

PRAYING FOR RAIN

by

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The church of St Jude's stood proudly in a paddock just on the outskirts of the town. Not any old paddock this one, a respectable paddock, well mown, surrounded by a rustic wooden fence and featuring some delightful, twisted, ancient gum trees, shading a collection of tumbling grave stones in picture postcard fashion. The church itself did nothing to diminish its surroundings. Made of rough hewn creamy stone, turning golden in the setting sun on many a summer evening, its presence was a source of quiet comfort for most in the small local community.

In an abstract fashion that is, as not many of these were ever to be seen entering its doors, at least when in a viable state. Death was their most reliable visiting card; babies and marriages being now mainly the purview of the local celebrant.

Herein lay the problem for Father Lester. In normal times his regular Sunday congregation was composed of no more than fifteen or so devout souls. The seven year drought, perhaps, one could say of biblical proportions, had recently swollen the attendance to approximately double that number. Morose farmers in their best pants and half-cleaned work boots; their dowdy wives, the grey roots of their badly cut hair revealing an estrangement from the hairdresser's services for many a long month. Nothing to do on a Sunday on the farm, no stock, no crops, nothing left but prayer.

But even thirty souls were not enough. Not enough for the diocese. Finances were strained, large amounts must be paid out for genuine expenses and staff misdemeanours, and congregations were falling everywhere. They decreed that the church must be sold.

Now, perhaps an argument could be made that the church was not the diocese's to sell. It had been built from local contributions, one hundred and twenty five years past. Local stone had been gifted from the local quarry and local hard working hands had raised the structure. A generous donation from a pastoralist, living like a lord in those halcyon times, had allowed the installation, above the altar, of a stained glass window that would not be out of place in the finest city church.

But the fact remained that the land belonged to the Anglican church and therefore anything on the land belonged to it also. The decision had been made to sell, and no amount of protestations or grovelling from Father Lester, or pleas from the local community was going to change that.

Father Lester was fond of his church and his congregation. He was also becoming especially fond of a young local woman, Madeleine. The word, 'maiden' may have not been totally applicable as a descriptor for her, but he had decided not to probe too deeply in that direction. She was certainly respectable enough for him and for the town, and not bad looking to boot. He had gone to the trouble of wining and dining her on several pleasant occasions and nothing in her demeanour indicated that she found his attentions anything but acceptable. In short, it would be most inconvenient at this time to have his church sold, and to be forced to leave the town. Being, he felt, totally ill-equipped to earn his living in any other fashion but that of the saving of souls.

Was it Divine Providence or just good luck that made him open the Bureau of Meteorology site one Sunday morning as he drank his coffee after the service? The forecast extended until the next Sunday and, on this day, it was claimed there was a forty percent chance of thunderstorms 'possibly severe', in the area. Now, as everybody knows, the Bureau has a habit of changing its mind, and even if it were correct forty percent did not sound like an encouraging probability. But Father Lester was desperate. Instantly an idea formed, and he hurried down to the local supermarket, even though it be the Sabbath, to purchase a ream of A4 printing paper.

There was no time, nor finances available for the local printing service. He laboured away the entire rest of the day typing and copying his message on Word, and then hurried out under cover of darkness to place a copy in every letter box in the small town. The message was a simple one. On the following Saturday afternoon there would be a service to pray for rain. Following the service there would be a substantial afternoon tea. So desperate was the poverty stricken town for entertainment that he felt assured even this small inducement would guarantee a significant attendance.

Later, as he dropped to his knees, exhausted, for his nightly prayers, he beseeched the Almighty that his efforts would not be in vain. He pointed out that not even a miracle

was required. All that was needed was for the forecast to be correct and the thunderstorms to form over his town. Also, he felt obliged to remind the Omniscient Creator, this was the only chance for his church to survive, and for the Divine Word (not in this case the digital version) to be spread and flourish in the local area.

One can only imagine his torments in the coming week. It may be acceptable, or even expected, for the Lord's earthly representative to cast his eyes heavenwards occasionally, but he found himself glancing upwards at approximately five minute intervals. Of course, he didn't want it to rain before the service, but, nevertheless he was finding the relentless blueness and sunniness slightly unnerving. Couldn't the occasional black cloud, or even a white one, make an appearance upon the horizon to restore his belief in their existence?

He was so distracted that he almost failed to notice the gasp of pleasure that escaped from Madelaine's lips when he abstractedly slipped his hand into her bra cup after their next boozy dinner. Just in time, he rose to the surface of reality enough to capitalize on this development. His response was enthusiastic but limited by his duty as a clergyman, she being technically one of his flock. Nevertheless, he now considered himself 'engaged' even though no words on the subject had passed his lips.

Saturday arrived, the church was full. The parish ladies had done him proud with plates and plates of sandwiches and home baked scones and cakes, and urns and urns of tea. They prayed, he gave a sermon, they prayed again, then all, with barely concealed relief, repaired to the church hall for refreshments.

Sunday, a frisson of hope. The air was leaden as he walked from the rectory to the church and he could definitely now see some dark clouds forming over the adjacent hills. Attendance this morning was even better than usual, and he saw Madeleine in the front pew for the first time. Halfway through the sermon there was a deafening crack of thunder. His heart beat faster but he continued explaining the mysteries of the Revelation 4:6 with barely a missed beat. Fortunately it was not a communion service. He was sure he would not have been up to administering the holy bread and wine without his hands noticeably trembling.

Finish the sermon, final prayers, blessing, nearly over, thank goodness. Then he did stop and listen. The congregation was silent, some leaning sideways as if in an attempt to get an ear closer to the sound. The unmistakable sound of heavy rain drumming on the roof of the church.

He walked down the aisle, the congregation followed. They gathered in the porch staring out at the curtain of rain that poured down. He felt his hand taken. Madelaine. Was that adoration in her eyes? The cars, mainly 4WDs fortunately, were parked in the paddock, which had become a shallow lake. It was too heavy to even make a run for it, but nobody cared. Faces almost split open with smiles. We did it!

But thunderstorms are fickle and localised events. His town received ninety millimetres of glorious rain, but only thirty kilometres away another small hamlet continued to bake surrounded by bare dusty fields. The mayor came with a delegation, devious, unannounced. They begged. Could he hold another service to pray for rain for them? Cornered, he said he would consult his diary and get back to them.

There were so many, many reasons why he did not want to do this. Only he knew how lucky he had been last time. Well, lucky or divinely blessed. But, in any case it was highly unlikely to happen again. Desperately he returned to the BOM Website. This time in even greater detail. Pouring over the three month rainfall graphs, delving into alien concepts such as Indian Ocean Dipoles, Southern Oscillation Indexes, and the more familiar, but no better understood, El Nino.

Peering closely at the barely distinguishable colours up the side of a map of Australia he concluded that his chances weren't that bad. He was almost certain that the graph indicated there was a sixty percent chance of average or above average rainfall in his area in the next month. That was even better odds than last time. Next month is not this month, so he rang the mayor and put off the service for two more weeks. He reminded the mayor, as an insurance policy, of that well used caveat of belief. Though it might seem churlish of the Lord to leave his town stricken by drought while pouring water on another in such close proximity, he 'worked in mysterious ways'.

The day of the service arrived. Identical to the one previously performed and, he feared, with identical expectations. Sunday dawned with a clear blue sky. The days of the

subsequent week crawled by. Then, when he awoke on Thursday he sensed a change in the light. Yes! The sky was grey. He leapt out of bed and ran out to the back garden in his pyjamas. He couldn't be mistaken, delicate drops of water were falling on his upturned face.

Light showers were experienced in the entire district all that day. Not enough to make any impact on a dam, but sufficient to put a few centimetres into tanks containing nothing more than a layer of green sludge.

That night he dropped to his knees and prayed as he had never prayed before. "More rain Lord. Oh please more rain." The rain came, three nerve-wracking days later, but it came. Gurgling downpipes, dripping gutters, with holes no one had reason to suspect; creeks flowing, dams filling and a glorious patina of green soon covering the countryside.

The local district paper, informed of events through some unknown channel, ran a front page article. "MIRACLE CHURCH – PRAYERS FOR RAIN ANSWERED." The article came complete with a colour picture of St Jude's in its bucolic setting. Possibly yet again due to divine intervention, it was a particularly lack-lustre news week, and the article was rehashed, essentially unchanged, in the closest large rural city a mere fifty minute drive away. Even more amazing, it appeared briefly on some state and national news bulletins. Father Lester began to be inundated with requests, mainly from the aforementioned city, to perform weddings in this picture perfect setting. Two local farmers eyed off their large barns and put in applications to the council to conduct wedding receptions.

Just at that moment, and their timing could not have been more unfortunate, the diocese sent an official letter to Father announcing the impending arrival of a property evaluator from a large real estate agency. Father Lester felt it was incumbent upon himself, his very duty, to announce this development from the pulpit on the following Sunday, assuring his parishioners that their spiritual needs would conveniently be met by a short two hour round trip to the closest church.

A slightly left leaning member of the town immediately started a petition on a site dedicated to such things. Within a week it had over five thousand signatures mainly from

people who would never approach the church, or indeed any church, but were incensed by this flouting of authoritarianism and lust for mammon, over the lives of normal, devote, humble people. The local mayors contacted the diocese, then their elected State Member of Parliament, followed by the Federal.

In the face of such a bombardment, they rolled over. St Jude's was now considered to be essential to the spiritual life of the community and could remain open.

Exalted, and it must be said, mildly drunk, Father Lester penned a letter to Madeleine by hand. Perhaps, he felt, the most momentous letter of his life. It was only fair to give her advance warning that he planned to make an important request. He urged her to seriously consider the tribulations of a vicar's wife; tea, scones, not always of the best quality, endless complaints which must perforce, be handled with diplomacy, hurt feelings, unsort intimate confessions etc, etc.

Madelaine, had of course, already considered all these things in the privacy of her one bedroom flat. She was a country girl, she had drunk gallons of tea and eaten stodgy scones so often that it was wondrous that her bowels still functioned normally. As principal of the local primary school she had endured and deflected spurious complaints from besotted parents for years. She knew that she was eminently suited for this job. Moreover, and of no small import, the rectory was a delightful stone cottage built not long after the church, and quite tastefully furnished. It came unencumbered with the distractions of bank loans and mortgages. Aware that she was acting rather like a Jane Austen heroine, she nevertheless awaited the romantic evening and declaration with impatience.

Perhaps at this happy juncture it is a good opportunity to say farewell to St Jude's, its rector, and the little town. To depart in peace, before life's inevitable frustrations and petty disappointments return, as they must. For this is a special moment. A moment in its history when two wondrous, and indeed miraculous, events have occurred simultaneously. The common people have prevailed against remote and indifferent authority, and, at least in one corner of the Australian continent, the drought has broken.