

(Genesis 2. 15-17, 3. 1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5. 12-19; Matthew 4. 1-11)

With numerous references to the book written by John Dominic Crossan, "The Greatest Prayer – Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of The Lord's Prayer", Harper Collins, New York, 2010

The lectionary readings today (Genesis 2. 15-17, 3. 1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5. 12-19; Matthew 4. 1-11) seem to fit into a very personal context. They frame up our relationship with God and set up a platform from which to start off the personal spiritual journey that is Lent.

Well, I'm not sure about you, but I'm with Eve. Offered a mysterious wonderful source of wisdom and knowledge, I'd have taken the fruit too. Given the opportunity to buck the authority figure, I'm sure I'd have a go. That's what makes it such an authentic and compelling story about how we ended up where we ended up. We can identify with Eve. And the words of the Psalmist in our liturgy resonate with us – we know the relief that comes through reconciliation and restoration. We know what it is to return from exile.

Estrangement and anxiety are common experiences. The message of Jesus, the presence of his spirit touches us in mysterious ways. Who amongst us would not wish for more compassion?

Who amongst us would not desire to act justly? Who amongst us does not need the opportunity to wipe the slate clean and start over?

The Gospel reading today– the Temptation of Jesus – deserves attention. Forgive me if I touch just lightly on it this morning. Rather, I bring you some thoughts from John Dominic Crossan from his 2010 book on the Lord's Prayer and with your patience, a few of my own interpretations and reflections.

One of my deep and abiding interests, both practically and theologically is;...how can organisations that choose to, live out the Christian faith as they go about their work? Perhaps wisely, my interests in this area have side stepped synods and their equivalents and rested predominantly in the welfare arms of churches and the other agencies that aspire to that calling.

Taking the premise that we are called to be the salt of the earth, the hope is that if even a few organisations can authentically display practical Christianity, they'll encourage others to follow. Amidst the pressure of corporate conformity they somehow walk on an alternate path.

Crossan's book is titled "*The Greatest Prayer – Rediscovering the revolutionary message of the Lord's Prayer.*" It is that message that connects most strongly for me as I start along the path of Lent. It is a message of distributive justice. For me it is a new reading of these very familiar words:

*Our Father , who art in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,
Give us this day our daily bread, and
forgive us our debts as we have also forgiven our debtors,
and do not bring us to the time of trial, but deliver us from evil.*

Crescendo parallelism – this term perhaps means something to some of you, or perhaps not.

In essence, Crossan argues that there's a message in the way the prayer is constructed. If correct, this analysis of poetic parallelism becomes profound theology (p49).

The two major components of the prayer interact with each other, they are reciprocal, and collaborative. God's name, kingdom and will match up with our bread, debt and temptation.

This reading of the prayer is both refreshing and challenging. In a few minutes, I can give you just a taste of the content and then I'll follow it in the same framework, but reflecting on Christian organisations.

So, "Our Father" – God as we know has many names. The case is well put that the term Father refers to the head of the household, the person responsible, the one with authority. The head of the household was mostly, but not always male. If God is the head of the household then household becomes a metaphor for the world – God's kingdom describes the how the world would look if God were at the head.

"In a justly run household all will have enough, and there will also be special care and concern for the more vulnerable ones, Three major groups are especially defenseless and are therefore offered special care and concern by the householder;

The poor and the needy – in a rich society,
Widows and orphans – in a patriarchal society,
Resident aliens – in a tribal society.

The fields are well prepared, the livestock provisioned, dependents have adequate food, clothing and shelter. A sick child gets special care, a pregnant or nursing mother is given special concern. Everyone has a fair share, everyone has enough. “ (p44) God as householder of the world desires such a state of affairs. A well run household is a microcosm of a well run world. (p41) It gives meaning to the central hinge of the prayer, “on earth, as in heaven”.

How shall we Hallow the name of God? In creation God hallowed the Sabbath day. Sincere observance of the Sabbath offers a model to follow that sets us apart from the mainstream of society. We are created in God’s image. We are charged with responsibility to run God’s world.

Your kingdom come. The contrast here is most obviously against the Roman Empire. Crossan suggests we reframe the words “Kingdom of God” into “the ruling style of God”. With God’s ruling style in place, we might look forward to an end of oppressive violence. In its place we would find peace. (p79) We would see swords transformed into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks. Everyone would have land and food to eat. There would be a banquet, there would be equality.

Your will be done. Go back to Genesis to see the early stories of what was planned, and what went wrong, through escalating violence. Think forward to the problems of our world over say the last 100 years. Think also of the wonderful achievements, the great strides forward in medicine, technology and peace. One simple conclusion to draw is that God wills human freedom. (p115) History is a record of the consequences of that will. With that in mind, acceptance of responsibility for our actions is an appropriate response.

The prayer now hinges and turns to the practical outcomes desired on earth.

Give us our daily bread. There are many stories in the gospels about meals. In a number of them we find the pattern familiar to us in the communion service – take, bless, break, give. Contrast this against the practice of the empire of simply taking, at times oppressively large proportions of the crops or catches.

With God’s style of ruling, there is enough food for everyone. Food is also a symbol of power. The powerful rulers had the best, the pick of the crops, the animals. The general population had no such luxury. Give us our bread challenges the unjust practices of the empire.

Forgive us our debts. This phrase is linked to our daily bread by the word “and”. Food for today – and – no debt for tomorrow. Crossan rejects the translation of debts to sins.(p158) In his assessment, it is money that counts – distributive justice. Debt was a major problem in Jesus’ day. In a world where the ruling elite needed half or more of the produce to support their armies and opulent living, there was no margin of safety for the peasant. With nothing in reserve, a poor season, a death, or another calamity could quickly push the household into debt. If the debt could not be paid, the tragedy of slavery and dispossession from their land followed.

Lead us not into temptation. Crossan proposes that in this prayer, the word temptation has a very specific meaning. In the parallelism used as an interpretive framework, temptation matches up alongside God’s will. In that context it represents our intended use of the power that is available to each of us, our will if you like. Placed into the context of distributive justice, or more particularly, the lack of it, what is our primary temptation?

It is surely to get even. The methods of rebellion could be violent or non violent. Violent rebellions frequently won the first round, only to be crushed when the empire’s reinforcements arrived months or years later.

Turning now to today’s gospel reading. Is the Devil or Satan a transcendental spiritual individual? For my purposes, I’ll keep in step with Crossan and think of the figure as temptation personified. The first temptation to turn the stones into loaves of bread is rejected – miraculous power cannot be used for personal use (p170). The second temptation was a temptation for a public display of power, for a public proof of Jesus divinity. Jesus responds; do not put the Lord your God to the test.

The third temptation is the climax. It doesn’t start with “If you are the son of God” – that has already been established. Jesus is offered all the kingdoms of the world. It is an extraordinary offer. There are several Hebrew scripture quotes that could be employed to rebut it, but none are used.

Jesus simply says, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him.” Why did Jesus not flatly deny any demonic control over the earth? (p172) It is because the tempter never speaks of “creation” or “the world”, but only of “the kingdoms of the world and their glory and power.” Jesus is offered the violent world of civilization, not the non violent world of creation.

The point is this – to obtain and possess the kingdoms of the world with their power and glory, by violent injustice is to worship Satan. To obtain and possess the kingdom, the power and the glory by non violent justice is to worship God. These are the two ways of establishing and controlling our earth. This last temptation faced is to use violence to establish God’s kingdom on earth and thereby receive it as the kingdom of Satan.

Back to the Lord's prayer and "lead us not into temptation".

Non violent justice, OR, violent injustice is the essential choice between God and Satan and their respective kingdoms. Now not many of us would own up to worshipping Satan. But the temptation to violence is all to present and real. It finds form in the desire to win at all costs, stepping on and over others in the way.

And this leads me on to present a few thoughts on organisations and how I see that they relate to the Kingdom of God. Organisations at their worst match the excesses of the Empire – power exercised for the benefit of the few, exploitation, oppression, bullying, or worse. Organisations at their best give evidence of the present Kingdom of God. From time to time, we see glimpses of heaven.

But mostly they reflect the complexity we each embody, the good and evil in each of us.

In reflecting on them, I'll stay with the format of the Lord's Prayer –

God as the Father, or the householder will see that in a justly run household everyone has enough, and the most vulnerable are given special care and attention. Resources in most organisations are scarce – those aspiring to Christian service must ensure that the priorities in managing those resources take into account the needs of the vulnerable. In many cases this is the people who are served by the organisation, and very frequently, also the staff employed. They are mostly are women, they are mostly are on low or modest wages. They all deserve special recognition. To achieve this I look for clarity of purpose at the Board level and for a capacity to see the spiritual element in mundane services. There should be a wary resistance to the gloss and glamour available to those at the top. There should be evidence of a generous heart that seeks to serve the needs of others. And these qualities must be valued and encouraged, protected and nurtured.

Sabbath rest has some interesting implications for organisations. It suggests to me that opportunities exist for everyone, when not working, to be able to rest peacefully, free from fear and anxiety and guilt that so often attaches to employment. A healthy balance between work and the rest of life exists.

Give us our bread surely equates with fair and proper rates of pay, terms and conditions of employment. It also requires that adequate workers be employed so that the tasks to be done can be completed in a satisfactory manner. The distance between those at the top and the many workers will not be excessive. There will be enough for everyone.

Your kingdom come takes us into the ruling style of God, the way in which power is used. Authority is used for the benefit of the whole, not the individual. Organisations are destined for conflict. How that conflict is resolved determines their nature and quality. On the one hand there are basic necessities of financial liquidity and solvency. When times are tough, not all the desired services or activities can occur and at times good causes will fail. But on the other hand, where people of faith and energy and capacity get together these problems are solved, and better days lie ahead.

Forgive us our debts speaks to me about sharing the economic resources with integrity. The temptation to draw the financial power into the centre is kept in check. The need for financial discipline is shared appropriately across all sections of the organisation, so that all can see the bigger picture. I reflect that Jesus during his ministry did not establish a physical centre, or base. This should be a caution to those of us following, a reminder that the main action, the main event does not happen at Head Office. It happens day by day in the acts of service by the many staff and volunteers.

Your will be done speaks to me of the principles of natural justice. When important matters are to be determined, all sides have the right and opportunity to put their case, issues are stepped through carefully, communication is timely, open and honest. The temptation to make quick or bruising decisions is resisted. The needs of all present are taken into account.

And finally, lead us not into temptation calls us to non violent justice in our relationships. The urge for revenge or retaliation is set aside – the urge to get even is set aside. In its place, we are called to a non defensive constructive approach – an alternate path to walk – one which leads to peace. We are to look out for the vulnerable, and in the words of Micah 6 we are called “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” Amen.