

On Prayer — Part 2

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 22 September 2024

The Reverend Rob Miners

This is the second part of the two-part sermon I on prayer.

As I finished nailing the section that was flapping the tin, I grabbed a hammer and nail and attempted the problem.

As I finished, the hair on the back of my neck stood up, and I was still facing the ground at this stage, and I looked down Goldstein Crescent back towards Isabella Drive roundabout and the back fences along Goldstein were all laying down consecutively, all the way down the road. The next minute we were in what was officially described as a mini cyclone. The three-tonne roof section I had just nailed jumped off its blocks and splintered.

I ran for the safety of the church building, but it just exploded around me. So, I decided to go for the hall door, and as I came round the corner, the hall literally fell over. So where to now? So, I dived under Gary Lowe's four-wheel drive and met Gary under there.

As I lay under the four-wheel drive, I looked up and I was looking up the vortex of the cyclone. There was twisted, corrugated iron, pieces of timber, dirt, shrubs, all spiring hundreds of metres high into the sky. It was all over in about three minutes, and peace reigned again.

The lady across the road had a front veranda, which now became her back veranda. It's strange how my old business mind kicked in, but while I was laying under the four-wheel drive, I remember taking note of the precise time as I recognised that I would need it for lodging an insurance claim. When peace settled, I came out to observe that both buildings had been smashed to pieces.

The church, without the cross-bracing of the roof, was flattened. One section of the roof, weighing in at, I said, three, three and a half tonnes, had been thrown approximately 25 metres through the air and had landed on the roof of the hall, smashing its spine and knocking it off its piers. The crane for placing the roof sections had been booked for the following Monday morning.

The door into the hall was jammed shut, and when we gained access, the ladies were inside amongst overturned furnishings with structural floor piers of varying heights protruding through the floor. A couple of the ladies were also overturned! After doing a head count and checking for injuries, it was found that there were no serious injuries. There was, however, one person missing, one of the community service order men. When we called his name, there was a muffled response from under the pool floor. The floor was mostly flattened, and he sat on the ground except for the few remaining erect piers. We located him when he was able to put the tip of one of his fingers through a crack in the floorboards. He had been working outside when he saw a sheet of corrugated iron coming for him and had dived under the hall, thinking that would be a safe place. He said he had just got there when the hall fell on him. We prised some floorboards off him, and he shot outside with the words, "Man, that was a blast, wasn't it?" He was totally uninjured, without even a scratch, even though the floorboards were literally only inches above his face. His body had fallen parallel to the bearers, with one side of him protected by a fallen brick pier. His reward for working at St Mary's was to have the rest of his service order cancelled.

The Chisholm Fire Brigade arrived instantly, quickly followed by police, ambulances, SES, and the obligatory TV cameras, with reporters armed with a microphone up my left nostril asking the ridiculous question, “Was this an act of God?” When we later found out that the cyclone was in fact only 500 metres wide and 800 metres long, I asked myself the same question. One person was slightly injured and taken to hospital: Lindsay had been sheltering against the hall wall when the church roof section had been thrown onto the hall roof, slid down and gouged some pieces of flesh from his back. He was released about 9.30 that night.

Gary Lowes later informed me that he had seen a piece of iron coming for me around waist height as I ran between the church and the hall. Now, as an aside, gentlemen, always believe your wife’s advice regarding sartorial elegance. Sylvia suggested that morning that I change my jeans as the knees and back pockets had holes in them, but I just grabbed a pair of scissors and cut the legs off above the knees and went to work. How was I to know that I would be featured on the front page of the *Canberra Times* the next morning?

Bishop Owen Dowling, travelling incognito, was amongst the hundreds who gathered to take in the destruction. He had been on leave with heart surgery at the time. Bishop Ian George conducted the service the next day. There was a huge congregation in attendance. Prayers of thanksgiving and prayers acknowledging grief were offered. Bishop Ian addressed the question foremost on many minds, why did God allow this to happen? The project had brought us together as a family, and as we all gathered together in the rectory lounge room the next evening, watching the red flashing warning lights around the smashed remnants of our hopes and dreams, we experienced a little of what those first disciples felt as they gathered together after their leader, Jesus’ crucifixion.

Where do we go from here? For me, the following week was just end-to-end phone calls all day and half the night. On the Monday after the church blew away, the insurance loss assessor arrived and, being such an astute loss assessor, instantly recognised that both buildings were a complete write-off. He stated that he would recommend payout within the week.

Later that afternoon he rang and asked whether I wanted the good news or the bad news first. I replied I didn’t care much as I needed to hear both. So, good news first. I would have a check for the hall payout by Friday. Bad news, the church wasn’t covered. I suggested that I had an AMP policy which suggested otherwise. We then got down to discussing a few technicalities. He said the policy was for a building under the course of construction, where in fact it was a building of 1917 vintage. I replied frankly I don’t give a— I won’t use that word—what the building is classified as, because the AMP knew, and it was specified that it was an existing building being relocated from Mannus and was in the course of construction on the Chisholm site. A Mexican stand-off occurred. All through the project, I had kept the congregation fully informed of developments but, when I told them the AMP were trying to wriggle out, they became a little irate, with many of them having AMP policies. Some wrote to management expressing their opinion of the AMP’s performance or lack of it. As AMP policy renewal notices were received by congregational members, they wrote across the front, “We won’t be renewing this policy as you won’t pay out on the St Mary’s Church claim”, and returned it to them. Still they would not budge. I’m told that the destruction of the church was recorded in some UK newspapers and one French paper.

With the destruction of the hall the furnishings were all removed and stored in various parishioners’ garages. The wreckage of the buildings was then taken to the tip. There was one song which we gave up singing at St Mary’s which was, “Wind, wind, blow on me.”

Now priests are supposed to say morning and evening prayer daily. We really didn't have time until the following Thursday morning or didn't make time. A retired priest and his wife always joined us for 9am morning office. The Old Testament reading for our first service after the disaster was from Ezekiel chapter 13. I'm now going to read Ezekiel, or part of it to you.

The word of the Lord came to me:

. . . "Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: 'Hear the word of the Lord!' This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing! . . . Their visions are false and their divinations a lie. They say, "The Lord declares," when the Lord has not sent them; yet they expect their words to be fulfilled. Have you not seen false visions and uttered lying divinations when you say, "The Lord declares," though I have not spoken? . . .

"Because they lead my people astray, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace, and because, when a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash, therefore tell those who cover it with whitewash that it is going to fall. Rain will come in torrents, and I will send hailstones hurtling down, and violent winds will burst forth. When the wall collapses, will people not ask you, "Where is the whitewash you covered it with?" . . .

"So I will spend my wrath against the wall and against those who covered it with whitewash. I will say to you, "The wall is gone and so are those who whitewashed it, those prophets of Israel who prophesied to Jerusalem and saw visions of peace for her when there was no peace." (Ezekiel 13.1-16, in part, NIV)

Sylvia and I went different directions. She out into the backyard, me out the front door and down the street. That was the morning I nearly walked out of the ordained ministry.

Now, I know that the reading was applicable to Ezekiel's time of ministry from 593 BC to 573 BC but that reading really shook us both. Had I been leading the parish up a wrong path? The project builder owned a beautiful unit at Jervis Bay and generously offered it to us. So we retreated to Jervis Bay for a week to recuperate. While we were away Sylvia was walking through the bush by herself. She was in an avenue of trees which arched over and met in the middle and she heard the words, "This is my church."

We returned home and the battle resumed. The cards, letters, visitors and phone calls continued to come. I wandered over to the now cleared site and was puzzled by dozens of spears in the ground. These spears were 12 to 15 inches long and were in the ground about two and three inches. It took me some time to realise that the spears were the tongue from some of the flooring from the hall and floor of the church. Such was the ferocity of the storm.

Some weeks before Easter of that year Sylvia had a friend return from Paris. She rang one Saturday evening and asked, "How's the church building going?" Sylvia replied, "It's gone, blew away in a cyclone." She then explained what had happened and the insurance claim stalemate. Bea then said, "I know one of the senior managers of the AMP, I'll ring him." Naturally he knew nothing about it. However, he did say that the claims manager would be in front of his desk at 9am with St Mary's file in his hand on Monday morning. He couldn't believe the stupidity of the company spending millions of dollars in corporate advertising and blowing it all for a few hundred thousand dollars.

The clergy hold a renewal of ordination in Bowers on a quiet day in the week leading up to Easter. In those days it was held at the cathedral but now it's in three different locations

around the diocese. At afternoon tea, prior to departure, the Bishop called us all to come together and called me out the front. Sacking? Archdeacon? Assistant Bishop? Archbishop of Canterbury? But no, he had just received word from the diocesan registrar saying the AMP had now decided to pay out in full. Excitement, cheering and applause. About \$190,000 plus \$50,000 for the hall. Again, it's not what you know, it's who you know.

As our esteemed Julia Gillard would say, we would now be moving forward. Receiving the payout gave the Diocese, the Parish and the Property Trust the opportunity to examine the vision again. As the suburbs comprising the parish were moving further south, it gave us the golden opportunity to move further south and be more centrally located. We surrendered the Chisholm site back to the NCDC and at the midnight Christmas service, eight months later, I held up the new lease title documentation for a new block at Calwell. More excitement, cheering and applause.

Every catastrophe teaches us something. It is how we respond that makes the difference. The parish family at that time responded firstly with grief, yes, but no one threw in the towel. Gradually step by step our response turned to faith, trust, prayer and hope we were not finished yet. With the Holy Spirit's leading, another direction materialised. And as we let go of our original vision, we caught the opportunity of a regenerated vision of St Mary's in the marketplace. With God from death comes resurrection.

In January of the new year, I accepted the parish of Tumut and was gone in six weeks. As the late Rex Mossop, the world's greatest tautologist, would say, in retrospect, looking back, I can honestly say that I wasn't running away from the prospect of building the new church building. I had been to Tumut Parish some years before and had assured Peter Bertram, the then Rector that, when he left, I would be the new Rector. Even my appointment to Chairman was strange. Very few rectors have ever sat in on their own clergy appointment board.

Under the leading of the Reverend Chris Short, the new building became a reality.

The whole experience was one which I still reflect on from a faith, leadership and prayer perspective. In 2009, I assisted at St Matthew's, when they asked, for nine months, while Bishop Trevor Edwards was running himself to exhaustion being a parish Rector and Assistant Bishop simultaneously. As I drove past the old site, I stopped the car and walked around. As I walked around, I noticed that some of the concrete footpads were still set in the ground. Looking at them, I wondered what it was all about.

As I put these talks together and reflected, I thought I knew how Moses felt when he saw the promised land in the distance, but never entered it. What I want to draw out of the story is that prayer covered the entire project and that eventually St Mary's ended up with a fine church building, even if the way of getting there was somewhat circuitous. The prayer which I identified was always there.

What was that all about?—

Asking Robin Long about a spare church building.

Prayer asking for direction.

Prayer taking this seemingly ridiculous idea to the congregation.

The week's prayer vigil for the whole congregation.

Prayer for funding.

Thanksgiving for funding received.

Thanksgiving for diocesan backing.

Thanksgiving for the response of churches of St Mary's around the world financially.

Thanksgiving for allocation of the block and claiming of the block service.

Thanksgiving for raising the profile of the church within the general community.

Thanks for all the freebies and trades offered.

Thanks for half an hour of prayer on the block every Wednesday night.

Thanks for transport from Mannus

. . . all covered in prayer.

Thanksgiving that no one was killed or seriously injured when the cyclone struck.

Prayers acknowledging the grief and praying for healing.

Prayer of thanks for insurance payout.

Prayers for the new block direction.

Prayers of reality for new church building.

You see, real and earnest prayer comes from the heart. It doesn't have to come in beautifully crafted words with grammatically correct sentence construction. To my mind, it's talking and listening to God. Of course, with my warped sense of humour, you can only imagine my mirth when I was locum at Young Parish for seven months. Because, on my last weekend there, I had an auction for the sale of five unused churches and they all sold. So, I started my parish ministry trying to build one church and ended it by selling five.

I do hope God was suitably impressed.