



AN INSURANCE POLICY ?

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the Kingdom, the power and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer: Christians of all traditions, denominations and movements pray the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. The focus of the prayer is God – who God is as one worthy of praise – and our relationship with God and by extension, with others. This is not a wish list sent up to a God who is there to do whatever we ask. It is the prayer of one who seeks God's will for the world; one who understands themselves as a 'sinner' before God and knows the power of God's grace to reconcile people to God and each other; and of one who knows that true security can only be found in relationship with God.

WHERE DO WE REALLY PLACE OUR TRUST?

For many of us it is all too easy to put our trust in religious practice and observation than in the object of that practice. We might go to church every Sunday, we might mark the major feast days with celebrations at church and at home, we might fast and pray and study the Bible every day. We might become so comfortable in our patterns of worship and prayer, that we begin to trust what we do more than who we worship. When this happens, it can become all too easy to disconnect the rest of our life from our faith. Our relationship with God becomes well contained and easy for us to manage and our religious practice keeps us secure: it keeps us secure in this world because God promises to keep us from harm; and it keeps us safe for eternity because all we have to do is believe. The rest of our lives are lived disconnected from the consequences of our faith and ultimately disconnected from God.

This is not a modern phenomenon. The prophet Isaiah voiced God's anger with the Israelites for just this kind of behaviour – for God fasting, prayer and worship is meaningless when it is disconnected from relationship with God and relationship with others (doing justice):

¹¹What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. ¹²When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; ¹³bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. ¹⁵When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. ¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:11-17)

For God religious practice and observance meant very little if it did not find expression in acting for justice. Trusting and believing was not an end in itself – trusting and believing should lead the faithful to action.

Jesus taught the same lesson. In the parable of the Two Foundations, we learn that strong faith is about hearing and doing.

⁴⁶“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you? ⁴⁷I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. ⁴⁸That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. ⁴⁹But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.” (Luke 6:46-49)

Justice As Christians we might feel safe, secure and comforted by our prayer, but that is only half the Christian story. The other half challenges us to take risks for God for the sake of the Kingdom. Jesus calls his disciples to live as he did – to reach out to those that society ignores and discards, to act with compassion and work for God’s justice in the world.

This is not what many of us might regard as a safe and secure way to live. The twelve apostles left everything, their homes, families and work, to follow Jesus. Then there were the ‘seventy’ who were also sent out into the world with nothing:

¹After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ²He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. ³Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; (Luke 10:1-4a)

Truth One of the consequences to living the Christian faith as a security blanket or an insurance policy is that we become very insular. Christianity becomes a club. Those of us in the club are meant to share the same world view; we develop particular and defined ways of interacting with groups and people ‘outside’; and we either give permission for people to join our club or not. Even for those already inside, it can be a challenge to meet the criteria.

For some people the church may not be a safe place at all. It is worth thinking about why some people might feel unsafe in your church and what it is about the way people interact and behave that might make others feel unsafe and/or excluded.

The problem of faith as a club was a common problem in Jesus’ time and was often the source of his disputes with the religious leaders of the day. Jesus touched, talked and ate with those who had been defined as ‘sinners’ or unclean. Jesus not only broke the club rules but he taught that those who love God should love the ones society and religion had forsaken – just as God loved each of them, also sinners before God. The sense of an elite and exclusive club is contrary to the idea of grace as a gift from God, available to all, and where living faith is the way to participate in the coming of God’s kingdom.

BUT GOD DOES OFFER US COMFORT AND SECURITY, RIGHT?

Throughout the Bible we read assurances of God’s protection and care. Psalm 121 is one of the most well-known of all the Psalms. It is a promise of God’s protection.

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come?
²My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
³He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
⁴He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
⁵The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
⁶The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
⁷The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
⁸The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

Jesus too, often spoke about the folly of seeking security anywhere but in God’s love and grace. True security does not come from empty prayers or material gain. It comes from God’s forgiveness. We are to trust God and trust Jesus. Jesus told parables and stories about people who believed that they could find security and comfort in material wealth only to be eternally disappointed (Luke 12:13-21, Luke 16:19-31). He advised the rich who were still trying to find the perfect relationship with God to sell all they owned and give away their money (Matthew 19:16-22, Luke 3:11, Luke 19:1-10). He also taught that security does not come from power and privilege but from humility and service (Mark 10:42-45). In God’s kingdom, the ways of this world will be turned upside down – the poor will be rich, the hungry will be fed, the sick healed and the oppressed set free. It is only in God that we can find eternal hope and only in God will we find true security.

Mercy What we often forget, however, is that the security God offers us is that of eternal grace and love. We are not offered the security and comfort of lives free from hardship. We are offered the security of forgiveness. Our security is in the gift of grace in Jesus Christ – his life, death and resurrection. We are reconciled to God through Christ’s death on the cross and in his resurrection we are



assured new life. This is the source of our security and this is God's protective love in action. The death and resurrection of Christ does not guarantee us from all sickness, harm and tragedy but it is the ultimate expression of God's love for us.

RISKING THE WAY OF JESUS

The way of Christian discipleship, as we have already seen, is demanding. Jesus expects much from those who put their trust and faith in him. Faith has consequences for the way we live. We are called to live every day in a way that reflects gospel values – the values of the Kingdom of God. It matters to God that the decisions we make, the things we do and the relationships we build bring honour to God. What brings honour to God, however, is not always what helps us to feel secure in this day and age. We are bombarded every day with messages about the need for financial security. How do we reconcile that with Jesus who told the rich to give their wealth away? We are bombarded with messages about the need to be powerful and successful in work. How do we reconcile that with Jesus calling his followers to a life of service and humility? We are bombarded with messages telling us who to invite into our homes, our communities and our country and who to keep out. How do we reconcile this with Jesus calling us to invite the most marginalised and despised to share our table?

Christianity is not an insurance policy. It is a call to insecurity. It is a call to risk the way of Jesus. We are called as Christians to truly, actively and consistently act as ambassadors of Christ in the world in which we live. The way of Jesus invites us to be fully human, by releasing preconceptions, fears, resentments and desire for retribution. Jesus walked the path of forgiveness and reconciliation, and we are to walk that path with him.

What risks do we take as Christians? What stops us from taking risks?

Community St Paul understood the risk involved in Christian living. He was persecuted and gaoled for his faith. In his Letter to the Romans, he outlined what he believed to be faithful discipleship. Risking the way of Jesus was about sharing God's love and hospitality without fear and without favour:

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:9-21)

Try to live one day in the next week in a way that reflects Paul's teachings in the above passage. It is commonly said that the only sure way to ensure that you have no enemies is to make friends with them all.

FINDING OUT MORE

Read some books about Christianity and peace

- *The Yellow Wallpaper and other sermons* by Peter Carnley, Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers 2001
- *Overcoming Violence – the challenge to the churches in all places* by Margot Kassman, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998
- *The Powers That Be - Theology for a new Millenium* by Walter Wink, New York: Galilee Doubleday, 1998
- *Making Peace, Making Sense* by Sandy Yule, Hong Kong: WSCF, 1988

Justice





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