The National Anthem of South Africa

Xhosa
Nkosi sikelele iAfrika
Maluphalanyis' uphondo lwayo,
Zulu
Yizwa imithandazo yet'u,
Nkosi sikelela, thina lusapho lwayo.
Sesotho
Morena boloka setjhaba sa hesoo,
Oo fedise dintwa le matshwenyehoo,
Oo se boolooke,
Oo se boolooke setjhaba sa hesoo,
Afrikaans
Uit die blou van onse hemel,
Uit die diepte van ons see,
Oor ons ewige gebertes,
Waar die kransie antwoord gee,
English
God bless Africa [it says]
Let its horn be raised,
Listen also to our prayers,
Lord bless us, we are its family.
Lord bless our nation,
Stop wars and sufferings,
Save it,
save our nation,
The nation of South Africa, South Africa!
From the blue of our heavens,
From the depths of our seas,
Over our everlasting mountains,
Where the cliffs give answer,
Sounds the call to come together,
And united we shall stand,
Let us live and strive for freedom
In South Africa our land.

Psalm 72 is a prayer for King David, perhaps composed by a member of his royal court. We could use it to pray for our Queen and say, “Give the queen your judgement, O God: / and your righteousness to the daughter of a king . . .”

It could be also adapted as a prayer for any head of state or the political leader of a nation or state, provided we substitute a gender free title such as “premier”, “prime minister” or “governor general”, and use feminine pronouns as appropriate.

Thinking of national leaders, however, we cannot let today pass without acknowledging the death of Nelson Mandela and giving thanks to God for his extraordinary life and work and his achievements. In part what we thank God for is the man’s character.

Mandela’s namesake, Lord Horatio Nelson, at the Battle of Copenhagen, was flagged a signal by Admiral Parker to withdraw from action. The Admiral judged Nelson to be too short of ships to maintain his attack but Nelson, when told there was a signal, put his telescope to his blind eye and said he could not see the signal. He went on with his attack and helped win a great victory for England. Like him, then, Nelson Mandela could never see a signal to give up and retreat from a fight he believed in. He would fight on until he had achieved victory, or had died in the attempt.

It is also Mandela’s great vision and the breadth of his humanity for which we give thanks. Unlike Lord Nelson, Mandela was never “one-eyed” when it came to building the new South
Africa. He wanted all South Africans to be equal members of the new republic.

Yet what we can give thanks for is not just what Mandela did for South Africa. I have no doubt that you and I are different and better people, and different and better Australians, for being as close as we were to the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, in which Mandela was the leading light.

Similarly, we are also different and better human beings for the campaign for the recognition of indigenous people of Australia in the Australian constitution, and for the restoration to them of land rights. That campaign, here, in Australia, was undoubtedly energized by the example of the anti-Apartheid campaign over there, in South Africa.

So then, to God be the glory, and ave, vale atque, Nelson Mandela.

Now, as a Christian Australian, I envy South Africans their national anthem, *Nkosi sikelel’ iAfrika*. It is written in five languages, two European and three African, and not only is it a declaration and a rallying cry, as anthems usually are, but, like the New Zealand anthem, it is a sustained prayer.

Furthermore it is not the people but God who is asked to “sound the call to come together”, and so it is God who, first of all, rallies the peoples to be one multicoloured nation. God is credited with conceiving and calling into being a new, free, democratic, non-racist South Africa. Only after this do the people send up their rallying cry to one another, saying, “Let us live and strive for freedom”.

Here is the anthem in English:

“God bless Africa. Let its horn be raised. Listen also to our prayers. Lord bless us, we are its family. Lord bless our nation. Stop wars and sufferings. Save it, save our nation, the nation of South Africa. From the blue of our heavens, from the depths of our seas, over our everlasting mountains where the cliffs give answer, sound the call to come together, and united we shall stand. Let us live and strive for freedom, in South Africa, our land.”

It’s not great poetry, I know, but beside such an anthem as this, “Australians all let us rejoice” is clearly not a prayer, nor yet a rallying cry. Rather, it is a cheerful call to ourselves, and to those who come to live in this land, to enjoy, appreciate, share and preserve what we have. I like “Advance Australia Fair” but I only wish our anthem was more *prayer* and less *puff*.

Life is, of course, far from perfect in South Africa. They are going to need to keep singing their national prayer. The Republic has a long journey ahead of it to fully establish the rule of law and peace for all its peoples. It is yet to attract and welcome home again many of its children from places to which they migrated, fearing chaos and carnage.

But then, we Australians are still venturing deeper and deeper into multiculturalism and we are seeing growing stresses in the fabric of our society, resulting from our undertaking to create, in quick time, a nation not of one race but of many, not of one culture but of many, and not of one religion but of many and of none. Are we not just *coming to the start* of the same journey...
South Africa is on? If anything, multiracial, multicultural South Africa would seem to have a head start on us.

Given, then, the journey we are now committed to make (we cannot go back), may God raise up among us men and women like Nelson Mandela, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu - people of courage and vision, and of great capacity to forgive and to love, to defy and defeat evil, to defuse suspicions, to heal wounds and to mend divisions. We have all the politicians we need and a combative political system. God send us inspiring and wise statesmen and stateswomen to help us find together the future we long for, in harmony, unity, justice and peace.

I also have no doubt, too, that we Christian Australians should be praying that all Australians will one day recover an unashamedly religious vision of life. I pray that those who come to our shores from Africa, be they Christian or Muslim, or from Asia, be they Hindu or Buddhist, will bring with them, and maintain, and help those of us who are people of faith to build, a living awareness of the divine, overarching, underlying and penetrating all human affairs. May we, one day, be free and equally unashamed to sing a national anthem which is a prayer not just a national puff.

Of course, there have been a number of attempts to bring God into our national anthem. Perhaps the one best known to Anglicans was written by Dr Robin Lorimer Sharwood, fourth Warden of Trinity College. It used to be the official version for use within St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne. However, we live in the day of the New Atheism, an aggressive, proselytizing form of atheism, an atheism which imagines itself to be the path to personal liberty, intellectual freedom, equality and fraternity, social justice and peace. At the same time, for not a few people, religion of any kind is now a positive evil. They do not say that we religious people are bad people as such. We do good works and we are even quite nice at a person-to-person level, and well-meaning. But, they say, we are deluded, divisive, interfering, moralistic, bigoted, hostile to reason and truth and therefore dangerous.)

A growing number of Australians seem to hold this view and to want religion eradicated from society. Other Australians are just glad of the opportunity to refute the claim we make upon their lives in the name of God.

So, while this situation lasts, it is unlikely that any religious and prayer-based (let alone Christian) version of our national anthem will be adopted for general use in our lifetime. But the message of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa is this: that, because something seems against all odds if not downright impossible, there is no reason to think it can and will never happen.

I am even encouraged to think this change will come about because I see many people migrating to Australia today who do have a deep religious instinct and a religious and spiritual way of understanding life. In fact most have a regular religious practice of one kind or another. These people are our allies in the fight for faith.

Yes, there are unhelpful tensions between this religion and that. Yes, the young members of migrant families have their religious allegiance mocked and eroded by Australian secularism. Yes, they and all of us have our faith knocked about by reports of evils committed by Christians, to abuse and to cover up abuse.
Even so, in spite of all reasons to think we might be losing the game, it seems to me that religious faith, that is, at least a private belief in God and in prayer, is holding its ground. The adherence to and practice of religion is a long way from being “dust and ashes, dead and done with” (to quote Robert Browning’s poem "A Toccata of Galuppi’s").

So, then, I will pray always for the conversion of Australia. Firstly, to faith in God. Then for all people who believe in God to come to faith in our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Yes, I know it is not politically-correct to talk about conversion, but if that is not what our church is on about, I judge it to have lost its mandate from its Lord and founder. “Go into all the world,” he said, “and make disciples from every nation”.

That being so, then, if the new disciples were not God-believing and then became so, and if they were not Christian and then became so, that would be conversion, would it not? So, yes, I pray for the conversion of people to faith, and from other faiths to the Christian faith. May we so live our faith that others will want to become members of us.

I foresee, then, that, as the recovery of God-belief happens, and then the coming to faith in Jesus happens, we Australians will come nearer to the day when we can all confidently pray for our national leaders, and do so as people of faith praying for people of faith.

We won’t just pray for our leaders as people of no religious belief whom God might secretly influence for our good. We will pray for them as people of faith who will look to God, and then to God revealed in Christ Jesus, for guidance and inspiration and strength to do what is right.

When that day comes, we will be able to pray, with deepening conviction and with growing confidence, for the men and women who lead us, and we might even do so in ways somewhat similar to the way the psalmist prays for King David:

1 Give the king your judgement, O God:
   and your righteousness to the son of a king,
2 That he may judge your people rightly:
   and the poor of the land with equity.
3 Let the mountains be laden with peace because of his righteousness:
   and the hills also with prosperity for his people.
4 May he give justice to the poor among the people:
   and rescue the children of the needy,
   and crush the oppressor.

Come the day when Australia is a land of faith once more, Australians will also be able to pray the national anthem as they sing it—not with their fingers crossed for good luck, but with faith. They will be able to sing it as a prayer, and then words like Dr Sharwood’s will be entirely natural and appropriate:

O God, who made this ancient land,
And set it round with sea,
Sustain us all who dwell herein,
One people strong and free.
Grant we may guard its generous gifts,
Its beauty rich and rare.
In your great name, may we proclaim,
`Advance, Australia fair!'
With thankful hearts then let us sing,
`Advance Australia, fair!'

Your star-bright Cross aslant our skies
Gives promise sure and true
That we may know this land of ours
A nation blessed by You.
May all who come within its bounds
Its peace and plenty share,
And grant that we may prayerfully
Advance Australia fair.
With thankful hearts then let us sing,
`Advance, Australia fair!' #

The Revd Dr John Spring, Acting Vicar
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