

Waiting and praying

A sermon preached by Dr Tony Lemon at St Peter's Wolvercote, 30 July 2017 8:00 & 10:00am

Readings: 1 Kings 3, 5-12; Romans 8, 26-end; Matthew 13, 31-33, 44-52.

Themes emerging from our readings might be summarised as 'waiting and praying'. The first two parables in our Gospel reading, as well as the parable of the weeds that precedes them, are also about waiting – something that we all find difficult. The farmer waits for the harvest-time, watching in frustration as the weeds grow alongside the wheat but knowing that to rush in and pull up the weeds, as the servants wanted, would pull up much of his wheat crop with them. In the parable of the mustard seed the farmer must wait patiently while this smallest of seeds grows into the largest of shrubs, becoming a tree so that the birds nest in its branches. Similarly the woman baking bread must wait for the leaven to spread its way through the dough until the whole loaf is leavened.

Jesus is trying to explain to his followers that this is what God's kingdom is like. His followers were impatient: if the kingdom was really present where Jesus was, coming to birth in what he was doing, they wanted the whole thing at once. They weren't interested in God's timetable. It may be that Jesus had his eye on the revolutionary groups of his day, who were only too ready to step into God's field and root up what looked like weeds. There were many groups, including some of the Pharisees who were eager to fight against pagans and against compromised Jews. But Jesus is trying to teach people patience – the patience of God himself who doesn't want to declare harvest-time too soon, destroying wheat along with the weeds. There's a message here for governments faced with demands for instant policy and legislation changes when dramatic and tragic events occur. Politicians of stature know that legislation rushed in such circumstances seldom proves wise and enduring. Royal Commissions are castigated for the time they take, but it is generally right to give the issues concerned the full examination they deserve. For the church too, as it is caught up in many difficult issues and demands for reform, there is an ongoing tension between what many perceive as an urgent need for change and the need to get things right and to recognise the wider implications of fundamental changes.

We are all impatient at times. One form of that impatience is expressed in what is probably the commonest question that people ask Christian leaders and teachers, often in the context of horrific violence like that we have seen over the past five years in Syria, or the unimaginable suffering in war-torn Yemen: 'Why doesn't God *do* something?' The answer lies in the fact that God made us free to decide and act as we see fit – and of course so much of the world's suffering arises from human actions. And would we really wish it otherwise? If the price of God stepping in and bringing peace to Syria and Yemen were that he would also have to rebuke and restrain every other evil impulse, including those we still cherish within ourselves, would we be prepared to pay that price? If we ask God to intervene on special occasions, can we really suppose that he would do

that simply when we want him to? And what happens if other groups want him to intervene differently? the age-old problem of conflicts between two sides which both claim to be Christian.

So what do we pray for? The first two verses of today's reading from Paul's epistle to the Romans form one of the most important passages on prayer in the New Testament. Paul says that, because of our weakness, we don't know what to pray for, but the Spirit intercedes for us – in the words of the Jerusalem Bible, the Spirit expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words'. The great Congregational theologian C. H. Dodd once said, 'Prayer is the divine in us appealing to the divine above us' – the Spirit acting within us, articulating our fumbling words and thoughts and bringing them to God.

We find it difficult to know what to pray for in part because we can't foresee the future. So we may pray to be saved from things that would ultimately be for our good, or ask for things that would ultimately be harmful. We simply don't always know what is best, either for ourselves or others. We may think we know, but that is quite different. We should all love to end the suffering of people in North Korea and to bring an end to its brutal regime and the threat posed by its growing nuclear power. But the huge dangers posed by military intervention, especially for the people of South Korea, dictate a more patient, nuanced strategy. It is our human nature to focus on the specific and the immediate, but God's perspective is not limited in time and place. In the last analysis all we can bring to God is an inarticulate sigh which the Spirit will translate to God for us.

But there are things that we can pray for with confidence. We can pray, as Solomon did, for wisdom – an understanding mind. We can pray, as in the hymn 'Father hear the prayer we offer', for the moral and spiritual strength to live our lives courageously. We can pray for guidance in difficult situations. In these things our prayer emanates from a recognition of our own limitations, our need for help. In the last analysis the perfect prayer is one of ultimate trust: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. Not my will but yours be done.'

But trust and acceptance don't mean inaction in the world around us. Paul's saying that 'all things work together for good' is one of those Biblical quotations that have found their way into everyday speech – the sort of cheerful offering in philosophical vein that we might expect to hear in Ambridge. But those words omit the critical words at the end of what Paul said – 'all things work together for good *for those who love God*'. He was not saying that we must accept the world as it is, with all its social ills and injustices. Religion has been used that way in the past, as a means of social control, a means of conditioning people to accept unjust social structures as natural and God-given – 'the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate'. There was uncomfortable truth in Karl Marx' famous description of religion as 'the opium of the people'. But nothing

could be further removed from the revolutionary gospel of Jesus which we are called to proclaim. As Christians we are called to pray for and actively seek justice in this world. In the words of that wonderfully simple prayer, we must seek to change the things we can, accept the things we cannot change, and ask for wisdom to know the difference.

Paul uses the word 'intercede' twice in this morning's reading: first, as we have seen, of the spirit, then of Jesus himself: 'It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.' Jesus, Paul says, is at God's right hand to *intercede – to plead our cause*: not to be the prosecuting counsel, but to be our advocate. With a great leap of faith Paul sees Jesus, not as judge but as the lover of the souls of all humankind. He goes on with poetic rapture to that great lyrical passage beginning **'Who will separate us from the love of Christ?'** His famous answer, which must have comforted so many Christians in extreme situations throughout the ages, is summed up **'nothing in all creation'**. It is with this assurance that we can enter into the words of the hymn and pray, not for a life of ease, but for the strength to live our lives courageously.

Amen