

Matthew 6: 7-18

As a boy I was a keen member of Christian Endeavour at Wesley Church, Shepparton, and loved the short prayer services we had before church. By the time I was 12, I was given the task of preparing the next week's service, and for my first ever liturgical venture, I devised an order which began with the benediction and proceeded to the Call to Worship. It is a tribute to our leader that she only said, 'Thank you, Robert'.

I am still young enough to be foolish, so I am going to take Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer and talk to you about it backwards. At the end – that is, the beginning, I will tell you the real reason. So:

**Save us in the time of trial/ and deliver us from evil.**

Or, in the version read in tonight's Gospel -

*<sup>3</sup>Don't bring us into the great Trial, /But rescue us from evil.*

Which is good, and I don't have to argue with that distinguished New Testament scholar, Professor Tom Wright of St Andrew's University in Scotland. We did need a new version, since 'Lead us not into temptation' would no longer do. Even Pope Francis recently challenged it: 'Does God tempt us?' he asked. (He was corrected by some Protestants, who pointed to the story of Job, where God sent Satan to tempt the poor man, but even there, it would be better to say that God sent to test him.)

I was a member of the international and ecumenical group which agreed on the version your church and mine usually use. 'Bring us not to the test', was the first suggestion. The American-English speakers around the table said, 'Sounds like school exams. Sounds like a cricket match'. No, they said, 'time of trial' is better. 'Sounds like a courtroom, said the English-English speakers. Well, the New Testament often uses the language of the court, of law and justice. That's

how we arrived at ‘Save us from the time of trial’. But what ‘great Trial’, what ‘test’?

We are tested and tried in life, God-sent or not; for the disciples and for many early Christians, the temptation was to give up on the faith to save your life. I think that’s what’s meant here. The word for it is ‘apostasy’, abandoning or renouncing faith in Christ. For some that is a test in our own day. Very subtly, in secular Australia.

Let’s go back one petition more.

**Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.**

The issue here was ‘trespasses’ which has lost its meaning today. The New Testament gives us two options: Luke says ‘sins’, Matthew says ‘debts’ (and so does the Scottish Kirk). Perhaps that’s why Tom Wright has ‘*12And forgive us the things we owe,/ As we too have forgiven what was owed to us.*’

I believe that ‘sin’ is *not* a word to avoid, though many outside the church think it’s all we Christians are on about. We believe we work out our lives in the presence of the One whose holy Name we affirm, and we know we do not mirror God in the way we live. And we don’t, not because of a list of minor failings, but because of a deep fissure at the heart of humanity, a propensity to get it wrong. Daily demonstrated in the lockdown. But we also believe in God’s grace. What about this? ‘*You, God, have forgiven me, and my gratitude frees me to forgive someone who has hurt me!*’

**Give us today our daily bread**

has one trick to it. Nathan supplied me with half a dozen versions; Tom Wright has ‘Give us today the bread *we need now*’; very boldly, *The Message* has ‘Keep us alive with three square meals’ - well, that’s more than *most* humans

get per day – but this prayer doesn't intend to focus on our bellies. Or on today. One translation is 'Give us today the bread we need for tomorrow', and I think that's closer to the meaning. This prayer looks to God's future, and humankind's future with God, and we need that sustenance, that nourishment, until the heavenly banquet. The bread of the eucharist expresses the same hope.

### **Your kingdom come/your will be done on earth as in heaven'**

I think that's one petition: in Tom Wright's words, '10 *May your kingdom come/ May your will be done/ As in heaven, so on earth.*' I almost weep with frustration and longing as I pray these words. Pray for God's kingdom, not the way kingdoms - and republics and armies - run the world today! And this prayer is closest to the heart of Jesus, who came into Galilee proclaiming the Good News: God's rule is breaking in!

### **Our Father in heaven/ hallowed be your Name**

Now we are at the beginning of our end. By tradition, the Protestant world calls this 'The Lord's Prayer' rather than the 'Our Father', for it *does* come from Jesus. The address to 'Heavenly Father' is his, which does not mean we shouldn't generously use *other metaphors* elsewhere.

But don't miss the pronoun – 'our'. If there is one thing of infinite value which COVID-19 has taken from us, it is community, family, shared love, and in this case, a God who brings us together through grace. The very style of this liturgy tonight expresses, every time a fresh voice takes up a part, the sense that the church consist of companions (=those who break bread together), a global congregation. Praise God that despite everything, we are together with God!

One of the great spiritual guides of the last century was the Russian Orthodox archbishop in London, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh. In a book on the

Lord's Prayer, he takes a surprising approach: he expounds it backwards! He starts with 'deliver us from evil' and he finishes with 'Our Father who art in heaven'.

That, he said, is the point of the prayer. In the midst of our world, with its trials and temptations, its own sins and the sins done to it, its hunger for bread that lasts, its longing for the rule of love, its call to be holy, the prayer of Jesus will ever lead us back to our loving God and Father.