the promises of God. That hope comes most explicitly in chapter 65 which follows our reading, but it only comes because of the self-examination the prophet undertakes in the lament that precedes it.

Chapter 64 –which concludes the lament, that actually commences at 63:15 – begins with an expression of frustration. The Jewish scriptures spoke of God's mighty deeds in past times, when God's presence had been obvious to all, when the earth shook as God drew near, when the voice of God evoked fear among the Israelites. Where was God now? Why wasn't God's presence so obvious now? If God would only show himself as in past times!

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.*

After all, the prophet says, since long ago no one has known "any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him".

I imagine that we've all been in this place. There have been times when all of us have wondered where God is, not least in times of suffering and challenge. The year of a devastating global pandemic has doubtless led many to wonder about God's apparent absence. It's easy – and appropriate – in Australia to give thanks that the virus' toll here has been so small, but we need only look overseas to the uncontrolled spread of the contagion in nations like the United States, Brazil and Peru, and its virulent resurgence across Europe and in parts of Asia, to get a reality check. Where is God in all this? we find ourselves wondering. So pervasive was that question that the biblical scholar and former bishop, NT (Tom) Wright was moved to write *God and the Pandemic: A Christian reflection on coronavirus and its aftermath*.

It's the same in any disaster. The bushfires with which we began the year, then the floods, traumatised countless Australians who had already survived a severe drought. In nations benighted by warfare, famine or poverty – sometimes all three together! – the same question can be found on people's lips, or at least in their thoughts: where is God in all this? Indeed the question of God's

role in human suffering is one of the most challenging and profound most of us will encounter in our Christian lives – and there are no easy answers.

That was the situation of the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem and Judah, who could not understand why, after all their expectant hope, life was still so difficult and their suffering still so real. We've observed before that it was a common theological / historiographical position for the Jews to explain their suffering as the result of their sinfulness. They had sinned, so God was punishing them. Cause and effect. That cry is often taken up in certain Christian circles even today. Thankfully we have not heard much of it in relation to Covid-19, but I too well remember the poisonous things that were said when another pandemic, AIDS, first began to devastate the gay community in the 1980s. The fact that the Jews explained their suffering as the result of their sin does not mean that they were correct, or that we should take up the same cry. Jesus himself decried such a notion in Luke 13, when his followers attributed some recent tragedies to the sin of the victims. As soon as we blame the victim for their suffering, we withdraw our love and compassion from them, or at least turn them into patronising pieties.

Actually the prophet does not immediately succumb to this paradigm. First he tries a disturbing sleight of hand. While not denying his people's sinfulness, he actually suggests that God himself is responsible for it.

*But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.*

It's quite an allegation: it was *because* God, in his anger, chose not to be present, that his people sinned. Somehow it was really all God's fault. Some commentators ignore this provocative suggestion, but there it is – and while I don't have the Hebrew to go back to the original, multiple translations all render the sentence in essentially the same way. If we were to take the prophet at his word, God was absent, which led the people to sin, which led to the people being punished. Pursued logically, the question becomes, why did God choose to be absent in the first place – if indeed he did – if it were not because of the sinfulness of his people. It's a classic chicken and egg conundrum. It simply won't stand up to try to blame God for our sin.

We might be shocked, or we might be mildly amused, by this lamentable excuse proffered by the prophet, but only until we realise that it's a stratagem to which we ourselves are not immune. Indeed our society is completely beset by blame shifting, as we seek to convince both ourselves and others that we are *never* to blame for anything that has gone wrong. We are ever loath to shoulder personal responsibility, and flounder around for some credible way to sheet home our bad choices or mistakes to someone else. Sometimes, albeit often implicitly, we also blame God – even if it's by asking the question, Why would God allow this terrible thing to happen? If our eyes are focused on blaming God, they are diverted from our own, or our society's, possible culpability.

The prophet's sleight of hand does not last long. He quickly moves to confession of his people's sinful ways.

*We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.*

The people have been delivered into the hand of their own iniquity. It's a powerful phrase. We might put the same thought into our own vernacular: *We are caught in the grip of our own wickedness*. The prophet is remembering that there is a consequence of sin – it is not “just” that we have disobeyed God; we do our own selves damage by living in ways that are destructive and unlife-affirming. The prophet's thinking has come to a realistic recognition of reality. The situation is not God's fault nor is it God's doing; the prophet returns to his understanding that the people's suffering is the result of their own ways of living.

And so comes repentance.

*Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.*

As Christians, we are so used to thinking of God as our Father – it is as “Father” that we address God in the Lord's Prayer – that we may not notice that it is very unusual in the Old Testament for anyone to refer to God as “Father”. Yet there is no familiarity here. God is “Father” here in the sense that he is creator. The following metaphor tells us what is in the prophet's mind. He borrows Jeremiah's image of God as the potter, and humanity as the clay (Jeremiah 18:6); and recalls that humanity is “the work of your hands”. This is getting things into their right perspective: God is the Creator, humankind the creation.

Such are the foundations upon which God's forgiveness will always rest. While we remain in denial about our sinfulness, we push God out of the picture. When we get the world into its correct perspective, recognising God as our creator and ourselves as his creatures, and we come penitently before God to confess who we really are, then God will be merciful to us. The writer of I John famously declared this very thing when he wrote,

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (I John 1:8-9)

There could be no better statement of the gospel than this. Nothing more is asked of us than that we throw ourselves on the mercy of God, who is faithful and forgiving.

So in the course even of this portion of the longer lament, the prophet has moved from venting frustration at the apparent absence of God, to a realisation that what is required is not frustration and anger, but repentance. It is a salutary lesson for all time.

So is it true that God had been absent from his people, that he had hidden his face from them? And for that matter, what has this passage to do with Advent?

In a Christian context, Paul declared to the church in Rome,

*For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Romans 8:38-39)*

The love of God was indeed incarnate in the Lord Jesus, but it was the same love of God that shines through all of God's revelation. And just as there is no power that can separate us from that love, so

there was never any power that could separate the Jews whom our prophet addressed from the love of God. God had never deserted them or turned his face from them. Perhaps the problem was that they did not have eyes to see God's working among them. And perhaps they lacked the patience to wait upon God.

If we cast our eye ahead to chapter 65 of Isaiah, we find God's reply to the lament. Just the first two verses will suffice to give the flavour of God's words of reproach to his people.

*I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me;
I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me.
I said, "Here am I, here am I,"
to a nation that did not call on my name. (Isaiah 65:1-2)*

God was always there, but the people did not call on him. God was never their tormentor, but they blamed God for their suffering and frustration. They demanded that God manifest himself in the kinds of mighty deeds witnessed by their forebears, while God was ever-present, patiently waiting for his people to come to him. The lament itself contains the clue to what was happening with the post-exilic Jews.

*From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him. (emphasis added)*

The Jews had not waited upon God. It is not our place to be impatient with God. God will act as he chooses and at a time of his choosing. The Jews' impatience had blinded them to God's presence among them. God's mighty deeds may have been missing, but his daily blessings were there, had the people only looked to see them. But they were not waiting on God.

God's mightiest deed – even greater than the creation itself – was that God himself was incarnate in Jesus Christ. God's people had to wait a very long time for that pivotal act; we're told that the prophets "searched and enquired about this salvation" (I Peter 1:10-11); they knew that God would act mightily, but the wait was long. Advent is a period of waiting, and that is why this passage is appropriate as we begin Advent. We anticipate with growing excitement God's great act of salvation in the coming of the Christ child. We are enjoined to wait patiently and in faith. God will never desert us, but at Christmas we recall once again how God came and dwelt among us as one of us. That mighty act of salvation is always worth the wait.