

## The Time of Trial

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The theme of this Fifth Congress of Asian Theologians, 'Sharing Hope for a New World', confronts us with the need to ask many questions. We note the presupposition that this old world needs replacement. We might wonder whether our various national communities have any chance of agreeing on a design for a hopeful New World. We note the positive challenge of finding ways to share hope, with the implicit requirement of putting our shoulders to the wheel of history in order to assist the realization of this New World. I do not propose to address any of these questions directly, beyond acknowledging that our world is indeed broken by a wide range of oppressive powers, most of whom are seeking to realize hopes of their own devising. There is a contradiction between the way of Jesus and the way of global empire, most clearly seen in the reality of domination backed by violence<sup>2</sup>. It is important for each of us to share what we can from our own specific context.

As an Australian, I am deeply troubled by our national priorities which reflect our hope for a peaceful national existence in economic security. Peace and prosperity are good things in themselves, but we Australians seem uncritically wedded to the present world order despite its oppressive character. We have shown ourselves ready for unjust treatment of individuals to send political messages, though not without widespread resistance<sup>3</sup>. It is difficult to find unequivocal words of hope in our context without taking the long journey away from our so-called mainstream cultural dreaming.

Does this mean that no Australian theologian can address the theme of the congress? I don't accept this conclusion, as for Christians there is always hope. Australian Christians should be held by the hope for God's new heaven and new earth, a hope that cuts across our national hopes for security and prosperity. If we believe that there is no hope other than that offered by great and powerful friends, we are unbelievers in the God and Father of Jesus Christ<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, if we are told that there is no hope other than that offered by revolutionary liberation from oppression, it is hard to accept the ambiguous promises of armed struggle when propagandist terrorism waits in the shadows. This set of questions is engaging and existential, but I find the hope offered in these terms to be uncertain, particularly when we recognize the continuing possibilities of oppression in

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<sup>2</sup> For a fuller exposition of this contradiction, compare Kim Yong Bock, 'A Biblical and Theological Perspective', in *CTC Bulletin*, Vol. XX, No. 3, pp. 40-50.

<sup>3</sup> I need only mention the name of David Hicks, incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay, to exemplify this point. Our whole policy towards those seeking asylum who do not arrive with Australian visas is another salient example.

<sup>4</sup> In this connection, Isaiah 31:1-3 is pertinent.

societies which have experienced the euphoria of political liberation. All too often, the promised new world looks uncomfortably like the old. For me, the words of the Psalmist express the outline of Christian hope which focuses on present troubles: "I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."<sup>5</sup> I conclude that Christian hope, both this-worldly and other-worldly, is in God for all things small or great. We need therefore to ask how we can make our hope in God real.

This question of how we can find real hope in God suggests to me that we should pay attention to two rather traditional categories when we are considering sharing hope for a new world. These categories are prayer and prophecy. We can always turn to God in prayer and we should do so whenever we come to recognize that our hope is from God. All aspects of our individual and corporate relationship to God can be expressed in prayer, though I would emphasize the aspect of listening when we face the brokenness of our world.<sup>6</sup> Biblical experience of the coming of God is mainly in terms of the word of God coming to a prophet, culminating in the coming of Jesus as the Word of God incarnate. The Word of God brings the full reality of God to bear, in judgement and in mercy, on the historical situation in all its entanglements. There is therefore a spiritual experience of receiving the word of God. This experience is witnessed to in our Protestant traditions, both Biblical and Reformation, but if we are to share hope for a new world, I believe that this experience needs to come back to centre stage.

I am grateful for the modern English translation of the Lord's Prayer, which we now use in Uniting Churches in Australia.<sup>7</sup> The most notable change<sup>8</sup> is the replacement of 'Lead us not into temptation' by 'Save us from the time of trial'. This is one of the more tangible fruits of modern biblical scholarship and of ecumenical solidarity between churches and communities facing persecution and disaster. As I was growing up, the emphasis upon 'temptation' inevitably led me to focus on monitoring my own conscience, thus shrinking the scope of my Christian faith to struggles of personal morality. This reflects the persistent belief of the Western church that salvation somehow depends upon individual choice, despite the profound Reformation recovery of the knowledge that salvation is from God alone, received in faith.

Jan Lochman confirms that there is a general difficulty with the traditional English translation, 'Lead us not into temptation'. Noting that the temptations in mind include the final, Satanic challenge to our human destiny, Lochman asks, 'Why use the words, "Lead us not into temptation"? Does our God, this God, our Father in heaven, lead into such

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 121:1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Western Protestants such as myself are incorrigibly activist in orientation. In the discussions of the Fifth Congress of Asian Theologians, I was struck by the perception that prayers of lamentation belong with prayers of confession, as both seek to speak the truth of the situation, respectively from the perspectives of victim and perpetrator. Yet both prayers require the truthfulness of the Holy Spirit for effect. Listening prayer is a necessary precursor to effective lament and confession.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. 'Uniting in Worship 2', Uniting Church Press, Sydney, 2005, p.228.

<sup>8</sup> The other noteworthy change is the replacement of 'trespasses' or 'debts' by 'sins'.

<sup>9</sup> J M Lochman, *The Lord's Prayer*, Trans. G W Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W Eerdmans., 1990), 142.

temptation?"<sup>9</sup> We should not ask for something which is not a real request. The idea that God might deliberately lead us into something really difficult in order to see how we get on suggests an inappropriate callousness in God. Yet asking that God not do this implies the real possibility that God might so choose. Lochman notes that this was a question asked from earliest times, as can be seen from the discussion in the Letter of James. 'No-one, when being tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no-one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it...' (James 1:13-14).

Traditionally, temptations come to us from the devil, not from God. 'Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you' (James 4:7). 'Being tempted' is different from 'being tested', as the Letter of James also makes clear. 'Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance' (James 1:3-4). Yet there is a close connection between temptation and testing. 'Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him' (James 1:12).

It was therefore a breath of fresh air when I learned that the Greek word *peirasmos* meant 'trial', and could only be translated 'temptation' by way of the thought of God testing us. The most literal translation seems to be 'Do not put us to the test' (or even 'Do not lead us into the test'). The focus shifts from my own disordered inclinations to the demands of the situation (personal, communal and global) in which we are presently placed. This shift of focus is fundamental to our understanding of how God is relating to us. We meet God in the needs of our neighbour and in the opportunities given to us for joining in God's mission of redemption in our broken world, not simply in our personal choices in response to our perception of these wider needs. The change from 'Lead us not' to 'Save us from' is also significant, as it makes it very clear that we look to God for deliverance and that all God's actions are positive and redemptive. Perhaps most importantly, the new translation shifts the focus of attention decisively towards the eschatological coming of God as Saviour of the world.

Yet the difficulty of this petition remains, as it relates to the realities of evil and suffering in our world. We can see how Jesus himself prays this petition in the garden of Gethsemane.

We therefore have to come to grips with the fact that Jesus gave this prayer to his disciples, but that when he prayed it himself *the answer was "No"* [italics in the original]. He put it together with an earlier part of the Lord's Prayer ("Thy will be done"). When he held the two side by side, he found that God's will involved him in a unique vocation. He would be the one who *was* led to the testing, who *was not* delivered from Evil.<sup>10</sup>

We can note that Jesus was delivered from evil in the resurrection and ascension. We can

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<sup>10</sup> T Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (London: Triangle, SPCK, 1996), 68.

wonder how our own experiences of encountering times of trial and evils of all kinds might relate to what Paul refers to as 'carrying in the body the death of Jesus' (2 Cor. 4:10), qualifying the implicit claim here that no-one else need be led to the testing. But we can also note the validity of Wright's point that Jesus asked to be 'saved from the time of trial' and that this request was refused.

What should we have in mind when we ask to be saved from the time of trial? If the time of trial is every day in every way, so that our every thought and deed is scrutinized by the divine bookkeeper, it is nonsense to ask to be allowed to avoid this<sup>11</sup>. Yet the word 'trial' suggests a more focused, summary reality in which aspects of our lives, or our lives as a whole, come into testing and judgement. To be involved in a court case is to be removed from everyday life into the special process of establishing and weighing 'the facts of the case' with a view to determining a judgement. If we are the accused person, our lives are open to the scrutiny and judgement—and possibly punishment—of others. There is real point in asking to be spared from this kind of trial.

I suggest that 'the time of trial' is better thought of as uncommon and extraordinary than as ordinary and everyday, even if the ordinary and everyday is caught up in extraordinary events. Today, it seems proper to refer it to those times of social and natural catastrophe in which there is intense and widespread suffering. Through the power of modern communications, those of us connected to them have become aware of catastrophes all over the world, leading to a constant and depressing knowledge of the suffering of so many of our neighbours<sup>12</sup>. The extraordinary is in danger of becoming the everyday. It is one of the gifts of this prayer that it continually reminds us that in God's providence the time of trial is not inevitable, though to pray to be saved from the time of trial is to commit ourselves to do what we can to forestall the need for trial. Justice denied leads to the need for a trial, just as justice done removes that need. We are in the territory where prophecy, the truthful expression of God's word of judgement and mercy, is required.

Times of trial follow times of justice denied. Particularly when we attend to the collective, communal and national dimensions of injustice, we can discern the onset of times of trial because of justice denied. When justice continues to be denied despite being brought to trial, injustice is compounded. From the perspective of Christian faith, sin is involved where justice is denied. In times of trial, it would seem that God allows those involved to receive the consequences, often catastrophic, of past injustice. Times of trial can therefore be averted by repentance, confession of past injustice and restitution. Our understanding of this petition connects with our understanding of the preceding petition, 'Forgive us our sins/debts/trespasses, as we forgive...', though in the modality of the restoring of just relationships. The fullness of the restoration of just relationships is what we hope for in

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<sup>11</sup> Some of us have thought that this petition does amount to a request for being spared the testing realities of life and have preferred to say, 'Save us in the time of trial'. Yet we can think that 'from' can mean 'from out of the time of trial', which means much the same as 'in the time of trial'. I prefer 'from' with the thought that the time of trial is extraordinary and not inevitable.

<sup>12</sup> There is another dimension to the suffering of those whose lives are destroyed by catastrophic events, which is the media involvement in broadcasting an account of these events. While this can be helpful in stimulating outside help, it can also be oppressive through misrepresentation of one kind or another. This is another large topic.

the fullness of the kingdom of God (Luke) or the kingdom of heaven (Matthew).

Jesus seems to have expected a fullness of the coming of the kingdom of God in the wake of widespread suffering, understood as a time of trial or tribulation<sup>13</sup>. I am not in a position to enter very far into the historical debate as to just what Jesus did expect, but it seems important to recognize that his recorded words point in a number of directions. He clearly predicted the destruction of the temple<sup>14</sup>. Uncertainty emerges with the question from the disciples, 'When will this be?' In Mark, the focus remains on the destruction of the temple and the associated suffering (Mark 13:5-23) until the mysterious return of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven is announced, with cosmological change signifying the end of the present age and the commencement of the age to come (Mark 13:24-26). In Matthew, the disciples' question explicitly asks about the end of the present age (Matthew 24:3). It is this combination of 'imminent future prediction' and 'end-time apocalyptic destruction' which has perplexed Christian interpreters ever since. Even if we accept rationalizing interpretations of apocalyptic imagery as coded political messages about the overthrow of worldly rulers, questions about our possibilities for life with God beyond our present earthly state remain.

The early church clearly expected the imminent arrival in our history of the fullness of the kingdom of God and the return of the Risen Christ<sup>15</sup>. These expectations, in a variety of forms mutated by the passage of time, still form a central part of Christian faith. For me, the crucial text for orienting ourselves in this strange area of expectation is Mark 13:32: 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.' We are to live faithfully in the present, without forgetting that there will be an end.

I was interested to learn that the word 'eschatology' was first used with its modern meaning for Christian theology by Philipp Heinrich Friedlieb in his *Dogmatics* of 1644.<sup>16</sup> This timing suggests the strong, shaping influence of modern western conceptions of historicity for Protestant teaching concerning Christian eschatology. It is a mistake to seek to interpret eternity in terms of time, though as time-bound creatures we find it hard to do otherwise. We typically understand knowledge to require factual clarity such as we sometimes possess with respect to events of the past, yet we also recognize that even the immediate future cannot be known in this way until it becomes the present and then the past. How much more inaccessible to our knowledge is a totally new state of being which suspends this orderly progression of time in favour of 'something else'. Christian tradition presents us with an understanding of God as the Creator of the world and therefore of time. We need to admit in all honesty that it is totally mysterious to us how God relates to time—particularly to the 'end of time'—and therefore to us.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Mark 13 and Matthew 24, among many possible references.

<sup>14</sup> Mark 13:1-2 and Matthew 24:1-2. As this was one of the charges against Jesus at his trial before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:58, etc.), this prediction seems unlikely to be a later fabrication by the early church.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and many other possible references.

<sup>16</sup> At least, this is the claim of Gerhard Sauter. See G. Sauter, *Eschatological Rationality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), 136.

<sup>17</sup> Perhaps I should acknowledge that he has taught this to me, rather than make the more general claim. See J Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (London: SCM Press, 1996).

Jurgen Moltmann has taught us to understand eschatology as the coming of God.<sup>17</sup>

This 'eschaton' means a change in the transcendental conditions of time. With the coming of God's glory, future time ends and eternal time begins. Without a transformation of time like this, eternal time cannot be thought. This actually already emerges from the idea of the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, in which death is no more; for all reflections about time here and now are determined by the *memento mori*, the remembrance of death.<sup>18</sup>

Yes, eschatology is the 'last things', including death, resurrection, the end of our world and the final judgement, but it is more fundamentally the time of the full revealing of God. The word 'end', like the Roman god Janus, looks both ways. It refers to the completion of a process and it also refers to the goal of that process. Our lives end in death, in the sense that our earthly life is completed and does not continue. Yet for Christians, the goal of our life is not death but the fullness of life in God's nearer presence. Western Christians live with a split view concerning these 'last things' which has been the dominant view since its formulation by St. Augustine. There is our personal end in our own death and there is the end of the world, where presumably the conditions which have sustained human life cease to do so.

In this western church framework, eschatological speculation has led some groups to keeping watch on the signs of the times and telling us, 'Lo, here!' or 'Lo, there!', presumably on the basis of some direct revelation received through a God-given gift of prophecy. Where these groups have named a date which has now come and gone, I believe that we are on safe ground in denying the divine origin of their prophecy. It is not my purpose to enter into critical dialogue with such groups beyond saying that where they disdain our responsibilities to care for this world, which has been given to us by God, I cannot fathom the basis of their confidence that their brand of faith will qualify them for acceptance into the rapture of the saints.<sup>19</sup>

Diametrically opposed to such literally otherworldly views are all forms of liberation theology. The focus of attention in these theologies is on present oppression and God's liberating dynamic which overcomes all powers to hurt or destroy in this life as well as in the life to come. I have no doubt that God's kingdom is indeed the fullness of liberation from oppression. Yet there is a temptation to identify God's liberating action with the resistance to oppression as such<sup>20</sup>, which would leave us ill-equipped to distinguish Pol

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> See Hal Lindsey, *The Rapture: Truth or Consequences* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983) and the 'Left Behind' novels of Tim LaHaye.

<sup>20</sup> In this connection, I welcome the reflections of Professor Yim Tae Soo about the messianic role of *minjung*. "'Minjung'" literally means the multitude of people, but in Minjung theology this term is closely related to the oppressed, exploited and marginalized'. Yim Tae Soo, *Minjung Theology towards a Second Reformation* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2006), Preface. 'The Minjung are not equal to Jesus who is the Messiah. The Minjung cannot save themselves without Jesus Christ. The Minjung need salvation from Jesus Christ. The Minjung as the subject of history carry the burdens of people in history and play a role of Messiah.' *Ibid.*, 19-20.

Pot from Gandhi, particularly before the leaders are tested by coming into potentially dictatorial power.

Discerning between true and false prophecy is therefore a continuing need. Such discernment is itself a prophetic gift. While there is no magic formula for extorting this gift from God, our Christian understanding is that God seeks us out in order to shower upon us the gifts of the Holy Spirit, collectively as church and individually as Christian believers. Our responsibility is to be open to receiving these gifts. We do this through turning to God in all things, most basically through listening prayer. As we share with each other what we receive from God, we are blessed with gifts of discernment which are prophetic. Of course there is a need to act on what we receive from God and to participate as we are able in God's work of redemption of our broken and fallen world. Yet it does seem important to point out that the practice of listening prayer and the reception of God's gifts of prophecy in association with hearing God's word is graciously offered to us by God and is essential for faithful Christian living in our contemporary world. I believe that we should trust the hope that comes to us in this manner and share that hope.

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