

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 5 JULY 2020

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 **Being ready for worship**

Well we're into July, very much into the winter season. And we are still grappling with the pandemic. I hear different reports from around the place about what churches are doing. Lauris and I led worship at one small suburban congregation who have put in place a very detailed Covid Safe plan, and we felt very confident about being there – but only because they were being so appropriately careful. A week earlier, I noticed our local Anglican church re-opened, and as I passed on my morning walk, I could see the 8:00 am worshippers suitably socially distanced. However, others are moving more slowly, in keeping with their own situation and risk assessment. Our home church of St Stephen's may begin cautiously reopening for smaller groups this month, within our resources to do this safely. Spikes in Victoria of late have certainly reminded us that we are far from out of the woods. So these notes will touch you in different ways, perhaps as a complement to resumed services, or perhaps still as a stand alone personal resource. Whichever situation you are in, I hope they remind you of the wonderful God who has invited us into his family. With that reminder, begin with the prayers below.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

I checked over the past weeks, and a well-loved hymn we have not used – so it's about time we did – is Amazing Grace. The History Channel is currently running a doco series on the history of Europe. In a recent episode, it highlighted the ungodly and highly profitable trade in African slaves upon which much of Europe's prosperity in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century depended. It is sobering to think that so many of the wealthy merchants' homes that we may so admire as tourists were paid for by traffic in human lives. The current Black Lives Matter movement in America is part of the legacy of that abhorrent trade.

The writer of Amazing Grace was a former slave trader. John Newton (1725-1807) went to sea on his father's ship at the age of 11, and became embroiled in the slave trade. He spent time capturing west coast Africans for the slavers, before becoming the captain of his own slave trading ship. However, over time he was led to realise the barbarity of the slave trade. Initially he attempted to ameliorate the harsh conditions on board for the captives, but eventually abandoned his command and became an anti-slavery advocate. After nine years working as a clerk at the Port of Liverpool, he entered the ministry of the Church of England. His studies were assisted by George Whitefield and John and Charles Wesley, although Newton himself did not join the Methodist movement. He was appointed to the Parish of Olney, near Cambridge, and served there 1764-1779. His authenticity saw him become a very popular preacher, both within and outside the church, and he sought to match the realism of his words with appropriate hymns. With the English writer, William Cowper, in 1779 he published Olney Hymns, a collection of 349 hymns, of which Newton the author of 282. Among them was Amazing Grace, based on I Chronicles 17:16,17. It bespoke Newton's lifelong passionate proclamation of the saving grace of God, for whom even the worst sinner was not irredeemable.

After Olney, Newton served at St Mary Woolnoth church in London where he had a very effective ministry, and where he befriended the great anti-slave trade advocate, William Wilberforce. Coincidentally, the great Act of the British Parliament, abolishing slavery throughout the empire, was passed in the year Newton died, 1807. Newton's, and his wife Mary's, remains were eventually reinterred in Olney, where the epitaph for John, written by himself, can still be seen and reads, "John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and Libertine, a servant of slavers in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,

restored, preserved, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Faith he had laboured to destroy.

Amazing Grace originally had six verses, and later Newton wrote three more. What appears in any modern hymnal is usually a subset of these.¹ The following is the version found in Together in Song².

Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.

As grace first taught my heart to fear
so grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come
God's grace has brought me safe thus far
and grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures;
he will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures.

Amen

3 **Prayer of Confession**

You may find this prayer helpful, or choose to pray your own more personal prayer, or to pray a combination of each. God is always ready to hear our confession.

O God, we confess that, despite all this,
we remain in constant need of Jesus' redeeming grace.
Deep within ourselves, we know the allurements of evil,
we know our shortcomings, our sinfulness and our weakness.
What we want to do, we do not do,
but instead find ourselves doing that which we do not want to do.
The fact is that we remain slaves to sin,
that we are utterly dependent upon your mercy and forgiveness.
It is not in us to love others as we love ourselves,
and our desire to worship you with our whole being is forever stillborn.
Forgive us what and who we are, we pray,
and strengthen us for the times ahead,
that we might be more the people you created us to be.
For we ask it in the holy name of Jesus, our hope and our Lord.
Amen.

¹ Kenneth W Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories. The inspiring true stories behind 101 favorite hymns* (Grand Rapids, 2012), pp. 28-31.

² Hymn 129.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

The good news, proclaimed by John Newton to all who'd listen was this:
Christ did not come into the world to condemn us, but to save us.
His grace is our hope, and its flow is bountiful.
He promises that, if we confess our sins, and are sincerely sorry,
he will surely forgive us.
In the Risen One, then, our sins are forgiven.

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Romans 7:15-25

The other Lectionary Readings

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Psalms 45:10-17 or Song of Songs 2:8-13

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

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

These materials go to quite a number of people across Sydney, in the Central West, the Snowy Mountains and on the South Coast. We all have different communities, and this prayer is for our own particular community. You may choose to pray about other things that are important to you at the moment.

Heavenly Father,

Our prayer today is for our own community, in this diverse nation.

We have focused much on our own community in recent times,
as we've warily watched for the intrusion of Covid into our local midst.

We've spent more time than ever close to home,
and we've been more conscious than usual of our neighbours and friends.

Our supermarkets have become the hubs and lifelines of our community,
while so many other places of gathering, including our churches,
have been closed.

We have felt deeply the loss of so many of our local newspapers,
at this time when we value authoritative news more than ever.

So we pray for our communities.

First and foremost, we pray for our neighbours – our immediate neighbours,
as well as those who are more distant, whom we may not know,
but who share this place with us.

We pray for our community leaders – politicians, ministers of religion,
business owners, school principals, local service providers,

Indigenous leaders, presidents of service clubs, sporting coaches –
for all who provide direction, inspiration and example to the rest of us.

We pray for those whom this time of lockdown and fear has caused hardship –
for those who have lost their livelihoods;

those for whom the lockdown has exacerbated loneliness, abuse
or family tensions;

for those whose businesses are threatened;

for those whose health has been compromised by their reluctance to seek help;

for those whose families have been separated by social distancing,

or whose family celebrations or rituals have been compromised or cancelled;

for those who have been deprived of activities that they value deeply.

We give thanks for those who have kept our community going in this time – for supermarket workers, police, transport drivers, nurses and doctors, teachers, aged care workers and social workers, farmers and all who have produced our food and other essentials, and the many others who courageously stared down their own danger to serve the rest of us.

As the time passes, Father,

we pray that you will remain with us in our communities.

Grant us wisdom to get the balance right between the public safety and the necessity to reopen businesses and community activities.

Especially we pray for our churches, the places to which we yearn to return, that we might worship you among the community of faith.

May decisions about reopening be made cautiously and wisely, lest we endanger our sisters and brothers in Christ.

Bless our communities into the future, in all their diversity and untidiness; remind us of the importance of where we come from as part of our identity, and remind us to give back to the place and the people who give us so much.

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**

The wonder of God's love is this,

that he is ever with us,

even in our worst moments,

even when we feel far from him.

Indeed, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,

and the love of God,

and the companionship of the Holy Spirit,

are with us now, and will abide with us evermore.

Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION

Two weeks ago, we explored what is required of the Christian in response to God's undeserved and free gift of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. It was certainly *not* to keep on sinning, confident in God's forbearance and continuing grace. Equally, it was *not* to concoct for ourselves a new Law, a new black and white code for living, just like the former Law from which we've been set free. Both of these alternatives would be a deliberate choice for death, a turning of our back on the suffering and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on our behalf.

We concluded that we were to heed the teaching of Jesus, the teaching that reminded us that our motivation is as important, or more important, than our overt actions. *I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart*, Jesus told his listeners. He enjoined his followers to *Love your neighbour as yourself*. These are very high – even impossibly high – standards by which we are called to live.

Last week, if you read the Lectionary passage from Romans 6, and possibly my reflection on it, it was all about slavery. Paul spoke of our liberation from slavery to the Law; but, lest we be deceived into thinking that that apparent freedom actually gives us control over our prerogatives, we were reminded how easy it is to become enslaved once again to sin, as we *think* we are making our own free choices. No, said Paul, freedom from slavery to the Law must lead to slavery to *righteousness*; in effect we must become God's slaves, if we want to be free from the clutches of sin.

If you reflect for a moment, both Jesus and Paul are saying the same thing. We must move beyond our fixation on the letter of the law, our sense that only our actual actions are what matter; and embrace instead the life of righteousness, a devotion to the good that must spring from deep within us. What has to change is in our innermost core; it is not just about being restrained in what we actually do and say. In short, our whole character must change. Controlling our outward behaviour is far from enough.

Both these thoughts form the backdrop for today's reading from Romans chapter 7. At first glance, it's a pretty dispiriting passage! As this year's commentator in *With Love to the World* says,

At first blush it's hard to find a lot of "good news" in this passage. If anything, it feels like the opposite!³

One thing you can say about the Bible: it doesn't beat around the bush. It calls a spade a spade when it needs to. It can be ruthlessly honest about the human condition. That is certainly the case with this reading today. Everyone of us can recognise our darker side in Paul's devastating words.

It's been argued that Paul isn't actually writing about himself as an individual – and thus not about all of us as human beings. NT Wright, the former Bishop and now Oxford scholar, claims that, in this passage, Paul is taking on the role of Israel, that this passage is, in some way, an exposition of Israel's relationship with sin⁴. If I dare to disagree with an eminent Oxford academic, then I'm sorry but I just can't see it. What Paul describes – the battle within us over temptation and sin – is just *so* familiar to each and every one of us. Paul puts into words our deepest and most private conflicts, as we reflect on our inability to meet the new standard of slavery to righteousness which is required of us⁵.

So here we are again at this concept of slavery. Christ's death sets us free from our slavery to the

³ Rev Michael Earl, *With Love to the World* xvi (2020), no 3, p. 43.

⁴ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone. Romans* (London, 2004) I, pp 127ff.

⁵ James R Edwards, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1992), p. 190 takes the view that this is a deeply personal account by Paul.

Law, from the clutches of sin, and we are to be slaves to righteousness. But, cries out Paul, in this deeply personal and agonising passage, it's not that easy! I can't do it! he is saying. Just as we know that *we* can't do it either! We completely resonate with Paul's agony. We know that what goes on in our mind is as important as what we actually do. We know that we are to be the slaves of righteousness, harnessed by the glorious shackles of God to a life of no sin, of inner cleanliness and sanctity. But we just can't do it. That is not where we are. That is not who we are.

That war which goes on inside us is exactly what Paul is describing.

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do..... As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do— this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

Which of us, in our more honest moments with ourselves, could not repeat these same words with heartfelt sincerity?

Recently, Lauris' and my Bible Study group did a short study on the letter of James. One of the concluding questions was this: *How is God-given faith revealed in your life?* None of us wanted to answer the question. Yes, it would be easy enough to rattle off some of the good things we might do, or think we do, or which others might say we do. Everyone in the group is, as we would judge it, a fine person, using his or her gifts in different ministries to which we are called. But each of us knew that, to count as virtuous the good things we *do* do would implicitly be a denial of who we really are. We are all conscious – and, like Paul, *should* be conscious – that none of that can make up for the times when we fail. Others may not be aware of what goes on in our heads, but we are. We may not look at a man or a woman with lustful thoughts, and so be an adulterer; but we know only too well the unworthy thoughts that we cannot control, thoughts that bespeak our hatreds, our prejudices, our jealousies and our greed. We all know the times when we've looked the other way, because we lacked the energy or the enthusiasm or the love to act with righteousness. We all know the times we have made selfish or self-serving choices. We know only too well that we have not loved our neighbour as we love ourselves. Indeed, even in the things we *do* do which might be counted to our credit, there are times when our motivation may not be quite as worthy as people around us assume it is. When we are honest with ourselves, we cannot help but join with Paul in his chorus of woe.

So powerful is the force of sin within us that Paul personifies it. He refers to sin "*living in me*" – and the Greek original, I understand is more powerful than that, meaning in fact that sin has literally taken up residence within Paul⁶. It's like another person, preventing Paul from being the person he wants to be. Of course, sin is *not* another person, and Paul is certainly not exonerating himself from responsibility for his sin. What he *is* doing is recognising that, we as humans, are so enmeshed in sin that the life of righteousness is beyond us. That's what he meant in the verse which opened today's passage,

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.

While we are called to be the slaves of righteousness; while we are to love our neighbour as we love ourselves; while we know that it is not just what we *do*, but also what we *think* and *feel*, what our *motivation* is, which truly matters – while we know and acknowledge all these things to be right, and the true hallmarks of a life of righteousness lived in the spirit – we know only too well that we are incapable of that. We are just not that person. As Paul says, we are *not* spiritual. Whatever our

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 192.

outward appearance and actions may suggest to others, whatever it is that we may pretend about ourselves, we know that our inner being is prostrating itself before the sin to which we are enslaved.

So we cry out with Paul,

What a wretched man [or woman!] I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Of course his question is rhetorical. Paul's whole purpose here is to make clear to his listeners, that there is *nothing they can do themselves* to rescue themselves from the stranglehold of sin. We are back where we were in chapter 5 of Romans; back at Luther's great break through; back at the realisation that salvation is given, not earned, back at recognising our utter dependence on the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so our passage concluded with the answer to the question, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!

We are not good at talking about sin these days. We're told that talk of sin presents a very negative view of humankind, and it puts people off the Church. We've mostly been brought up to have a positive opinion of ourselves, to count our positives and forgive ourselves our negatives; not to worry about what dark thoughts may occupy us, so long as what we do and say are okay.

We put on a face to the world, and expect to be judged by what we seem to be, while even we ourselves are not particularly interested in our darker inner selves.

Even in the Church, I've known people who object to having a prayer of confession each week. One chap I particularly recall said, "I haven't committed any sins. Why do I have to confess?"

Our modern ethos of positivity about ourselves is certainly better than encouraging people to succumb to despair, depression and self-hatred. We all know that that is harmful, and I'm not encouraging that at all. But we lose sight of who we actually are at our deep peril. We know only too well that we are not the person we present to the world. But if we deny this truth, we put up an impermeable barrier between ourselves and God. We are denying that we have any need for God's mercy and forgiveness. We are denying that the gospel of Jesus has any relevance for us.

We are choosing death over life, papering over our addiction to sin.

Our passage today from Romans was written to people just like us. Its purpose is to confront us with the truth, to cause us to cry out,

What a wretched man [or woman!] I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Only then are we open to the healing found in the resurrected Christ. Only then will we fall to our knees, and claim the promise,

Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!