

Ash Wednesday – 2017

The gospel reading this evening was a long one. I decided to use the full reading, rather than the shortened version, because it included the account of Jesus teaching his disciples to pray the words of the Lord's Prayer. I wanted us to hear this because of a particular clause in the prayer. In verse 23 we read 'and save us from the time of trial.'

During my time as a theological student at Wangaratta Cathedral the decision was made to move from the 1978 book, the AAPB to the then new book, the 1995 APBA. With that change came the new translation of the Lord's Prayer. I very much supported the move to the new book and I was rewarded for my enthusiasm by being asked by the Dean to preach at the mid-week Eucharist on 'save us from the time of trial.' During my sermon an elderly member of the congregation interjected and claimed that, and I quote: 'you blokes just want to take away the mystery of it all.' I don't recall now how I responded, I was probably completely flummoxed. I felt my time of trial was upon me!

'Save us from the time of trial' is a more literal translation of the Greek original. In the third century Tertullian proposed 'do not suffer us to be led into temptation.' A century later St Augustine knew this rendering but preferred 'Do not bring us into temptation.' In 1538 Henry VIII wrote 'suffer us not to be led...' and then Cranmer in the 1549 prayer book adopted the interpretation 'and lead us not into temptation'; it has been used ever since and is still in our modern prayer book alongside the modern usage 'save us from the time of trial.' It is a fascinating clause in this our most important prayer. The question is can we indeed be saved from the time of trial or indeed should we?

On Monday I attended the opening lecture of the academic year at St Mark's titled "The good book under the gum trees: the Bible in Australian culture." The lecturer Dr Meredith Lake spoke on the topic of the place of the Bible in Australia. It was a challenging lecture because whilst she spoke of the way that the Bible was central to our cultural understanding it also called us to account, placed us on trial, questioned indeed whether ours was a Judeo Christian culture, a term so frequently used. It was challenging, unsettling. She spoke of aboriginal Christians like William Cooper who became a Christian and then challenged the churches to fulfil their obligations as the Bible proscribed to uphold the rights of his people. We heard that challenge this evening in the words of Isaiah, God speaks through the prophet to the people of Israel: Yet day by day they seek me and delight to know my ways *as if they were* a nation that practised righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God. The people in turn question God...we fast but you do not see, we humble ourselves and you do not notice. Their fasting, their religion is clearly not acceptable, they are challenged, put on trial...what of us.

Lent is a time of trial. Acknowledging our weaknesses, faults, regrets, and misgivings is challenging and it is a trial. But trials are also the means by which we find truth, Lent is a time of discovery, self-discovery and we can be confident that we will be saved from trials and the truth beyond that which we can cope. It is for a good reason that we are daubed this ash this evening and that that very ash is from the palm crosses blessed and handed to us last Palm Sunday. Lent is a time to ponder our mortality, the dust and ash from which we were moulded and to which we shall return. A time to consider our own response to and reconciliation with the God who in Christ, goes before us and into whose hand we place our own, knowing that he has faced *the* trial, *the* ordeal in which our own trials and ordeals are given new meaning and context and for which we give thanks.

So much of our calendar relates back to the northern hemisphere, indeed the very word Lent is derived from the Anglo Saxon for spring. So I was glad to read this RS Thomas poem 'The Prayer' which concludes in a way that is perhaps relevant to us here in Canberra:

*Deliver me from the long drought
of the mind. Let leaves
from the deciduous Cross
fall on us, washing
us clean, turning our autumn
to gold by the affluence of their fountain.*

Save us from the time of trial. Amen.