

Prayers for our Times...Ben Bano

Introduction

As I grew up in the 1960's and 1970s I have a clear memory of some of the momentous events that shaped that time and in particular the call of the second Vatican Council to build a Church based on a missionary spirit relevant to the lives of ordinary people, many of whom had lost contact with the Church. In my twenties, alongside other people, I wondered how to make the message of Our Lord's salvation relevant to so many people on the margins. I have memories of taking a guitar to a Mass in a Nissan Hut on the edge of a new housing estate, of hundreds of people, including young families, coming to deepen their faith.

In France this movement was particularly strong, with initiatives taken by many organizations, including Young Christian Workers, worker priests, and many others. Imaginative ways were found to engage people who would not have thought of entering a Church building, such as beach missions and gatherings in factories and workplaces. I and many others were influenced by priests such as Michel Quoist who through books such as 'Prayers of Life' did so much to help to make our faith relevant to those struggling to make sense of their Christian beliefs amid the challenges and struggles of their daily lives.

Pope Francis has called for a new spirit of evangelization in the context of a need to reach out to people on the margins. I believe that the challenges in society which led Michel Quoist and others to respond are still relevant today as people struggle in the context of what might be seen as a godless society to connect the challenges of daily life with the Christian message of love and hope in the resurrection of Our Lord.

'Prayers for Our Times' has not been prepared as a contribution to these challenges. Rather, they offer a few glimpses into those moments when at the difficult moments of daily lives, we need to take a little time to reflect and to ponder even briefly on the meaning of what we might be going through in the context of Our Lord's plan and purpose for us.

Ben Bano
January 2017

Some reflections on a Sunday evening - after the children have gone to bed....

I have been reflecting on how our lives can sometimes become so routine. Daily activities such as putting the children to bed can lose their significance as that special act of love and affection which should be cherished.

Tonight, Lord, I played my part in the life of the family - and my wife was pleased that I Jamie and I enjoyed laughing about the story which we had just read together. It was a rare moment in a life which has become a little dull and routine in recent times. And then I caught up with news of my friends on Facebook. Yes - it was good to catch up with them but why am I always doing this 'virtually' ? Its almost as if I am afraid to meet them in person.

I have been conscious that for a little while my feelings have become numbed to the joys that being a father should bring. I don't think that I am a poor father - its just that I become a bit overwhelmed by the banalities of our modern lifestyle - I spend too much time idling on the computer with my curiosity driven by the next message on social media. And if I keep on doing this I can lose the ability to be present to the mysteries and surprises which are part of your divine plan for our family.

Lord, help me to see not just the burdens, but the joys of family life as well. Help me to share some time with the children, away from the anxieties of the present moment.

Its two months since we last went to Church on Sunday. its not that we are disillusioned with the Church - its just that other priorities seemed to matter more. My wife's shifts changed so that I ended up cooking Sunday lunch. And we gradually got into the habit of shopping on a Sunday morning as all the children's activities on Saturday seemed to take over our lives at the weekend. And yet I feel a sense of loss. Where is the deeper meaning in this increasingly routine life of ours ? How can I bring myself and the family closer to a sense of what really matters ?

I have discussed this occasionally with my wife, Amy. I must not put too much on her as changes to her shift patterns have resulted in a lot of stress - she now has to wok many more night shifts and feels guilty that she is neglecting us. Above all I feel the need to be and act as the 'strong' person at a time when I am feeling more vulnerable and uncertain.

My sister-in-law attempted suicide...

It was earlier this afternoon that my wife spoke to my sister-in-law. She ha

taken an overdose of sleeping tablets and had been admitted to the Accident and Emergency Department. There was little they could do for her once they had washed out her stomach. We decided to go to the hospital to collect her. She had recently been separated when her husband left her for another woman. She had already gone through a difficult time. As we arrived at the Accident and Emergency Department we found her, looking anxious and despairing in the corner of a busy waiting room. We went together to the cafeteria to talk before driving home. As she described to us what had happened, she felt ashamed and embarrassed. Life had just got on top of her. The children were with their grandparents when she had taken the tablets. She felt so ashamed afterwards that she rang her mother who called the ambulance.

A prayer in the Chapel of the hospital, next to the Accident and Emergency Department.

We have found a quiet space away from the noise of the waiting room while we are waiting for my sister in law to be discharged. Someone has thoughtfully provided some bibles and prayer books for us to read. Why Lord do people have to go through the anguish which leads them to take their own lives? You made us in your image to be sources of life rather than instruments to end our lives. Shine your light of love and hope on my sister in law and her family, that they may rebuild their lives and learn to understand your loving plan for her and all those who in their desperation feel the need to end their lives.

Our estate doesn't inspire me...

We moved into our new house six months ago when our third child was born. Its comfortable enough and its meant quite a big increase in our mortgage repayments even though interest rates are low at the moment. I haven't made much contact with the neighbours yet - most people seem so busy going to work or taking the children to various leisure pursuits. And so my contacts have been limited to small talk as we enter or leave our houses.

All the houses seem to be the same - in fact all the estates seem the loop same. Many are occupied by young couples who cannot afford to buy and as a result are paying high rents. I have this feeling of being hemmed in by all the cars which are parked as the developers did not provide enough parking spaces in our close. My wife is gradually getting used to our new environment but as sociable as she is, it has been difficult for her to form new friendships.

I took the children to the park today, and as we walked from our road I reflected on our place in this new environment. I must learn to set aside my daily and often trivial anxieties. I must learn to appreciate our good fortune compared to so many people for whom their lives are a daily struggle. Above

all I must learn to appreciate the beauty of our God-given creation. In my walk today I noticed a small sapling taking root as spring arrives. In spite of the drabness of our estate the trees and the small stream around us provide a little sense of tranquility.

Thank you Lord for giving me a sense of proportion. All around me are the people of God, the fruits of your incarnational presence in our lives. Each of us is shaped in the image of God, even though so often we do not realise it. Help me to see the beauty and the potential of the human spirit, even at the times when I feel frustrated and cynical with some of those I meet in my daily life. Lord, help me to remember that we are all made in your image and that wherever I look in our estate, each day we should give thanks for the marvels of your creation, however mundane they may seem.

Lord, free me from my tablet...

My tablet computer seems to have become a permanent fixture for me. I take it with me on the train to work when I can watch at least part of a good film. On many evenings I catch up with my friends through social media. We exchange pictures of ourselves and our friends and families. And what's more, my wife and the children enjoy this as well. Last night, when we were all in front of the television, we were all busy with our phones and tablets, each in our own little world. And more and more our meals are taken in front of the TV instead of round the table. And when we do sit round the table the children still catch up with their friends on social media. We seem to be fascinated by everyone except our family in this house. Where is it all going to lead? And our priest reminded us that we can't take our tablet and iPhone into the next world!

Lord I feel so stuck in my own little world! You created us all to be social creatures and not to find our satisfactions in our own little world of smartphones and the internet. I must learn to connect again with real people and stop living in a fantasy world. Tomorrow I will leave my tablet computer behind when I take the train - and I might even talk to a few of my fellow passengers! And tonight I will make sure that we sit round the table for our meal instead of all going our individual ways.

An encounter with our priest, outside the coffee shop

It was on a Monday morning that I encountered our priest in the shopping precinct. I don't know him very well other than to greet him after Church on a Sunday. He asked kindly after the family but this time I asked after him. He does not have an easy time and I suspect that he feels at times unsupported - in spite of good intentions there is usually a problem which he has to sort out. He has recently had to close a Mass Centre due to the shortage of priests. It must be hard to be a shepherd of the flock when parishioners find

it easier to focus on the peripheral matters which can cause so much tension. And it was good that we talked things over with a coffee when he had a chance to open up to a listening ear.

Thank you Lord for this encounter. It helped me to realise that our priest is human as well and needs the support and love of those around him. Help me to be a discreet and welcoming listening ear, not making judgements but gently being there when needed to support him and to help him in different ways to be the 'Good Shepherd' in our parish when times are difficult. For someone who has given his life to the service of the Lord, we must take care to ensure that his ministry is facilitated and enabled through the support we are able to give him.

They want to build a site for travelling families next to our estate...

The volunteer from our local residents association knocked on our door the other day. They want the Council to realise the strength of feeling against the proposal to build a site for travelling families next to our estate. The arguments in the petition were well made: there is a lack of facilities and infrastructure and the site could lead to unwelcome developments in anti-social behaviour as well as the potential for insanitary conditions. Do I really want my family to have to live with this ? And as well our house prices could go down ! Of course I signed the petition - I was not going to go against the flow of local opinion. And then at teatime I talked about this with my daughter. She wasn't as sure as myself about our opposition to the new site. - then our daughter reminded me that she has just made friends with a girl from a travelling family who at the moment has to take two buses to get to school.

Lord, the conversation with my daughter last night has challenged me. I am beginning to feel uncomfortable about signing the petition. I need to remember that travellers and all those on the margins are part of your creation and made in your image. help us to understand that we are all made in your likeness - and that each of us is equally precious to you. Lord , help us to free ourselves from our prejudices. Then we will come to the realisation that our duty is to build your kingdom on earth in accordance with your divine will.

My wife is helping at the local foodbank

It was at the local parent and toddler group some weeks ago that my wife became acquainted with a young woman who seemed to have problems in paying the weekly fee. Over a cup of tea they got talking about her situation. Her husband had left her and there was a delay in processing the benefits payment so that she had had no money for four weeks. Against her better

judgement she had resorted to asking for help from the foodbank. She had felt so humiliated in even asking for help but the volunteer involved in the distribution was so supportive - she provided a really helpful listening ear. And my wife has decided to become a volunteer herself and has contacted the local organiser - she will be starting her training as a foodbank volunteer in the next month.

Thank you Lord for the gift of the foodbank and everyone involved with it. You did not intend the disfigurement of our world and our society. You did not intend to create an order based on injustice - You have given us the power to transform and transfigure the world around us in our own situations. Give my wife the strength and motivation to be part of your healing mission, so that she and those involved in the Foodbank can be witnesses to your spirit of justice and love. Help us to be healers of your broken body in our actions each day.

I just couldn't bury my head in the sand...

Last week I was coming back from work after a hard and arduous day. In the seat opposite me a young woman was in obvious distress. She told me that she was a single parent and that unexpectedly her baby had been born prematurely and he was expected to remain in the special care unit for at least another week. She was making a 50 mile return journey each day and had hardly any money left to feed herself and her three year old daughter. As we were talking the guard came to check tickets - and she explained that she had not had time to buy a ticket. It was clear that she had little or no money and I decided to pay her fare for her. The guard grumbled 'People who can't pay should take the consequences'. I agreed with him to a point but I didn't regret what I did - in fact I gave her another £10 to buy herself a meal in the hospital restaurant.

Lord, why did you tell me to be present to someone in need, just at a time when I wanted to forget the problems of the world around me? Why did you tell me 'to love all men, my brothers' Son, you were made in my image, to love and be loved. I need you to be an instrument of the peace and love which I came to bring to all humankind.¹

Lord, where ARE you ?

I see them every weekend in the town - people just like myself going about their daily business. I see them on the train on the way to work. People who are preoccupied by what they might be doing tonight, people who are worried about what they might wear to a party - people who are boasting about what

¹ From Michel Quoist – 'Prayers of Life'

a good time they had on their night out. I see the people crowding into the shopping centre, their minds on the pleasure they will get from the goods they are about to buy. In spite of the challenges facing all of us in these difficult times I see people just focused on shopping and having a good time in the innumerable coffee shops which have sprung up. I see the parents at the school gate talking about what their children are doing.

But I can't see You in all of this, Lord. It's as if there is a wall between the people I see and your Church. A wall that seems impenetrable with the people I meet on one side and the Churchgoers like myself on the other side. How might I help to build your Kingdom on earth if so many around me have their mind on other things? I dare not even mention my religion at work for fear that I might be seen as some kind of religious freak. If I can only help to break down a little bit of this wall I might help to bring back to you your people who are part of your loving plan of salvation.

A prayer in the arcade of our local shopping centre, on a Saturday morning:

Here I am Lord, surrounded by shoppers going about their daily business. The lady in a hurry who is anxious to get a bargain at the sales. The young man and his friends, out for a morning's shopping. The group of football supporters, out to have a good time before they go to the match...all of them Lord are made in your image - all of them Lord have their part to play in the infinite mystery of your creation,.

I must remember the words of the late Brother Roger of Taizé - 'God is united in every human being without exception. Even if they do not realise it, the liberating power of God is ever present'. And so Lord, help me to see your loving power present in all the people in this shopping arcade this morning. Help me to see my fellow humans not just as passive victims of our consumer culture, but as potential actors to live and show your Gospel values of love and peace.

I found Margaret alone...

For some time we have been friendly with Margaret, a 70 year old widow who lives a few doors from us. Her children and grandchildren live in Australia and although we don't know her very well, I suspect that she must be lonely at times. Even so I have hesitated to call at her house, thinking that it might be an intrusion. Last night, as I walked back from the station, I could see that the curtains were open and that she was sitting in her armchair with the TV turned off.

I knocked on her door, thinking at the same time of an excuse I could use to make my visit easier. But I need not have worried – she seemed surprised but pleased at my unexpected visit. And she was happy to talk as she made me a

cup of tea. A former teacher she wished she could play a more active role in the community but was afraid to take the first steps. She knew that I was involved with our local Church but she was not a particularly religious person herself. And she missed the company of young children as her children and grandchildren lived so far away. She had heard that they could talk through Skype but was not confident in using the technology required. And in her need to feel of use we came up with a small plan – next time we go with the children to the park we will let her know so that she can join us and enjoy the pleasure of being at the park with the children.

A prayer after my visit to Margaret: Lord, thank you for giving me the courage to take the small step of calling in on Margaret. You have helped me to take just one tiny step in alleviating the loneliness and the feeling of lack of purpose which is so prevalent in our world today. Margaret may not feel that she is close to you – but you are close to her. Shine your light of love and hope on her and show me and our family how to be a discreet and enabling presence in her life and that of others who experience loneliness and isolation.

I am not the only labourer in the vineyard...

I seem to be everywhere at the moment. I have become a committee member of our local PTA and am helping to organise social occasions for the parents. And I recently volunteered to help with the preparation of the young people of the Parish for their forthcoming confirmation. My wife has found the Foodbank very satisfying and so I have been giving her lifts to the distribution points. I have this constant need to feel wanted and useful. But then just a few weeks ago I had an accident and was out of action until a few days ago. And everything carried on just as normal - the PTA event was a great success even though I could not be there.

Lord, help me to understand that I am not the only laborer in your vineyard. Help me to realise that there are many mansions in your Father's house. And in feeling perhaps less important and needed by other people I might enable someone else in taking their place to work for Your kingdom here on earth.

My father-in-law has Alzheimers Disease

For some time Dad had been getting more forgetful than usual. Over the last six months has been increasingly disorientated and two months ago he had difficulty in remembering where he lives. My wife persuaded him to go to the doctor who after a brief examination referred him to the local memory clinic. The staff at the clinic were very kind and gave him various psychological tests as well as a scan.

When he returned for the follow up appointment the doctor gently broke the news that the tests showed that he is in the beginning stages of Alzheimers Disease. Dad still has enough insight to realise that this is a blow to him and the rest of the family. A week later he and his wife were visited by a nurse who told him not to give up any of his activities and to see that there is still life after a diagnosis of dementia. We are encouraging him to keep attending the choir at Church and the members have been very supportive to him. Dad has now been referred to a support group in which he will be encouraged to keep mentally active.

Lord, the news of Dad's diagnosis has come as a shock to all the family. But we have been able to talk about our feelings with our priest and some helpful parishioners. We have been helped to realise that Dad's condition is not an end but a beginning... He is still himself, with his unique gifts and personality. Help us to see him as the person he is and always will be, rather than someone burdened with the label of dementia. Just as you have a special place for all those with confusion and dementia, show your love and compassion as we journey with Dad in this new chapter of his life.

'We are all migrants in the eyes of the Lord'

The house next door has been rented for over a year. I have felt uncomfortable with the thought that we will always have a succession of neighbours but for so many younger couples it has become impossible to buy in our area. Last week I was surprised to meet our new neighbours who greeted us in broken English and introduced themselves and their five year old daughter - they had recently arrived here from Poland and both had jobs in local care homes.

I had seen so much adverse publicity about migrants in the local press that I had imagined them as people to be feared rather than welcomed. But barriers were broken down in a few minutes as our daughter invited their daughter to her room within a few minutes of us meeting. I have offered to show the family the way to our Church next Sunday - perhaps I might introduce them to our friends - and from the delicious smell of the cooking next door I look forward to being invited for coffee and cake !

Lord thank you for our encounter with the new family next door. Thank you for helping us to realise that we are all one in the image of God. Thank you for helping us to break through the anxieties and prejudices which mark our modern age. We will try to get to know our next door neighbours in a friendly but discrete way, always conscious that we must not impose ourselves. As a start we will make sure that the little girl who is the same age as our daughter is invited for her birthday party. Through this small gesture we might play our part in living out your Gospel message in our estate.

Lord, why did you tell me to love ?

It was after the homily last Sunday that I felt a sense of fatigue. We were reminded about the Gospel message of the Beatitudes and asked to reflect on how we might put this into action in our daily lives. There was an appeal for people to join the Justice and Peace Group. And when I got home there were leaflets asking us to support a charity for homeless people. The collector for the Cancer Charity has just been. I feel that I am playing my part - I can't be responsible for all the ills of the world, and anyway, shouldn't other people be taking some responsibility ?

A prayer on my way to work, while waiting for my train...

Father forgive me for:

*The times when my patience is tried to the utmost and I become intolerant;
The times when I can't get myself to live out your message of love and mercy;*

The times when I fail to appreciate and give thanks for my many blessings – my family, my health, my job and so much else..

The times when I turn in on myself

Lead me to follow the hope of your Resurrection and the light of your Kingdom here in earth. Amen

The train conductors are on strike...

I have been waiting for more than an hour for the train to get me to work, and still there is no news. All around me commuters are angry and venting their feelings on social media. The staff at the station are at their wits end as they listen to and feel the anger of the passengers who are waiting in vain for their train. I have taken my place on a bench on the platform, trying to distance myself from the anger and frustration I feel around me and trying to make sense of it all...

A prayer on the platform, while waiting for my delayed train...

Lord , give me patience in a situation which I can do nothing about. Help me not to rush to hasty judgements but to listen to and understand the views and arguments put forward on each side. Help me to be an example of peace and calm in a fraught situation.

A prayer for the victims of a terrorist attack

Their shattered limbs lie all over the road.

They seem to have lost all vestiges of your identity in this terrifying and almost meaningless act of carnage. All around them emergency service

workers have been desperately to do what they can and bring help to the injured

We cannot begin to understand all makes sense of it all - and yet Lord in each shattered limb is a body, a soul, a person who has loved and being loved. A person shaped in your incarnate nature.

Help us Lord in these terrible times when we can make no sense of all of this.

Help us Lord to realise that in these shattered limbs you are still present as your wounded and crucified self.

Help us to dedicate ourselves to build a better world through the wilderness and confusion that we all feel in these times.

Lord, as we try to make sense of these shattered bodies, bring us a little closer to understanding the mystery of your suffering and redemption in these scenes around us.

Amen

Prayers from a hospital ward - *Sometimes we find ourselves in unfamiliar places such as a hospital ward. In these bewildering surroundings, and at night when we might have difficulty in sleeping, we might well need some spiritual comfort...*

Lord, we are stuck together...

It's the middle of the night and I am finding it difficult to sleep. Its many weeks now since I had a serious accident which led to a long hospital stay being confined to bed while my leg has been recovering. And as I lie on my bed in hospital, awake in the early hours, I have placed a small crucifix next to me. I am contemplating you Lord, in my helplessness. We are both motionless and cannot move – you nailed to the Cross as you prepare to die for humanity – and me far from being my usual active self.

As I contemplate your motionless presence on the cross I realize that to draw nearer to you I must learn to accept my passive state just as you have accepted yours. I must learn that there is virtue in our stillness – virtue in the state of powerlessness in which I and so many others worse off than me find myself. I might even catch a glimpse of what it might have been like to be in the helpless state in which you found yourself.

Lord, as I lie awake in this ward help me to understand that the path to redemption is not always through constant activity and good works but

through slowly contemplating your divine presence as you lie motionless and helpless on your Cross. Help me to be calm and still and grateful for even the smallest blessing... Then I may begin to understand the wholeness of your message of love and redemption for the 'least of my brethren'.

'I just can't pass by on the other side'...

For so long I have had a busy and fulfilled life. My days have been filled with meetings and 'purposeful' activities. At the same time I have tried to understand how it must feel like 'on the other side'. I have thought of myself as having a strong social conscience. I have passed by people in wheelchairs, people who are finding life difficult and thought how hard it must be. I have given money to people begging on the street and I have been as generous as I can be with the various charity collectors who seem to single me out...in short I have felt that I am doing everything possible that my conscience tells me.

But now I have been given an opportunity to see life on the other side. My life has made me stop and see things from a different perspective. My time in hospital has helped me to begin to accept the value of patience and acceptance of my situation. I now have time to stop and think, to see the little details of life which had passed me by until now. I have stopped in my wheelchair to reflect on the changing colours of the season as winter draws in. I have had time to talk with other people with disabilities about their experiences about being on the margins. I have learned that 'life on the other side' has to be lived and understood.

Lord, thank you for the opportunity to stop, think and reflect. Help me to understand that just as I have passed the 'least of my brethren' on the other side, so I cross the road and journey alongside those I have passed by until now. Then Lord I might begin to understand how you are helping me to see the true meaning and purpose of your plans for me and all those 'on the other side'

A trip to the day room...

Today I was taken after the ward for a short spell in the day room off the ward. It was only for 15 minutes but a precious time. I learnt to appreciate the beauty of ordinary activity - the porters taking the food to the various wards, the workman making sure but all the likes worked all these everyday an ordinary activities was something but I learn to place in the in God's plan of our daily living

Thank you Lord for my trip to the day room and for the gift of being able to come to appreciate the ordinary things of life which add up to the uniqueness of your creation. As I return to the ward I realise just what does special

privilege this little outing has been. Keep giving me the wisdom and insight to appreciate what I can't change and keep me ever thankful for my blessings.

A prayer in the stroke unit

Over the past month I have been a daily visitor to the stroke unit as my wife suffered a stroke some time ago. I have seen the gradual climb back of those who are beginning to recover their functioning and I have seen the vacant expressions of those who lie on their bed - victims of the terrible effects of a serious stroke. I have seen the dedication of the staff as they nurse their patients back to life, offering comfort and hope wherever they can. And I have witnessed the marvels of modern medicine in bringing people back to life.

A prayer for my wife during my daily visit...

You are lying on your bed, motionless through the effects of your stroke. You cannot talk but you can take and squeeze my hand to find comfort. Help me Lord to realise that these moments together are the authentic expression of our love which we expressed 40 years ago at our wedding. Help me to realise that these moments are as precious as all the good times we have had in our active married life. Now it is time to return the love which she has given me over these years. Thank you for everything we have experienced together. Whatever your divine plan for her, shine your light of love and hope on her and on all of us so that we may experience together something that incarnational love which you brought to humanity. Amen

It would have been so easy, Lord...

Sometimes in the course of our lives we are shaken abruptly from our comfort zones through unexpected events such as illness and disability. Whether through cancer, an unexpected illness, or other events, its at these times, particularly in our later years, when despair can so easily take over and we need all the faith and hope we can muster to take us along this difficult road.

It would have been so easy Lord:

*To enjoy our last years together,
Taking holidays to places that we have always longed to see,
Enjoying the pleasures of our garden,
Going to interesting art galleries and exhibitions.
Meeting socially with our friends,
Enjoying the company and achievements of our children and grandchildren,
To be part of the 'Saga generation'
Contributing our efforts in voluntary work to help our community,
Seeking wherever we could to be of service,*

*But you have had other plans for us through illness and disability.
You have ordained us to walk the path of suffering, the path of the Cross, in
common with so many millions of our brothers and sisters in humanity.
You have willed that we should see round the corner of our comfortable lives
into a world which up to now we have not had to see.
Now we see the depth of human endurance and the fortitude by which it is
born by so many of our brothers and sisters.
Help us to accept - and embrace – this new experience, so that in the
darkness we may be authentic witnesses to the light of your resurrection in
the midst of despair. Amen*