

St. Alban's Epping, 14th July 2019

“PRAYING FOR OTHERS AND PRAYING FOR OURSELVES”

(Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37)

What do we pray about when we pray for other people? Most of the time, we probably pray about some particular concern: sickness, a personal crisis, a difficult relationship, the loss of a loved one, a big examination, or a new job or the search for a job. It's good that we do that: seeking the special help and blessing of God at a challenging time for someone we care about and want to support.

But it's also good to pray for people without waiting for those difficult circumstances to arise. It's good, for instance to pray for Ross and Jenny even when there isn't a specific issue that we are aware of. And it's good to pray for one another in our ordinary lives: of course everyone always has their challenges, but we won't always be aware of every specific need of the people we might pray for. But we can still pray.

As we read the letters of Paul, we often find him writing about his prayers for his readers, particularly in his opening words of greeting. And those prayers of Paul can help us to see how we might pray for one another, and indeed pray for ourselves.

Paul's Letter to the Colossians provides an example of what I am talking about. Over the next few weeks, the Lectionary is taking us through most of this small but very significant letter written to this church in what we would know as Western Turkey. Some of you might have seen the extraordinary white chalk terraces of Pamukkale in Turkey. Three ancient cities existed in this area: Hierapolis, whose ruins lie above the terraces; Laodicea, of which we know from the letters to the churches in the Book of Revelation; and Colossae, an old city which was past its prime by the days of Paul.

The church in Colossae had not been founded by Paul himself. Epaphras seems to have been one of many people converted during Paul's extended ministry in the great city of Ephesus, 150 kilometres west on the coast of Asia Minor. The Gospel of Jesus Christ had gone out from Ephesus throughout that part of the world, and there were churches in many towns and cities of the area. And it seems that when Epaphras took the Gospel of Jesus to Colossae, people took to heart the message of God's love in Christ, many were converted, and a church was founded.

Years later Epaphras went to visit Paul in prison and told him how things were going, and to let him know of some concerns. We are not sure whether Paul's imprisonment was in Ephesus, not too far away, or over in Rome itself. But the result of Epaphras' visit was this letter to the congregation, a letter which came to be part of the New Testament.

The first thing Paul wants to say in his letter is that he prays for this church, this congregation whom he has never met. He doesn't know them personally, but they form part of the results of his extended ministry. In a sense they are his spiritual grandchildren, and he is concerned for them.

And the first thing he includes in his prayers is thanksgiving. He gives thanks because of their faith in Jesus Christ and their love for all the saints. That's a pretty good start, and he sees their faith and their love as linked up with the hope laid up for them in heaven. Faith, hope and love: these three appear together not only in that famous passage in 1 Corinthians 13, but in a number of Paul's letters. They go together.

Faith, that trust and dependence on God's grace which brings us forgiveness in Christ. **Love**, which is faith expressed in our lives. Love, which is our response to God's love shown to us, and the sharing of that love with others. Love which is demonstrated in generous, caring and even sacrificial acts for those who are in need of it, or those who will be blessed by these actions. That famous parable of Jesus, the Good Samaritan, which we just heard, shows us what love really involves: love is not just about how we feel but how we act. And of course to love our neighbour means being ready to show that love to anyone at all, those whom we find easy to love and those whom it is difficult to love. And we know that there are plenty of Christians and plenty of church members who are not all that easy to love. But there is the challenge for us all: can people look at the life of our church and say, "See how these Christians love one another!"?

Paul was delighted to hear of their faith and their love. And he points out that true faith and love are undergirded by the **hope** we have in Christ, the assurance that God's wonderful kingdom is opened to us through God's grace, and the promise that evil will one day be overcome, and that good and love will triumph, and that we will share in that wonderful victory.

Having expressed his thankfulness, Paul goes on to the main part of his prayer for the Colossians. Since he got the positive news from Epaphras, he and Timothy, who is linked with him in the writing of this letter, have not ceased praying for the Colossians. I don't think Paul is claiming that this is all he has been doing 24 hours a day: but he is saying that he has been regularly and consistently in prayer for them.

And what does he pray for the Christians at Colossae? He prays that they may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Knowledge, wisdom and understanding: that sounds all very theoretical. And it sounds much more relevant for the very intelligent and clever people than the average person, especially when Paul talks about being **filled** with knowledge and having **all** spiritual wisdom.

But why is this knowledge and understanding and wisdom so important? Because Paul wants them to lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him. Our faith ought to be seen in our lives, and our knowledge must be expressed in our living. The better we understand God and his purposes, the more equipped will we be to recognize the way God wants us to live, and how he wants us to act and to treat people.

Biblical teaching or doctrine or that unloved word *dogma* are not just ivy tower irrelevant information: they point us to the **ways** of God and the best way to live. And then the challenge for us is actually to do it!

But the purpose is not just living a moral life and being kind to people, important though these are. Paul talks about bearing fruit in every good work, and growing in the knowledge of God. And when he writes of the knowledge of God, it is not just knowing *about* God: it is developing a relationship with God. For some people that relationship can be a very real experience, almost an emotional experience, while for others this knowledge of God may be more of a sense of growing assurance that God is there, that he is with us, that he loves us, and that he will stick by us in all situations – and that in God's time we shall see him face to face in glory.

So Paul prays for that knowledge and wisdom and understanding. He prays that these Christians will live lives that please God. He prays for a developing knowledge and relationship with God. He prays for fruitfulness: fruitfulness in doing good works and loving deeds. He prays that they will have strength, spiritual strength, especially strength to endure, to stay strong in difficult times, and to keep going in faith and love, even giving thanks when things are tough, knowing that God's wonderful purposes **will** be fulfilled, and his wonderful promises will be kept for us.

So here is Paul praying for the Colossians. When we pray for people, let us always give thanks for them. And as we pray for one another, let us pray for real growth in understanding and faith and love and stickability and confidence in God's promises. Let us pray that people's faith will be expressed in their lives.

And if we pray those things for our fellow Christians, we can certainly pray the same things for ourselves, for these are the things God wants for all his people. And if we pray these things for ourselves, we need then to be ready to respond as the Spirit leads us forward, and opens us up to the blessings as well as the challenges God offers.

And how do we do this? Nothing original! People have always known the ways God uses to help us grow spiritually: our personal and corporate prayer, our reading and reflection on the scriptures, as well as other helpful spiritual reading, and coming regularly for worship and fellowship together, including our gathering at the Lord's table.

Let us then pray for ourselves and for one another, for spiritual reality and spiritual growth and for all God's blessings. And let us take the opportunities God gives us to be more open to those blessings, so that we might truly demonstrate them in our lives. Amen.

Paul Weaver