

On Prayer — Part 1

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, 15 September 2024

Revd Rob Miners

As promised last week, I said I would speak on prayer, using a piece I wrote in 2014. A few of the more chronologically gifted people of the congregation may remember the events. So it's part one this morning and part two next week.

Now whilst in the first part, I speak a fair part about my involvement, it's not my intention to glorify myself. I'm glorious enough already. But there's one lady here who can vouch for part of what I'm saying this morning. Jeanette was part of the congregation at St Mary's when all this occurred—although she had great foreknowledge, as she chose to go to the coast on the particular weekend when it all occurred.

While I was locum at Christ Church, Queanbeyan for 13 months in 2013-14, someone asked if I would speak on the subject of prayer. Or more precisely, on de-mysticising prayer—their words. Prayer, being such a huge subject, really requires a series style of sermons to deal with it properly. Do not panic, this Sunday and next Sunday I will be dealing with it.

Prayer, to my mind (recognising that mine is a very simple mind) should always be a two-way conversation with God. Note, *two-way* conversation. It's not just us trotting out our long list of requests to God. It's also us providing a time of quietness, perhaps even solitude, where we can listen for God speaking to us. So, I'm going to tell you a story and hopefully you might see the many different styles of prayer as I speak.

This is a true story and one which I had been wanting to document for some years. It's also me still thinking and wondering what it was all about some 36 years after the events. It was written while I was recuperating after an operation. The actual words and events will be recorded in minutes, photographs, letters, newspaper clippings next week, which I'll hang up over in the Lamberton Centre.

On the 19th of April 1988, I was inducted as the first diocesan priest to the parish of St Mary in the Valley, South Tuggeranong. The parish had started five years earlier under the auspices of the SSM, the Society of the Sacred Mission. This is an Anglican religious order for priests and brothers. Even my appointment to the parish came about in strange circumstances. As my time as curate of St Matthew's, Wanniasa, was drawing to a close after two and a half years, Bishop Owen Dowling called me in and asked where I might like to be appointed. The other three clergy who had been ordained with all had received their initial parishes. As I had been living in my own house for the past two and a half years and was aware that the ministry of the SSM was drawing to a close, I light heartedly replied, I think I might go to St Mary's as their first diocesan priest.

Bishop Owen responded very quickly with,

Rob, you can rule that possibility out of your mind totally. It won't happen for the following reasons. One, this would be your first appointment as Rector and clergy are always appointed to a smaller parish to get experience before being appointed to a larger parish. Two, there are many country clergy who need to come back to Canberra for children's education needs or have served in the country and now deserve to be considered for a Canberra parish. Thirdly, this has the potential to be one of the largest parishes because of demographic growth patterns with new suburbs. And lastly, a bishop never appoints a priest to an adjoining parish.

So it was with great confusion that I received a phone call from the bishop some weeks later offering me the parish of St Mary in the Valley South Tuggeranong.

I replied, "Where's that?" Because I'd always known the parish in its shortened name as St Mary's, Richardson. After he'd explained that they were one and the same, I reminded him of our previous conversation, ruling out such an appointment. He responded by saying that the presentation board (now known as the Clergy Appointment Board) were unanimous in their selection and that it was obviously a leading of the Holy Spirit which could not be denied.

I was duly appointed and was inducted on the 19th of April 1988. At the time, the annual income was not sufficient to cover stipend, running costs and the parish had no rectory, no parish car. When I assumed responsibility for the parish, I was given one chalice borrowed from St Paul's Manuka, one chalice donated as a farewell gift by the SSM, and a cope on loan from St Paul's. Seeing I don't wear curtains, I returned that one quickly. The SSM returned the photocopier from Adelaide which when air freighted from Adelaide allowed the carcinogenic toner to spread through the entire machine and the box in which it was contained.

We started looking for a suitable four-bedroom house to purchase as a rectory. Of course, this purchase had to be at a time of boom in the Canberra housing market and there were only two houses on the market which were four bedroom. But what did that matter anyhow? For the lounge room became the chapel (remember we had no church building) the dining room became the parish office, and one bedroom became the study and interview room. The family room was used to house larger meetings. O the joy of it all, with a wife and three children in residence. From memory, the purchase price was \$129,000 and the total amount was borrowed. At this time, the area comprising the parish was experiencing enormous growth and went from five suburbs when I arrived to eleven suburbs when I left; some 42,000 people.

On the 14th of May 1988, I was standing in a queue at the then CMS bookshop in Civic behind Robin Long, rector of Bungendore Parish, when I heard myself say, "Robin, I don't suppose you've got any spare church buildings laying around your parish?" I hadn't even been thinking about church buildings and with St Mary's financial position being so dire, it was a ridiculous inquiry. I was so embarrassed and couldn't get out of there quick enough. As I drove home, I kept praying and asking, "Lord, what was that all about?" A short time later, 30th of May 1988, 16 days later, I attended the annual clergy conference and the rector of Tumbarumba rushed up to me and said he'd been speaking with Assistant Bishop Bruce Wilson about a large, unused weatherboard church at Mannus, New South Wales. Bishop Bruce suggested that Rob Miners might be interested in the church.

Frankly, I was astounded. I asked if he had a photo of the church at home and suggested that he might arrange for his wife to post it to me so that it would be there when I got home on the Friday night. I also phoned Sylvia and asked that she arrange for a meeting of the wardens to be held on Friday night, 3rd of June, at the rectory with no stated purpose or subject. That's intriguing stuff, yes.

That night, I explained to the wardens the circumstances leading up to the meeting and produced some large, coloured photos of the church interior and exterior. Great excitement all around and after a time of prayer, it was decided to drive to Mannus the next morning to investigate further and, if appropriate, take it to the congregation. On Sunday, 5th of June, the ridiculous proposition was initially laid before the full congregation. We called for a prayer vigil of one week to really ascertain the Lord's leading. We prepared a prayer point brochure for the week with a feedback meeting scheduled for one week later.

At the feedback meeting, it was prayerfully decided that we cautiously pursue the proposition of relocating St Michael and all angels building at Mannus to an unspecified block of land within the parish. Again, more prayer as to where a suitable block of land might be found. A small committee was formed and negotiations commenced with the then NCDC (National Capital Development Commission), now disbanded. Immediately across the oval, opposite the rectory, was land signposted for community use. Our small committee spoke with the NCDC as to its availability, again after prayer. In time, the answer came back that the land was available for a church building.

Again, with prayer and faith, it was decided to pursue the vision. Congregational numbers were increasing, and income growth was commensurate. It was also decided to purchase a second-hand parish vehicle, a Ford Meteor with dark brown interior and orange exterior, which became known as “Jaffa.”

We had in the congregation a very experienced project builder who was willing to oversee the project. The diocese was kept informed of our intentions and were encouraging of us moving. With the demographics of the growing suburbs, the number of baptisms was enormous. How about 261 in six years? But as part of the preparation sessions, I would inevitably bring the conversation around to the church building, with the result that I had plumbers, electricians and other trades promised. Eventually, the NCDC allocated the blocks across the oval on favourable terms.

Tumbarumba Parish gave the church building to us with their blessing. Everything was coming together and was now all systems go. Quotes were then obtained for the removal of the building from Mannus to Chisholm. One was accepted from a Wagga contractor for \$72,000. Focused prayers for the requisite funds to enable us to proceed were then made. The parish then wrote to all church solicitors of the diocese and all Anglican, that is, Church of England and Episcopalian, churches around the world bearing the name of St Mary’s, explaining our intentions and inviting them to contribute financially. Large donations were also received from the Diocesan Shakespeare Trust and the Home Mission Society. Some \$36,000 was raised in a very short time. \$36,000 doesn’t sound much now, but it was back then.

In the middle of it all, I received a phone call from Duntroon Military College asking if I would like a hall to go with the new church, free. Would I what!? It was an old drill hall that was architecturally in keeping with the church building. However, once the availability of a free drill hall was heard within the general community, scouts and other organisations wanted it. Duntroon apologised and said it would now need to go to tender. Eventually, we secured the building with a tender of \$1,000. Relocation costs of \$10,000 were also met, with the hall needing to be off the site within a month. This was achieved, and again, prayers of thanksgiving were offered.

On 23 April 1989, a “claiming of the block” service was held on site at 2.30pm. Archdeacon Alan Huggins, who was acting as diocesan vicar-general at that time, and I, officiated. Weather-wise, the service was again blessed. Alan and I were on the tabletop of Gary Lowe’s Land Rover. We were facing south, and the choir and body of the congregation were facing north. As we later compared our experience of the service, the congregation were concerned that the service would be washed out for they had observed the menacing low black clouds in their line of vision. Alan and I were having similar concerns, with the gathering ominous black clouds to the south. However, where the service was being conducted on the oval, sunshine was perfectly fine. The whole project was always immersed in prayer.

After the claiming of the block service, every Wednesday night there was half an hour of prayer on the block. One of our parishioners, who had served as a naval commander during the Second World War, was able to rig up a battery with other devices which projected a huge cross into the sky.

As the Duntroon Hall had been erected within the ACT boundaries, there were no problems with relocating the building onto our site. This then enabled us to remove the furnishings from Mannus to the now standing hall. The furnishings were removed from Mannus as part of a training exercise by the Transport Section of the Army. (It's not what you know, it's who you know.)

And another freebie: "Lord, thank you very much." Having had numerous meetings with the NCDC regarding the church relocation, we still hadn't received formal approval for the project. They didn't know what to do, as the law didn't provide for the possibility of an old building being relocated into Canberra. On the morning of the arrival of the first section of the building, I was down at the planning section at Tuggeranong, asking, "Well, what are you going to do?" They replied, "There's no law saying you can't do it, so bring it in and put it on the block." To which I replied, "Well, I do hope that it gets approved one day." Even the transport was covered in much prayer.

The building arrived in three or four trips on the low loader, and the carpenters quickly and expertly joined the framing of the walls and floor together. The three huge, and I mean huge, roof sections were left sitting on concrete blocks, awaiting placement by a crane. The crane was booked for the following Monday morning.

Some months had been spent by the ladies, rubbing back, restoring the pews, sanctuary table, lectern, prayer desks, etc., etc. The men were sanding back the hall, priming and painting the outside. Pretty soon we would be starting on the church, once the roof was in place. Every Saturday at lunchtime was barbecue and beer time, and the camaraderie was wonderful. Saturday the 12th of January 1990 dawned another beautiful Tuggeranong day, as we all assembled for another day of merriment, mirth and painting—and the mandatory barbecue lunch. During that week the Department of Corrections had phoned to ask if I could use an extra two bodies on the project, as they had two available. These guys had been sentenced to community service for being naughty boys. So that day we had 24 or 25 people on site, and after lunch we got back to work in the still beautiful, calm, sunny day. Not too long into it, a piece of loose, corrugated roofing iron on one of the roof sections began to flap in the light breeze. I grabbed a hammer and nail and attended to the problem.

I cease there. You get the next half next week, if you're good and turn up.