

SERMON FOR SUN SEPT 25TH, 2022

AT GORING, STREATLEY AND SOUTH STOKE

Why the church?

2. Prayer

Acts 2:42-47 + 1 Pet 2:4-5

Heb 10:24-25, Lk 11:9-13

‘JESUS – YES! CHURCH – NO!’ So read a placard carried by a student some years ago. Today I think there is still a desire for spiritual reality, but people not knowing where to look, are disenchanted with the church.

In 1740 the church looked bleak. Just 6 people attended St Paul’s cathedral on Easter Day, that was all. Church leaders were losing their faith and had lost their confidence in Jesus Christ. Most people were saying that theirs was the generation in which the church would disappear from this land. Two small groups of Christians in Oxford said, ‘Not on our watch’, and they met to pray. God moved powerfully over the next 5-10 years and millions came to faith in Jesus Christ. It shook the foundations of our country and around the world.

The Hebridean Revival of 1949 was at a time when the church on the islands was complacent and slumbering, if not dead. Young people were turned off by the church, with many alienated by a legalistic spirit. Duty rather than devotion led to a lifeless expression of faith. Two old sisters met to pray, and God moved powerfully.

Very recently a serious family crisis came to a head, so four of us met together to pray. Almost immediately, the situation improved dramatically. God is faithful! You might call it a coincidence, but as Archbishop William Temple said, “When I pray, coincidences happen. When I don’t pray, coincidences don’t happen”.

Today there is no shortage of critics who delight in caricaturing and knocking the church, describing its buildings as empty and dilapidated, with fewer and fewer people attending. The congregations are said to be made up of a few old ladies, if they can draw themselves away from the television, and depressed and irrelevant clergy with archaic and irrelevant services. Today apparently, we cannot believe in anything or be sure of anything concerning the existence of God. The cynical frequently delight to tell us that the church

will disappear within a generation. Does this distorted description of the church sound familiar?

But God has not changed and He moves powerfully when people pray.

I am glad that this is not a description that could be applied to our church and that many good things are going on here.

But the church is **NOT** a building, as useful as buildings can be in providing a meeting place, which might be warm. **WE** are the church. It is made up of those who trust in Jesus Christ. Scripture describes the church not only as a family, but also a building, with Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone, binding the stones together. We are living stones in His building, yes, each one of us, and it is this building which co-operates with God to build His Kingdom, and each of us has a role in this. It may appear at times that the church looks like a demolition site, but it's not. It's actually a construction site. It's not perfect because it's not finished, but God is supervising the construction and nothing will thwart His plans for the church that He loves.

In our reading from Acts, we have a picture of the church as a family at its best. A family looks forward to being together, it meets together regularly, has meals together, pools resources, cares for members in need, such as the sick and the elderly, studies scripture together, worships and prays together, both formally at the Temple, and informally. And they did this daily! This should be our model. Of course, we live in different times and circumstances, so we can't be together the whole time, but we can emulate their priorities and activities. Last Sunday we started a sermon series on the church, and today we are considering prayer as one of its priorities.

Why should we pray together?

A couple of missionary nurses in Africa were returning to their mission hospital from a village clinic where they had held a surgery. They were a bit late setting off as there had been more patients than expected. The night fell suddenly, as is usual in tropical regions, and they could not get home that day. So they chose as safe a place as possible to put up their tent, light a fire to cook supper. They committed their safety to God in their evening prayers and went to sleep. They slept well and safely, had breakfast and set off for the mission hospital soon after dawn.

Roughly two weeks later, the pair were on duty in the hospital surgery, when two men were brought in bleeding from gunshot wounds. When the men had recovered a little they asked the nurses if they were the nurses who had been camping out over-night near the big rock in the desert about twenty miles from there. The girls confirmed the details, but wondered how on earth the men knew it was them.

“Oh we know it was you”, they said, “because we were intending to rob you of your money and horses. We watched you all night.”

“Well, why didn’t you rob us, then?”

“Well, we would have done, except for the twenty-four soldiers who were camped in a circle around you”

“But we were all alone!”, responded the girls with some emphasis.

“No, there were all these soldiers!”, said the bandits.

Six months later, both nurses went to a deputation meeting at the home church of one of them and recounted the story of the bandits and the twenty-four soldiers to a fascinated group of church people. After the meeting the Church Secretary asked, “Just when was the desert-camping incident?” The nurses gave the date, and the Secretary came up with the startling information that that evening had been the date of the special prayer meeting for their mission work and that there had been twenty-four people present to pray that evening! Maybe God sent His angels to protect them! (Story from David Pawson).

Prayer changes things. God moves powerfully when we pray, though we may not understand it. It seems that God honours the prayers when a number get together to intercede.

We pray together because we are a family who meet together with our Heavenly Father. This is precisely what the early church did. Jesus said that when 2 or 3 of us meet together in His name, He is there in our midst. The writer to the Hebrews told us not to forsake the meeting of ourselves together, but to encourage one another.

It is encouraging when we agree to pray for particular issues, and it brings a shared joy when we see our prayers answered, and our faith is strengthened. We can support one another as we share personal needs and can pray about them together. Jesus said if two of us agree on earth about anything we ask

for, it would be done by His Father in heaven (Mt 18:19). So Jesus certainly envisaged that we would pray together as a church family.

But why do we pray at all? Is it duty or habit or delight? It is a good to have such a discipline. If I only prayed when I felt like it, I would pray less often. But at other times I pray excitedly and expectantly. This is something Jesus did regularly and is taken for granted in scripture. But why?

As Christians, we are members of God's family and He is our loving Heavenly Father. We have direct access into His presence because we are cleansed from our sin through Jesus' sacrifice for us. What a privilege! He is the Sovereign Lord, the Creator of the universe, for Whom nothing is impossible, yet He delights when we pray to Him, because He loves us. He knows and cares intimately about every detail of our lives. He is not just a personal assistant or a counsellor, but the King of kings, yet He waits for us to pray, He listens and responds, because our needs and concerns are important to Him. It doesn't mean that He will give us just what we want and everything will hunky-dory, but He will give us what is for our good, even though we may not realize it at the time.

It is when we pray that we can receive peace, though not an absence of conflict or difficulties. His peace passes all understanding in the most difficult of circumstances. He guards our hearts and our minds, when others would be in despair, and we can be agents of His peace.

Prayer is important because it deepens our relationship with God and we are changed as we pray. His priorities become our priorities. Relationships with people develop as we spend time with them and get to know them, and so it is with God.

We need to be thankful people, to express our gratitude to God for all His goodness to us, for the way He has answered our prayers, for what He has done in our lives, that we can address Him as Father. Gratitude changes how we pray and it changes us.

And of course, our prayer includes worship, which was last week's topic.

May we be praying people, not just on our own but with others. We are involving the King of kings, the One for Whom nothing is impossible, in our concerns and in our desire to build His kingdom.

Judith Hogg

