

Ecumenical Service to mark the beginning on a new session of Parliament 2020. +Stephen Pickard

4th February 2020, St Andrews Presbyterian Church, Canberra

May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O God and bring honour to your Holy name

In early January, having been involved in evacuations on the south coast, finally back at home in Canberra, windows sealed in a vain attempt to keep the smoke from creeping through any crack, air purifier buzzing away, my youngest daughter, Miriam and I were talking about the events of the recent weeks. The heartache, loss, anger, bewilderment at the forces of nature. A cry goes up from the human heart about such things that overwhelm us. We seek a greater wisdom; a remedy and balm for our troubled and anxious spirits. Some may be drawn to pray, perhaps for the first time. What shall we pray? My daughter captured this move well: 'I think about prayer as a kind of divine poetics. I can't think of anything else that could possibly change the hearts and minds of people ... This is why prayer is so necessary; it moves beyond the cerebral and into the actual human experience and our connection with God and the earth'.

So what kind of resources do we have to help flesh out our prayer, give it some bite, cause us to act? Enter the Lord's Prayer. This prayer has it all; orientates us to the universe; focus for our worship, it identifies our yearnings, needs, failures, fears, hopes; provokes a moral vision, speaks to our fundamental responsibilities. It's a prayer that reaches the deepest caverns of the human heart and at the same time can take root in our national consciousness. It is mobile, powerful, universal, convicting and opens up the heart of God.

The reading today from Matthew's Gospel begins thus:

'Pray in this way'. Just prior to this Jesus says, my paraphrase: 'when you pray don't bang on with empty phrases thinking God will hear you because of your many

words'. In other words pray in such a manner and with such intent that you may be drawn deeper into the purposes of God for this world. The remarkable thing is that Jesus doesn't give instructions about *how* to pray, getting the composure right, having a positive attitude, finding a quiet space, standing up or on your knees. What does Jesus do? He provides a formulae; an unadorned series of 5 imperatives. In an age like ours that privileges freedom and spontaneity, here is a form of words with content for the training of would be disciples, for apprentices in prayer. Just a few comments on this prayer for an occasion such as this.

Say this: **Our Father in heaven** Matthew's Gospel was written with the worshipping community in mind. It has a more liturgical rhythm about it. So it is 'Our' not simply 'my'. And it is direct, concrete and familial: 'Father'; abba. The intimate address of a child in the arms of a loving parent. One commentator says of this simple address: God is a motherly father and a fatherly mother.

hallowed be your name The sanctification of the name is an ancient feature of Jewish prayer. God's holiness is God's radical otherness; depth of divine brightness, precision of wisdom; intensity of love, yet closer than breath itself. The word 'hallowed' is old English; but it still seems to have traction conveying a sense of purity, respect, awe and that something more that lies beyond us mere mortals.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven This is a prayer for an earthy, grounded faith. Does not the human heart long for the kingdoms and rulers of this age to give way to the merciful, loving and wise God; and leaders after God's heart. While many people may believe that you go to heaven when you die that's not what the early Christians believed. The New Testament scholar Tom Wright puts it well: 'The point is not for us to go to heaven but for the life of heaven to arrive on earth'. Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of a 'worldly

Christianity'. 'Your kingdom come' was nothing less than the cry of the community for a faith made real in the everyday of this life on this earth. Maybe as we face the realities of planetary life; as we consider the challenges before us, we might dare to pray for an 'earthly Christianity'; and in so doing pray for ears to hear the cry of this country and its First Peoples; this remarkable place we inhabit as guests for a time and a season.

How poignant to pray this prayer as the earth of this country is turned black; peoples' lives overturned, grief abounds and the human spirit stretched to its limits. Is this indeed what the good God desires for this earth? 'May your kingdom come' is not a recipe for head in the sand on the pretext that God will sort it out. Nor does the prayer map out a blueprint for a social and political program or a 4 point government policy plan. But it does call us to faith and action for the common good. So I wondered what might a Government policy look like that offered a glimpse, however fleeting, of heaven upon earth?

Give us each day our daily bread The sense is 'day by day', keep giving us; and even more the sense: give us today what we shall need for tomorrow.

For those with an abundance of resources (i.e. food, material things, wealth and power) born of an acquisitive and voracious spirit, it is easy to become smug and self-satisfied and forget the giver of the gift. And what of those with not enough sustenance for mind, body and spirit. They lack daily bread: security, food, dwelling, community, purpose, voice, rights, representation. It generates frustration and anger and arises out of a sense of being ignored. 'Give us this day our daily bread' is a prayer for sustenance for our lives, care for each other, care for the earth and its climate, care for this country and its people who have come here from the four corners of the earth. The gift of daily bread. We see this in the remarkable generosity of people during the recent bushfires helping one another; and the thankfulness of

receiving sufficient unto the day. In a time of growing inequalities across the world and 71 million refugees wandering the planet this prayer is a call to action; now is the time to prepare for tomorrow's needs; not simply the day after the next, but prepare for the needs of the tomorrows of future generations. Prepare today for our grandchildren's children.

There is so much more to this prayer. Perhaps when Parliament resumes today you might ponder the words of this prayer as they ring in your ears and you can fill in the blanks as the Spirit leads. Suffice it to say the prayer of Jesus, like John's Gospel, is shallow enough for toddlers to wade in and deep enough in which a blue whale can frolic. It's a prayer which is deeply personal with a universal orientation; it covers the bases of our life and planet; it inspires and provokes us to pursue the things that make for peace and justice in our personal and national life. This prayer has an inescapable political and pragmatic edge to it. It offers non-negotiable guidelines for our life and aspirations. It is an uncomfortable prayer to pray in our times. A political poetics from the lips of Jesus. It is nothing less than a fundamental spiritual resource. It's a prayer that draws us heavenward and at the same time plunges us into the things of the earth. May the prayer of Jesus take root in our lives and inform the deliberations of this new session of Parliament. And as you begin your work for this year know that you do so with the prayers of many Australians. And may God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen