

## PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 13 DECEMBER 2020

No 39

Prepared by Alan Harper

### 1 **Being ready for worship**

The third Sunday of Advent. Where churches are meeting, many will be lighting three Advent candles today. Next week the fourth, then five days later, the glorious white candle at the centre of the others will come alive to mark the birth of the Saviour. Advent, as we have seen, is a time of waiting. Our reading today takes us to I Thessalonians, where the Lectionary passage has helpful words about what waiting looks like. One of Paul's admonitions is always to give thanks, and that lies behind the selection of the hymn which is our prayer of praise for today.

### 2 **Prayer of Adoration**

*I well remember an occasion, perhaps twenty years ago, when the Church Councils of two neighbouring congregations reached the end of a long, difficult period of negotiation, and took a courageous and epochal decision. One member present, who was also the organist for one of the congregations, strode to the organ and spontaneously struck up the hymn which we know as "The Doxology" – Praise God from whom all blessings flow. We all sang it with enthusiastic thanksgiving. Nobody had to be told the words! It is so much a part of our tradition. When I was growing up as a Presbyterian, our congregation sang this short hymn every week as the offering was presented. It was a very common custom to do so at the time, and most Protestants "of a certain age" are very familiar with "The Doxology".*

*The hymn may be short, but its four lines are credited with being "the most frequently sung words of any known song for more than three hundred years" – no small claim! The same author writes,*

*It has been said that the doxology has done more to teach the doctrine of the Trinity than all the theological books ever written.*

*Originally the four lines were the closing part of each of three hymns, "Morning Hymn", "Evening Hymn" and "Midnight Hymn", written by one Bishop Thomas Ken (1637-1711) and included in a manual of prayers he published for students at Winchester College in 1673. Today the words stand alone, their accompanying hymns largely forgotten.*

*Ken attended Winchester School, then Oxford University, before ordination in the Church of England. He rapidly gained a reputation for his boldness and outspokenness, traits which he took into his role as a Chaplain to Charles II. Despite the rebukes which Ken regularly directed at the behaviour of the dissolute King, he and Charles became friends, and the cleric was eventually appointed as Bishop of Bath and Wells. When Charles died only days after Ken took up his appointment, however, and his Catholic brother, James II, ascended the throne, Ken's outspokenness soon led to trouble. He was imprisoned in the Tower of London, along with six other Anglican leaders who refused to read the Royal Declaration of Indulgence. He was ultimately acquitted and returned to his bishopric until William III, James' successor, removed him. His remaining years were spent in obscurity.*

*As a hymnist, Ken rejected the contemporary orthodoxy that Christian hymns should be restricted to versions of the psalms and simple canticles. In that vein, this venerable hymn was, in its day, quite revolutionary. The traditional tune to which it is sung, is Old 100<sup>th</sup> (a reference to the hymn for which the tune was composed, a translation of Psalm 100), although it has been set to other melodies in modern times. The words have also been altered in various ways to suit the times – the removal of the masculine pronouns, for example, in the version*

*found in Together in Song<sup>1</sup>, or a reconstruction of the final line or two to avoid the antiquated reference to the “Holy Ghost”. Such alterations seem unnecessary, however, and the version which follows is the original. Short as it is, it is a wonderful hymn of praise, calling on the whole creation to praise the triune God.<sup>2</sup>*

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise Him all creatures here below;  
Praise Him above ye heav’nly host;  
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.  
Amen

### 3 **Prayer of Confession**

*When we bottle up our sins and refuse to acknowledge them either to ourselves or to God, then sin has us tightly in its grip. The reason we confess our sin is because our sin is then exposed to the light of Christ and is amenable to God’s forgiveness. God already knows what we have done, so we should feel no reluctance to come to him in confession. When we refuse to confess, however, we erect a barrier between ourselves and God. So do pray this prayer of confession with sincerity.*

Eternal God,  
in whom we live and move and have our being,  
your face is hidden from us by our sins,  
and we forget your mercy in the blindness of our hearts.  
We choose to live in darkness,  
for our sin is manifold.  
Cleanse us from all our offences,  
and deliver us from proud thoughts and vain desires.  
With lowliness and meekness  
may we draw near to you,  
confessing our faults –  
for they are many and great –  
confiding in your grace,  
and finding in you our refuge and our strength;  
through Jesus Christ your son.  
Amen.

### 4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

*It is hard to go past the words of I 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.

*Could there be a clearer or more life-giving assurance?*

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<sup>1</sup> *Together in Song* (Melbourne, 1999), hymn 768.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth W Olbeck, *101 Hymn Stories. The inspiring true stories behind 101 favorite hymns* (Grand Rapids, 2012), pp 66-8; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doxology> (accessed 30 November 2020).

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

I Thessalonians 5:12-28 (Lectionary has only 5:16-24)

**The other Lectionary Readings**

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126 or Luke 1:46b-55

John 1:5-8, 19-28

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

*To ensure variety in our prayers, I sometimes look at calendars of international and national days. On occasion, they can suggest areas of focus. I did that for 13 December, and was rather amused to discover that Tuesday coming, 15<sup>th</sup>, is Chocolate and Coffee Day for Religious Harmony!<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this is something you will feel moved to celebrate! However, religious harmony is certainly a worthy topic for prayer, although, in my view, we need to strike a careful balance. On the one hand, none of us would want to be part of religious vilification, discrimination or offensive pronouncements about the sincerely held faiths of other people. Similarly, within the Christian communion, we would want to emphasise the foundational matters upon which we can agree, and not focus on denominational differences, or succumb to the temptation to presume that we alone have managed to discern the “real truth” or “correct” doctrine. On the other hand, we need to remember the words of Jesus, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Other faiths are to be respected, but we proclaim the risen Christ. In a multicultural and multifaith society, these are indeed challenging waters to navigate. That is the subject of this prayer.*

Lord our God,

We praise you and give you thanks that you are God,

that you have revealed yourself to your creation,

and that in the person of Jesus Christ, you even became a part of our world.

We give thanks for Jesus' proclamation that he alone is “the way, the truth and the life”, and for the truths which he revealed through the word of the gospel.

We are, and we are grateful to be, your people, followers of Jesus Christ.

Yet, Father, we know only too well the harm which can be done when there is disharmony, between different groups of Jesus' disciples, and between Christians and other religions.

We have seen far too many wars, supposedly fought in the name of religion,

and we see too many people commit horrendous acts, claiming to do so in your name.

So we pray for your wisdom and guidance

as we navigate the perilous waters of our complex society.

First of all, Father, we pray for all who truly honour your name, in whatever tradition is theirs, and indeed we pray for all religious traditions which are wholesome and life-giving.

So we pray for the traditional religious practices of Australia's First Peoples;

we pray for our Moslem brothers and sisters; and for people of the Jewish faith;

we pray for Hindus, and Sikhs, and Buddhists, and Bhá'ís.

We pray that we might always be respectful of the followers of all other faiths, never party to discrimination or offensive language or behaviour directed at those of different belief.

May we live in harmony with all peoples.

Within the Church, Father,

we know that we have dishonoured Jesus' prayer for unity among his followers,

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<sup>3</sup> [Chocolate and Coffee Breaks – Bringing People Together in a Spirit of Love and Acceptance](#)

preferring to think that we alone have a monopoly on truth,  
or that we have perfected the ideal polity for our church,  
or that in some other way we are just truer disciples  
than those “other” Christian sisters and brothers around us.  
So we pray also for harmony within the Church.  
May we focus on the things upon which we agree,  
the fundamentals of the gospel,  
that your overwhelming love reached deep into our sinful lives  
to bring forgiveness, and healing, and wholeness in the person of Christ.  
May your Church speak as one in proclaiming the saving name of Jesus.  
And as we do proclaim our Lord,  
may we find the delicate balance between being utterly true to the One whom we follow,  
and indulging in proclamation or behaviour  
which causes offence to sincere followers of other faiths.  
May we come to realise that the most powerful proclamation we can make  
is to live lives which echo that of Jesus,  
in which our love, our care, our humility and our grace bespeak our faith  
more powerfully than any words we could say.  
We do pray for the blessings of harmony among peoples, our God,  
while we also pray that the gospel might be heard in every corner of the world,  
and that our own Australian society might rediscover the precious faith  
which it has sadly jettisoned and forgotten.  
Grant us the wisdom to live as your people,  
peacemakers in this complex and challenging 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**

Another week of waiting is ahead of us all.  
The secular Christmas rituals will be ramping up.  
But our eye will be on the one thing, the only thing, that has true meaning in this season.  
We are waiting on the coming of the Lord.  
So it’s fitting to conclude here, as Paul concluded his letter to the Thessalonians,  
“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”  
Amen.

## BIBLE REFLECTION

### WAITING

I don't know if you've ever wondered why the books of the New testament are in the order they are. Obviously the gospels are grouped together at the beginning, with Acts directly afterwards; and Revelation, which is apocalyptic about the end times, comes last. However, sandwiched between these two "bookends" of the New Testament are twenty-one letters, thirteen of them associated with Paul and his circle. If you thought, as many people do, that Paul's letters are placed in the order they're thought to have been written, then I'm sorry to say that you're mistaken. They are actually ordered, more or less, by *length*! Romans, being the longest, comes first, followed by I and II Corinthians, and so on. The short letters to the church in Thessalonica thus come late in the Pauline collection.

So it can come as a surprise to find that most scholars believe that I Thessalonians is probably the oldest of Paul's letters. It was most likely written in the early 50s, so little more than twenty years after the crucifixion and resurrection, and only about ten years after Paul began his ministry. It's thought that Paul wrote from Corinth, following a very positive report on the progress of the Thessalonian church from Timothy (I Thessalonians 3:6). Thessalonica was (and is) a port on the northern shore of the Aegean Sea. It was, in Paul's day, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, and lay on an important land transport route connecting Byzantium (modern Istanbul) with the Adriatic Sea. The church there was Paul's foundation, though he had had to leave prematurely because of difficulties with some of the Jews in the city (Acts 17:1-10)<sup>4</sup>.

I Thessalonians is a particularly warm and loving letter. Set against some of Paul's other letters, when he is writing in high dudgeon about issues in the recipient community, this is a beautifully pastoral and affirming letter. It is probably a mistake, then, to "read between the lines" of what Paul writes, to infer particular "issues" in the Thessalonian church. It's probably better to regard the advice Paul gives as general in nature.

It is clear, though, from the preceding chapter that one matter that was troubling converts to Christianity, probably not just in Thessalonica, was the fact that the anticipated return of Jesus had not eventuated. Believers had died; what was to happen about them? It is pretty clear that Paul himself, at least at this early stage in his ministry, shared an expectation that some who were then alive would live to see Jesus' return (4:15). Paul assures the people of Thessalonica that "the dead in Christ will rise", and will in fact precede those still living (4:15-17). The closing chapter of the letter, from which our Lectionary passage comes, is thus Paul's advice to the people of the Thessalonian church, and the other churches in the region (5:27), as they awaited the return of the Lord. Today's believers may be many centuries beyond Paul's day, and have been disabused of impatience at the non-appearance of Jesus, but the reason this reading is offered by the Lectionary writers for Advent is that Paul's advice is no less applicable now than it was when he first penned it. What does it look like to live in the real world, with an expectation that Jesus will return, while nevertheless ensuring that a healthy community life is maintained? Paul offers sound advice as applicable now as it was for the letter's original recipients.

Most of us have a preference for an ordered society. That is also a fairly consistent theme that runs through the New Testament, with strong Jewish roots. Order implies the need for positions of authority, and it is with that that Paul commences.

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<sup>4</sup> *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, 2009) V sv "Thessalonians, First letter to the"; *The Harper Collins Study Bible including Apocryphal Deuterocanonical Books with concordance* (NRSV) (San Francisco, 1989), introduction to I Thessalonians p 2005.

*But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work.*

The ancient world was very hierarchical, and authority, both formal and informal, was a given. However, the new Jesus movement was countercultural. Many of Jesus' stories had pointed to the reversal of power relationships. In Matthew's gospel, the "parable of the labourers in the vineyard" (Matthew 20:1-16), which sets the values of the world on their head, ends with Jesus' words, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." Significantly, that parable is followed by the request by the mother of the disciples James and John, that her sons be promised the privilege of sitting at Jesus' right and left hands at the coming of his kingdom. When the other disciples came to hear of this presumptuous request, Jesus calmed the situation by teaching that the world of the Kingdom would not resemble the human world.

*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:25-28)*

It's thus not hard to see the potential for those in leadership positions in the Church to find it hard to exercise authority.

At least parts of the modern Church can be little different. Of course episcopal denominations – in Australia, primarily the Roman Catholic and the Anglican Churches – certainly do have positions of significant authority, but denominations with a more democratic and congregation-based polity can struggle with the whole concept of authority. The inter-conciliar structure of the Uniting Church, in which no council of the Church can exercise authority over another council of the Church in the matters for which the latter is responsible, is one manifestation of the necessary compromises which are required for a functioning organisation which is cautious about authority.

Paul's advice is practical. Those "who have charge of you" are to be respected because they "labour among you". Theirs is not an authority derived from privilege – as much worldly authority was in the ancient world – but an authority earned by diligent work. So they are to be esteemed "very highly in love". Paul is clearly not implying that they may never be questioned or challenged, but he is legitimising positions of leadership and authority in the Church, for the simple reason that an anarchic church would be unlikely to function in the longer term. But the admonition, "Be at peace among yourselves", is directed both to the leaders and the led: the appropriate exercise of authority is to promote harmony, not to sow discord. Disharmony could be (and can be) unhealthy within congregations of God's people.

The strong are to be patient with the weak.

*And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.*

It is pretty clear who the "fainthearted" and the "weak" are likely to have been. Still today every congregation has those who are weak in their faith – and *all* of us are weak in our faith from time to time – ; and becoming a Christian in the midst of pagan society, especially in places where there was a strong Jewish community, certainly took courage. As for the "idlers", we are likely to think of the modern pejoratives "dole bludgers" or "layabouts". However, the ancient world had no social security safety net, and people had to work to survive. It has been suggested that Paul may have been referring to people who, convinced that Christ's return was imminent, had ceased to work and depended on charity. Or they may have been genuinely exploitative folk. Whoever they may have

been, they were certainly to be admonished, but they, along with the fainthearted and the weak, were to be treated with patience. Impatience leads to disharmony and conflict. Those who are strong are to show their love for their less robust sisters and brothers by being patient with them. That is an important lesson for the Church in any age.

Paul then moves to more general advice about living the Christian life in this period of waiting for the Lord.

*See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.*

There are seven admonitions here. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus had taught,

*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?*  
(Matthew 5:43-46)

Paul's teaching is the same, and it is noticeable that he specifically extends its application beyond the Church community – "to one another *and to all*". The greatest "weapon" of the Church was to be love. It was to win over its enemies by showing them love. Once again, that is ageless advice for the followers of Jesus Christ.

The next three admonitions are to rejoice, to pray and to give thanks – always and in all circumstances. We all know people to whom these things seem to come naturally, but for most of us they don't. It is not hard to rejoice and give thanks when things are going well, nor it is uncommon that we resort to prayer when things are not going well. Paul's challenge to people like us is to rejoice and give thanks in adversity, to be able to discern the good gifts of God, even when we are preoccupied with our plight; and to pray – to keep the conversation going with God – even when things are going well for us. These are important disciplines. To fail to rejoice and to give thanks when we are preoccupied with adversity is, implicitly at least, to blame God for our troubles; while to limit our prayers to those times when troubles drive us to our knees is to use God as a kind of triple zero number, to be accessed only in times of dire emergency. What we are called to do is to develop a relationship with God, respectfully and gratefully acknowledging his extraordinary blessings which are all around us at all times, while having a dialogue – *not* a monologue, where we do all the talking – with the God who is both our Father and our friend.

"Do not quench the Spirit." It may seem an odd thought that *we* could somehow impede the work of the Holy Spirit, and of course, in one sense we can't. However, for the Spirit to work within us, and within our communities, we do need to be co-operative. Although it was told of the "word of the kingdom" (Matthew 13:19), Jesus' parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-7) could apply equally to the work of the Holy Spirit. For the Spirit to do his work within us, and within our communities, we need to ensure that the "soil" is fertile, and that growth is nurtured. We do that through Word, Sacrament and prayer. If we are neglectful of our nurturing role, the Spirit will not grow within us. So the admonition not to "quench" the Spirit is an important one.

"Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything." Paul certainly allowed that there were prophets in the Christian communities (*e.g.* I Corinthians 12:28), so his advice does not only refer to the prophets of the Old Testament. However he was also well aware of the danger of charlatans, and

of those who are deluded into thinking that they are speaking the word of God. So everything must be tested. From time to time, atrocious acts are committed by people who claim that God's voice instructed them to perform their heinous deeds. We rightly place them in the legal system where they are more often than not declared to be insane. Not all those who claim to hear God's voice can be taken seriously. The same is true in less horrendous circumstances. There are people who claim to have a direct connection to God. Their advice may be wholesome and lifegiving, or it may be challenging and controversial. Paul's caution is important. We must not cynically judge that such people are deluded and to be dismissed, but nor should we blindly accept what they say as the word of God. We are to test it. Paul does not elucidate here how that is to be done, but in other places he and other New Testament writers do offer some tests. Essentially they are about whether the prophecy accords with the Scriptures, whether it glorifies Christ, whether it embodies the greatest gift of all, love, and whether the prophet is sober and respectful of the Church community and its leaders<sup>5</sup>. These judgments are best made by the Christian community: although he predated the Christian era by over three hundred years, the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, rightly put great weight on the common sense of the community, and he was right. With all these prudent provisos, however, we are not to despise the words of the prophets among us.

Finally, we are enjoined to,

*hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.*

Such advice may seem redundant: which of us knowingly abandons the good and embraces the evil? Yet this is a necessary reminder for us all. Temptation is all around us, and the descent from good to evil is generally down a gentle slope. Each step is easy enough, although the cumulative effect of successive steps can be disastrous. While they might be extreme and particularly public examples, how many televangelists have ended up in scandal and often criminality? How on earth did so many clergy, in Australia and elsewhere, become embroiled in the abuse of children? Why does the present Pope compare cleaning up the Curia with cleaning a basin with a toothbrush? Temptation faces all of us. Paul's reminder that we need constantly to check our motives, assess our actions, and eschew evil is a valuable one.

Paul's final request is that the recipients of the letter pray for him. We know that he prayed constantly for the communities with which he worked (*e.g.* I Thessalonians 1:2), but his humble request recognises that the master, in his turn, is in need of the prayers of his "apprentices". This is a model of a good relationship, and another timely reminder from Paul. It is at our peril that we underestimate either the importance or the efficacy of diligent prayer.

Isn't it interesting how much there is packed into these few short verses, right at the end of the letter, in the portion that many of us are likely to skim over as just a conclusion to the apparently meatier content that has preceded? Yet here are very sound instructions to Christians of all ages regarding how we should live in the world during this time of waiting on the coming of the Lord. Does that mean that we conclude with another set of the kind of dos and don'ts to which many Christians seem partial? That is surely not the case, and surely wasn't Paul's intention. Nothing Paul says to the people of Thessalonica implies that their salvation depends on their strict obedience to his injunctions. Their happiness and harmony, yes, but not their salvation. Paul should never be used as the foundation upon which to build a new legal code. In Romans, and elsewhere of course, Paul's entire teaching is that there is nothing we can ever do to earn our salvation, which is entirely a gift through the grace of the Lord Jesus. We can live well, or we can live badly, in the time of waiting, but the One for whom we wait, and the salvation for which we yearn, are the free gifts of a loving God. It is thus not just for the sake of a simple pleasantry that Paul concludes this letter to the Thessalonians, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you".

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<sup>5</sup> See for example I Corinthians 12:1-4, II Peter 3:16, Acts 20:29-30. See [Tests for Prophecy | Bible.org](https://www.bible.org/Tests-for-Prophecy).