

‘I pray that....’

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, St Luke’s Day 2020, All Saints’ Belmont

Keynote Bible passages: Luke 10.1 – 9, Isaiah 61.1 - 3

For quite some time I have pondered the relationship between the New Testament church and the church of today as we know it. Bearing in mind differences in culture, and the situation then, and now, what might we expect to learn and practice today? This being for the effective working of the church, and the life of the church community.

1) New Testament examples

First, here are a couple of descriptions: ‘They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship and the breaking of the bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many signs and wonders were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.’ (Acts 2.42- 45). Thus here was fellowship, teaching, sharing of communion, generosity, we can surely identify with that. What we call healing ministry was practised, with great effect, described as ‘signs and wonders’. It is this last aspect may I draw your attention to the beginnings as described in today’s gospel, the sending out of 70 to minister to ones in need. Described as ‘signs and wonders’, it recognises God’s presence and activity.

Let’s consider it more closely. In a second example we are told by Luke of the beginnings of this for the early church. Some 70 of the followers of Jesus were appointed for this – That would have been a significant number of the early discipleship community. It’s likely also to have been men and women. Sent out in twos, likely to encourage each other as they went. Going into the wider community meant that while there would be ones who responded, others may not have accepted – (Like ‘lambs into the midst of wolves’). Wherever they went they were to bring peace into situations. They were to pray for those in need, and pronounce that this ministry was a sign of the kingdom of God present. What that would have meant would be to bring into situations those qualities of peace, love, kindness, joy, goodness, patience, encouragement and humility.

What relevance might this have for our membership and practice of ministry? I would suggest there’s learning and suggestions how to go about it. For example, to think of situations where there needs be *peace*: in tensions in relationships, in brokenness, and where families are struggling economically. To think of it, we may well realise we know of ones in such situations. Then there’s those who are ‘sick’ or struggling with a disability, We surely know of such folk, be it in our own extended family, a friend, in the church community, and with the pandemic, living overseas perhaps having tested positive, and separated from family members. Prayer is surely needed.

2) A way of praying.

As well as giving them our encouragement, and love, how might we pray? May I suggest a way I've found helpful, and to invite you to 'try it out in the service. Hence the sermon theme '*I pray that...*' What I've noticed in the letters of St Paul he easily moves into 'prayer mode' as he writes to the believers. For example writing to the Ephesians he is describing his ministry to the Galatians and then without notice: '*I pray that* according to the riches of his mercy, God may grant you that you may be strengthened in your inner being...and to know the love of Christ...' (3.14).

How for us? I've found this way of praying especially helpful when one is with somebody you don't quite know how a prayer will be received, or if one finds it difficult to pray a prayer aloud. Thus from conversation one simply moves into 'prayer mode' - 'I pray that....'

I remember doing this in that 'chance encounter' with the resident in the Stone Cottage on Chatham Islands. Having not met her previously, I wasn't sure a formalised prayer would be accepted. Thus it wasn't intrusive into the conversation, 'I pray that....'. And it seemed gratefully accepted.

May I suggest 'let's try'. Bearing in mind the teaching of the gospel, please form a 'group of two.' Please take a few minutes to share a particular concern you have for someone, be it in family, a friend, someone from church, or wider - there's plenty of options from the prayers in Newslink.

[Prayer opportunity]

3) Prayer outcomes

Now what's important is not to doubt the veracity of your prayer, trust the sincerity of it going to God - and to leave it in God's hands. Thus we trust as the promise of scripture: "in the same way the Spirit comes to helps us, weak as we are....and God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the thought of the Spirit is , because the Spirit pleads with God *on behalf of his people* and in accordance with his will'. Hence my understanding is that the Spirit takes the inadequacy of our prayer and transforms it for God to respond. Thus be encouraged in your faith by the next verse: 'We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to is purpose.' (Romans 8.26 - 28)

Finally, on the theme of healing, a quick word on the selection of the first reading, from the Book of Isaiah. Here the writer had a broad view of the nature of healing, in varying circumstances, those oppressed, broken hearted, and in mourning. The 'good news 'is that there's hope in God by the Holy Spirit, as it was in Jesus (he quotes the passage at the start of his ministry) and as it can be in our caring for ones in need.

