

BEING THE ANSWER TO OUR PRAYERS

Sermon by Rev Dr David Merritt, September 11, 2011
The Avenue Uniting Church Blackburn

10 years ago today I was watching late night television when the program was interrupted by a newsflash showing a tall building in New York with smoke pouring from it and a dramatic description of a plane that had flown into the building. I switched to the American news channel CNN and over the next couple of hours watched a second plane deliberately fly into the second World Trade Centre tower and saw where a third plane had flown into the Pentagon building – the world's largest office building in the world by floor area that is the home for the US Department of Defence in Arlington, Virginia, near Washington. A fourth hijacked plane heading for Washington was crashed in open country due to actions by American civilian passengers to stop it reaching Washington. Nearly 3000 people died in the September 11 terrorist attacks that are remembered today.

It is hard for us to understand the hatred that lead a group of well educated young Muslims to train over a long period to destroy the lives of so many people. What a violent and destructive species humans can be! How tragic that religion is sometimes used to justify such terrorist violence!

This morning I want to reflect for a few minutes on my Christian response to those events. In the face of such suffering, religious people are driven to pray. But many also know that such suffering caused by humans is another demonstration that God does not control what humans do. Nor does God repair the damage we do to each other. We cause it and we have to fix it. Our prayers are not to persuade a reluctant God to act but to clarify our vision of life and to strengthen our will for how we must act.

The lifetime of most of us here has been the time of the most deadly conflicts in human history. The catalogue of killing in 20th century wars

and conflicts is horrendous to recall – slaughter in China and Russia, two world wars, the obscene extermination camps of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, Treblinka and over a thousand more Nazi death camps, Pol Pot's killing fields, wars in Korea and Vietnam, over 5m people slaughtered or raped in the Congo, over 100,000 killed in the Bosnian war, 800,000 killed many by machetes in the Rwandan Genocide. On and on the toll goes – a death toll in the 20th century that a recent study calculates at over 230 million humans killed by humans. And in this century, terrorist attacks in New York, and closer to home, the Bali bombing that killed 202 people including 88 Australians, and other terrorist acts in London, India, Spain.

Just as earthquakes and volcanoes show the effects of natural forces at work in the planet on which we live and are not the judgement of God, so the terrible toll of suffering from human conflicts does not show acts of God but the consequences of human choices. We, the people of the world, have to cooperate to control and, hopefully, one day eliminate such terrible human actions.

So if God does not stop such horrors, what is religion about? Why do we pray? When we pray what do we expect? Are prayers answered?

I think religion reminds us we are connected with something larger than our individual lives. A church service is a gathering to look at our ordinary life but to see it in a different way, to recognise we are not alone, that we are part of the family of God. And that has implications for how we think about other people within that worldwide family of God, including those who find a way to God in other religions.

That is why we pray.

If our prayers are to ask God to do what it is our responsibility to do – for example to feed the hungry or to stop wars - I don't think our prayers are answered.

If our prayers are to ask for privileges for ourselves or to change the laws of nature for our benefit – for example for the end of drought or for earthquakes not to happen - I don't think our prayers are answered.

But if our prayers are to focus on how people are suffering and what people need, we can become part of the answer to our prayers. In this church we pray for people in need – and it is no coincidence that this small group of people gives \$50,000 a year to the work of the Uniting Church beyond this congregation - \$1000 a week that helps to answer our prayers. Here we pray for asylum seekers and people enduring famine – and it is no coincidence that this congregation gives additional thousands of dollars to Share appeals and the Christmas Bowl that help to answer our prayers. In this church we pray for people of other faiths – and it is no coincidence we invite people of other faiths to share with us what their faith means to them and that we visit the Sikh temple and Jewish synagogues and a Buddhist meeting place.

The 2006 census report stated that people involved in a religious community were much more likely to be involved in volunteer community work than people who are not involved in a religious community. It is part of being the answer to our prayers.

One of you told me a couple of weeks ago that you were surprised at how much support you received from people here when you were sick. When I had 38 weeks of radiotherapy for cancer that left my body weak and my mind wondering about what cancer means for life expectancy, I knew people prayed for me but I was not prepared for how moved I was by the actual support and encouragement – the phone calls, cards, food and visits. I discovered that people become part of the answer to their prayers. A community of faith can make a difference.

And prayers are answered when we focus on what is important in our lives, what has deep meaning for us, and what Jesus teaches us. We know that we can speak of the Mystery of God only in metaphors and that all our words are inadequate, but being open to that Mystery can

transform our lives and give direction to how we live – how we treat people, how we use our money, how we vote, the kind of society we work to achieve.

Prayers may be answered in ways we can't explain. But prayers are certainly answered when we become the answer to our prayers.

I read a story about a man who worked for the Post office whose job was to process all the mail that has illegible addresses. One day a letter came addressed in a shaky handwriting to "God" with no address. He decided to open it to see what it was about. The letter read:

'Dear God,

I am an 83 year old widow, living on a very small pension. Yesterday someone stole my purse. It had \$100 in it, which was all the money I had until my next pension payment.

Friday is Christmas and I had invited two of my friends over for dinner. Without that money I have nothing to buy food with, have no family to turn to, and you are my only hope.

Can you please help me?

Sincerely,

Edna'

The postal worker was touched. He showed the letter to the other workers. They decided to help and each donated some dollars. By the time he finished the rounds he had collected (5, which they put in an envelope and sent to the woman.

The rest of the day, all the workers felt a warm glow thinking of Edna and the dinner she would be able to share with her friends. Christmas came and went.

A few days later, another letter came with the same shaky handwriting addressed to "God".

All the workers gathered around while the letter was opened. It read:

‘Dear God,

How can I ever thank you enough for what you did for me?

Because of your gift of love I was able to fix a glorious dinner for my friends. We had a very nice day and I told my friends of your wonderful gift.

By the way, there was \$5 missing.

I think it might have been those thieves at the post office.

Sincerely,

Edna’

There are people of good will everywhere who make the world a better place. Whatever else it can be, the church is people of goodwill praying and taking action to make a difference for good.

On a day when we remember the tragedy and suffering that evil people cause, we look beyond that to celebrate the difference that faith and love can make.

In words that have echoed across the centuries:

“What does God require of you
but to do justice,
and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God”.

Micah chapter 6 verse 8

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