My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our grateful hearts, minds, Spirits, and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Today we’re hearing scripture from a letter that was written in Paul’s name. This happened with many of the letters we see in the New Testament—letters that need authority to the audience to which they are written. In the ancient world, they did that a lot, writing in the name of the one who might have spoken or written the words. In our modern times, it’s like having a speech-writer. The one who knows what might be said, if the person had time to write it themselves and thought about to whom it was being presented. Very few important people these days, much less back then, were like Abraham Lincoln, who penned all his own stuff.

Now the apostle Paul was a Pharisee and is a Roman citizen. He’s an important guy before his conversion to Christianity, and so he might be qualified to write on the heights of imperial power and its intersection with God.

And Pharisees know all about prayer as leaders of the synagogues. But prayers then, as today, reflect both the will and circumstances of the people of faith, and for the most part, from the Pharisees’ point of view, are centric to the nation of Israel.

Imagine, then, the surprise Timothy must feel when he is advised to pray for all members of the human family, including the godless emperor Nero of Rome, the emperor at the time of this letter. Nero needed a scapegoat for the great fire of Rome in 64 A.D., and he blamed the Christians to take the focus off himself. Christians were denied certain privileges in society, and some were publicly butchered or fed to the lions in the Colosseum. And yet Paul says to this, that even if we disagree, we are to pray for those who rule the daily affairs of our lives. What a weird approach to government authority, particularly when the government seems arbitrary and capricious, rather than just and merciful.

We are encouraged to pray for “kings” – those ruling heads of state and CEOs of our government. We pray for those who represent us to the world at large. And we are encouraged to pray for those “who are in authority” – those who are subordinate rulers, regional leaders, and local officials. We are to pray for those who protect and provide for us on a daily basis.

But what if we disagree with what’s going on. What do we do when we see what we perceive as stuff that should not be going on? Shouldn’t we voice our concern? If we’re being mistreated because of government intervention, shouldn’t we protest or sign a petition?

We’re talking prayer here. Paul says that we should challenge false teachings and reinforce right actions. But maybe we should pray first before getting too riled up. Maybe we should lift up our ruler in prayer, whether it’s the president, the director of whatever agency, or a local member of the board or town government. Jesus often went off to a place by himself and prayed before he acted against the authorities of his day. And like Jesus, Paul places primary importance on prayer.

We’re not talking about the different types of prayer that we have for our personal well-being here like petitions, thanksgivings, laments, and the like. Paul is talking about the scope of prayer, that we can trust coming to God with requests, needs, and desires for ourselves AND for others. Here Paul insists that we thank God for where we are and what we have, that prayer should always include thanksgiving. We’re pretty good at asking God for action, aren’t we? But we are not so good at remembering to thank God for answers, because we don’t know how to see them or hear them.

I have a question for you. Do we ask others around us to pray with us? I often get push-back that the evidence is that prayer doesn’t work. We can ask God for anything. God wants us to put our cares out there, to lean on God’s heart for peace and solace. But we too often expect our prayer will prompt the hand of God to our will be done, when in fact, God’s hand is only, and must only, be based on GOD’s will be done. The prayer that works is the prayer that taps into GOD’s intentions.

When things are peaceful in our lives, we take good government for granted. But we should not overlook the things that light our rockets, either. That being said, we should pray for leaders of both parties of government. Who among us can say that? Do we pray for judges and others who promise to be just and merciful, or does one decision cement our minds against their efforts for all time? Threats of harm, incivility, and discord should make us as Christians more inclined than ever to pray for peace, that all might hear the Gospel message of Truth and Love for the whole world, and that no one is outside God’s mercy. But this knowledge goes beyond intellectual awareness. Truth requires deep spiritual discernment, and full experiential knowledge.

Paul’s advice extends for peace so that we might get on with the work of having folks hear God’s word. We want to help nations, all the nations, to be quiet and peaceable, so that people understand our reverence, devotion, and dignity before God, that all peoples might gain more insight to the purposes to which they are intended, and less bent over, or mis-shapen, by sin.

Remember those words from a few weeks back?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

You’ve heard me say that God and Jesus never comment on capitalism or communism, democracy or monarchy, and they are neither inclined toward Tory, Liberal, or Labor.

Even Christians cannot agree on the content of prayer. Just like the Pharisees, Christians can’t agree on the full extent of justice, mercy and kindness to all. But I read recently a beautiful quote from Deborah Haarsma, a noted author and astronomer who lectures extensively on the intersection of faith and science to both conservative and progressive Christians. She says, “When Christians refuse to talk to each other across disagreements, we miss out on the beauty of the unity of the Body of Christ.”

We have to agree that we pray for peace so that we can be at a maximum for gospel ministry, that prayers can be answered in a way we least expect. We may experience times of persecution: great for gospel peace, but not so very peaceful. But let us always say, no matter what time and place find ourselves: In God We Trust. And for that, thanks be to God, Amen.