

Your Will Be Done!

An Address at Highfield Road Uniting Church, July 9, 2006.

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I am sure that the prayer, “May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”, is often said without a second thought. But then, there are those other occasions when we struggle as we repeat the words. Consider the dilemmas of these people –

* The marriage of Peter and Ann seems to be on the rocks once again. Both of them have to decide whether to end it or to hang in there and try yet again to revive it.

* Thomas is offered a high-paying promotion, but it means three years overseas; on account of special needs of his family, it would mean leaving his partner and their two secondary school children at home at a time when his involvement in the family was of special importance.

* Ted, an 80-year old widower, has spent the last decade of his life caring for his wife with dementia; his life is now lacking any meaning or purpose; so he is thinking seriously about bringing his life to an end.

* Mathew is a much-decorated pilot in the U.K air-force. Because he believes the war in Iraq is illegal and unjust, he refuses to return for a further tour of duty. He now faces court-martial and years of imprisonment.

* Marlene, now three months pregnant, and her partner, Anthony, are dismayed when informed that the child they are expecting, if it goes full term, will be born with major congenital disability. The medical advice is to terminate the pregnancy.

* St John’s congregation has strong objections to a decision made by their national church and the parishioners attend a special meeting to decide whether they ought to remain in that organisation.

There are times when many of us struggle to know what is the right decision to be made. What we agonise over, others see as clear-cut. If we believe there is a God who wants us to act responsibly with due regard for the consequences for ourselves and others, then this becomes a prayer spoken with special intensity, “Lord, help me to know your will in this situation, and help me to act according to it”.

After years of warfare, King David thought it was time for him to turn his attention to more peaceful interests. He wanted to build a temple. He was convinced that what he proposed was what God also wanted. But one way or another he got the message: ‘This is not God’s will for you. Your son, Solomon, will build the temple’ (2 Sam. 7).

The apostle Paul had experienced a spiritual high, but then he crashed. He had to deal with a major setback, he termed it 'a thorn in the flesh'. I don't know what the problem was. He did what many of us would do when facing a seemingly insurmountable roadblock. He prayed earnestly and repeatedly that it should be removed. He thought that what he wanted was also God's will. But he eventually he came to realise that God's will was something different, and he was enabled to live with his problem (2 Cor. 12).

St Matthew's gospel records how when Jesus was in Gethsemane he was intensely aware that a horrible and totally unjust death was but hours away. He agonised over this reality. He was anything but composed or fatalistic. After hours in prayer, he finally was able to pray, 'Not my will, but yours be done!' (26:36-42).

Back in 1943, a professor from Union Theological Seminary in New York, during the summer vacation, preached at a little country church in Massachusetts. The prayer he used that day has become famous ever since. He prayed: "*God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference*". Reinhold Niebuhr, one of America's outstanding theologians for more than 40 years, in that remarkably insightful prayer, has given a very helpful explanation of how we might pray "Your will be done". There are some things that ought to be changed – a fatalistic attitude of 'what will be, will be' is not the way to go. There are some things, however, that we cannot change, and we need a special measure of grace to deal with them with serenity. But most of all we need wisdom to know what can and what cannot be changed.

When Cynthia and I were leading psycho-educational support groups for parents of a child with major disability (*Care for Caring Parents*), parents often told how they had come to apply this prayer to their situation. They could not change the fact that their child had a profound disability, preventing the child from doing the sorts of things other children of the same age were doing. They did not see their child's disability as the capricious decision of some impersonal fate. Sometimes there was a genetic or physical explanation. But they were not pre-occupied with why their child had this disability. What they were looking for were ways to deal with the demanding situation which they, their child and other family members were facing, and would face for years to come. They were helped to find the

courage to change the things that could be changed – sometimes to strengthen their own inner coping resources, sometimes to take steps to secure greater family and community support, sometimes to change community attitudes towards disability. In the process of working out what could and what could not be changed they showed remarkable courage, serenity and devotion.

Let us consider now briefly this prayer as a community prayer. As with the other petitions in the Lord's Prayer, this one too places a heavy responsibility on all those of who pray it. It is appropriate that we, as concerned citizens of this country, should applaud actions and decisions of governments, community organisations and individuals that are clearly motivated by compassion and a desire to assist others to share in the justice and 'fair-go' that we enjoy. When we see this happening in our community and nation we rightly conclude this surely must be in accord with God's will for his world. On the other hand, there are occasions when we have a right and duty to ask how can this or that policy of government be in accord with God's will? The Assembly of the Uniting Church these days has questioned the Commonwealth's treatment of persons who have no power in the political scheme of things, such as asylum seekers, our indigenous people, and David Hicks. Many of us will applaud and strongly support their discernment and pray with greater intensity that God's will be done.

But since we do not have infallible knowledge, our best informed judgements can be mistaken; humility is always in place. The decisions we arrive at in good faith can be later shown to be wrong. That is the risk we take, but yet if we believe actions and decisions of government are not in accord with God's intention of justice, humanity and compassion for all, we have a right and duty to say so, and be prepared for the consequences.

So we need to keep on praying, "May your will, O Lord, be done as well as it is humanly possible for us to do it. May our actions advance justice in our world; may they help people to become reconciled to one another; may our decisions advance unity within families; may our actions enable those people who depend on us to achieve their full potential in the world; may our words bring hope, comfort and healing." All these things surely are God's will. But remember, as I said in earlier address, 'the ball is certainly in our court' when we pray, 'Your will be done'. It is up to us to ensure that we do follow through on what we perceive to be God's will, as difficult and as frightening as that sometimes can be.