

A Week of Prayer

Sermon by Chris Bessant

Seventh Sunday of Easter – 8th May

Inspired by John Chapter 17, verses 20-26

Jesus prayed to his Father: 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'

Most clergy will tell you that the last thing you want is a letter from the bishop or archbishop. In the Church of England the top table are usually best kept at bay, lest they find out what is really going on in the parish. So it was with horror recently that I received a letter from both Archbishops of Canterbury and York. But fear not because the good news is that I have not been sacked – well that it good news isn't it!? Much better than that

though is that the archbishops want us to share the real ‘good news’, that is: The Gospel. Perhaps I’d better explain.

If you have yet had a chance to read my Parish Magazine for this month, then you will already know that this week, and beginning from today, there is to be an extra focus of prayer upon the needs of our parish. In the letter the two archbishops – Justin and John – are urging **all clergy and all churches** to take up on a theme of prayer for the **whole nation**, both locally and nationally.

Here is what they are proposing for each parish to undertake, in their words:

‘Like us, you will know that ministry is empty and barren without prayer. That is why we are taking the unprecedented step of writing to every serving parish priest in the Church of England inviting you and your people to join us in a week of prayer for the evangelisation of our nation.’

So a week of prayer across the nation, and for the needs of our nation, is certainly time and effort well spent, and so we shall. But what do the archbishops mean by ‘evangelisation of the nation’, and what does that mean for the people of our parish here?

Well that word evangelisation means to share the good news of Jesus Christ and to share the gospel in mission. It’s a very active word that looks to spread an influence of God’s love and his intentions for humankind. Evangelisation is best understood as the foreign policy of God’s Kingdom. When God sent his son to us he was evangelising. When we invite people to events here in church, we are evangelising. When you pray for others and visit them in their homes with care, then you are evangelising. When we work in the schools we are evangelising. I’m sure you will agree that a church which has none of these things is not a church at all – it’s a club.

In our Lord's Prayer is that wonder phrase – 'Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done.', which I suggest is a summary of all I have just identified as the ministries of the Church. Remember that God's Kingdom is never static; it wants to grow, and it's natural for it to do so. But growth here is not just in terms of regions across the world, but in time also. God's Kingdom wants to be passed on from generation to generation, which is why it's so important that we have a strong ministry amongst children and families.

It's also the case that in some places God's Kingdom can shrink too. ?In the UK, have we seen God's Kingdom grow or shrink in the life of our nation? I think you would have to conclude that it seems to have diminished a great deal. You can count the number of worshippers and you can look at the institutions of our nation, and it's sadly quite clear that what was once no doubt a Christian country is now much less so, or perhaps even not at all. **So this week of prayer is where the archbishops are saying to us: 'look now we want all parishes to take a week of prayer, and during that week you can gather in the prayers and needs of your parish, and ask for God to show you how you can share the good news of Christ with all the people.'**

The archbishop's hope in prayer is:

- For all Christians to deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ.
- For all of us to have confidence to share the gospel.
- For all who don't know Christ to respond to the call to follow him as disciples, and to seek to be in God's Kingdom.

So for us, this week of prayer is a time to stop and ask God to show us the way, and to ask God to send some of this influence and Spirit to guide us.

Now I think it's very important at this stage to make it clear that this is not about a special prayer committee who are gathering to pray about plans for the future. **This week I would like us all to engage with some of things we have organised, and simply come to prayerfully ask 'Lord, help me to share the good news and grow your Kingdom.'**

Let me outline for you some of the things we have planned for the next few days.

- Tea Service Theme of Prayer
- Sunday 8th (this evening at 8pm) – Taize Evening Prayer
- Morning prayer – look at the notice sheet and come along.
- Handout Prayer Sheet for Home
- Giant Prayer Board (show them)
- Evening Course on the Lord's Prayer
- 10:00am Wednesday Quiet Morning
- 12:30pm Friday Soup Lunch
- 6:30pm Prayer Meeting from the Giant Prayer Boards

Prayer often carries this impression of being something passive, and of course it is often still and quiet. But pray this week for us will be also very active, because we are all invited to something extra, over and above our normal prayers.

And so I commend this week of prayer to the whole church, and extend God's invitation to you all.

'Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done'

Amen