

Maundy Thursday 2010 Birmingham Cathedral 1030

Isaiah 61:1-9; James 5:13-16a; Luke 4:16-21

'pray for one another that you may be healed' James 5:16a

This is one of the many imperatives of the book of James. They are rooted in the messianic Christian tradition drawing heavily on the Law and the Prophets.

Part of the same imperative could be read on the back page of yesterday's Sun in 7cm type PRAY (alongside a photo of a well known footballer's sore ankle) but with no further direction as for what, who, or how
- though those who have committed hard cash to long odds of England's world cup progress may have prayed already.

James' inclusion in the Christian canon is of course because he is not satisfied with the wisdom of the years nor a nod in the direction of the Deity, for his pivotal challenge is in 2:1 'do you...really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?'

'Praying for one another' was not a feature of my upbringing. Recently however I was visiting a housebound cousin with my mother. The hour was coming to a polite scone and tea conclusion when a neighbour burst in excitedly and asked 'where is the bishop?' / 'I hear there's a bishop in the area' requesting an immediate blessing for herself and her sick son abroad. I complied, willingly, and was encouraged to move out once again from my culturally influenced, private, individual approach to spiritual and physical need, to a renewed confidence in a distinctive Christian Way of open, trusting prayer in the community.

[5:13-16a] James' three examples of human experience for which the practise of prayer together is valid are suffering, cheerfulness and sickness. They illustrate not only the depth and variety of prayer, but also the expectation of an ease of praying together.

Suffering is so much part of our condition whether in fabulously wealthy Western-type cultures or the far reaches of impoverished millions everywhere: captive, blind and oppressed [Luke 4].

From nature's earthquakes to abused children, from disappointment in career to family breakdown, from the carnage of unwanted war to the isolation of old age we could turn to greater and greater despair/destructiveness. Yet when faced with suffering we are exhorted to pray. Not to go down the blind alleys of complaint or aggression (blaming temptation by God (James 1:13) or seeking retaliation (James 5:7) but to reconnect with the God of a Covenant of love and trust, righteousness and mercy.

Cheerfulness is not equated with a chirpy personality or mere happiness but with that which leads to songs of praise. It is the praise from 'a people whom the Lord has blessed' [Is 61:9] with 'a garland instead of ashes' [61:3] who are 'a planting of the Lord, to display his glory' [ibid].

[East African revival 'Praise the Lord!']

Practising this acknowledgement of God as the generous giver of gifts [1:17] and mercy [5:11] takes readjustment, moments of gratitude throughout the day, staying in the perspective of consecration rather than consumption.

On the third of James' examples there is some discussion now as to whether we have a National Health Service or a National Sickness Service. Martin Powell's inaugural lecture as Professor of Health and Social policy at Birmingham University last week was quick to point out the limitations of the ambitious aims of government from 1997-2009 in dealing with sickness and promoting health. I was left more sure than ever there is an essential requirement for visible prayer at the heart of the NHS.

The Christian who is sick is also told to call for anointing 'from the elders of the church' reminding us of the oil that we bless today. Not only in Extreme Unction but in its sick-bed administration, there is a linking, as Luke Johnson writes, of the "spiritual and the physical, reaching across pain and loneliness, in demonstration of solidarity with the wider community" [Luke T Johnson NIB p222]

We may pray into our suffering, cheerfulness and sickness, or any other area of life, but the overall imperative of praying for one another is that we may be made whole – healed!

Later today we shall reflect on the Last Supper and the power of Jesus own prayer-in-action:
‘having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end’ [John 13:1]

Here of all moments we may consider our own needs and practice as baptised disciples and ordained ministers, fearfully and wonderfully made and called to be a priestly sign of Christ’s Kingdom [ref Peter royal priesthood!]

Our greater openness to prayer with and for one another allows Jesus to minister to us in his loving work of our ‘being made perfect’.

This often starts through an individual who cares for us in their professional or intimate capacity: a family or household member; doctor; counsellor; spiritual director; friend; colleague, but the emphasis of James is that the work of prayer and healing is a shared endeavour of a supportive community of faith.

There is one area of common knowledge and a significant step on the way to open prayer: our everyday, human propensity to sin and our everyday human need for forgiveness.

James' imperative about healing is preceded immediately by 'confess your sins to one another' (5:16).

This is not to dwell morbidly on daily failure, but in confession of our mutual weakness, and receiving the grace-filled, powerful miracle of forgiveness, through the vulnerable self-giving sacrifice of Jesus, to find a new freedom, a greater trust and a joyful confidence in loving and being loved.

Bill Butler a British missionary in his candid account of the East African revival records the testimony of his Ugandan colleagues 'We love our brother Bill because although the colour of his skin is white, we know his heart is as black as ours!' (Hill Ablaze Hodder 1976 page 116).

There are many stories from that mid-20th century period particularly about the healing of relationships. A leading churchman in Uganda confessed to a huge congregation after hearing a well-illustrated exposition of the Gospel "I have been like a warder keeping people locked in jail...It is because I have never seen clearly how to get out of prison myself, but today I have come to see, and I myself have come out of that prison and I hope that many others will follow me!" The report goes on that there had never been so much rejoicing over a repentant Anglican priest! [ibid p117]

Of course only God can bring revival – meanwhile he provides all the resources for holy and joyful fulfilment.

A Christian student many years ago tells of their wrestling with what would in the old traditions be called a mortal sin and going for a few minutes refuge into the cavernous silence of Durham Cathedral. Hidden in front of one those great carved pillars they opened a prayer book desperately and read a verse of an epistle: ‘No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it’ [1 Corinthians 10:13]

One of those ways is in keeping a holy accountability to one another in mutual support, with that great trust in the universal forgiving power of the cross of Christ and his resurrection.

Let us be faithful in these ordinary praying ways of Jesus and expect him to be extraordinary in every day life ‘starting with me and you’

If you are already full of grace and truth then be encouraged by Sarah Maitland who gave the threatening promise on Radio 3 last Sunday ‘the more time you have for prayer, the more interesting prayer gets’ (28.03.10)

Then in practise, as we go out on our daily journey as those who know Christ's wholeness expecting 'the Spirit of the Lord to be upon' us (Isaiah 61:1) we enter with new confidence into the many opportunities for prayer with those amongst whom we minister.

These might be at the far end of communal prayer, for example the Bishop's grace at great formal dinners (a sign of people's hunger for acknowledged divine space in the public arena which is wide open for Christian proclamation)

Or in

Healing on the Streets

Home visiting

Stories of encouragement in the Diocesan Prayer Booklet

The reconstituted Diocesan Healing and Deliverance Group

And the daily and weekly participation in the Eucharist

Then I pray, we will indeed be known across the land as those who 'really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ' (James 2:1) - and can even say one for Wayne.

+David

Bishop of Birmingham

1st April 2010

