

Sermon for the 1st Sunday after Trinity (18th June 2017)

Readings (Morning Prayer):

Exodus 19:2-8a
Matthew 9:35-10:8

As if three terrorist attacks in the last few weeks¹ wasn't enough, the country is now reeling at the impact of the horrific fire this week at Grenfell Tower in North Kensington². Disasters that have cost lives, left many with terrible injuries and others distressed, traumatised and homeless have in three of those cases happened almost on our doorsteps, in places many of us will know.

What do we do in such circumstances? Of course, many have donated clothing and other items to help those who have lost everything, and others have rushed to volunteer to help. Perhaps some of you have done something like that, and it's been good to see local churches opening their doors to victims. But then, there have been reports that people at the forefront, at least at Grenfell Tower, are overwhelmed with offers and are turning volunteers away.

There is, of course, something we can all do – and that is to pray. Prayer is something people seem to turn to instinctively on such occasions. I remember seeing a picture of the message wall near Grenfell Tower – it was headed “Pray for our Community”. And in many reports in the media people say they are praying or ask others to pray. My guess is that they are not all of them people who would regularly pray or attend church, mosque, synagogue or temple.

That's good – even if we might wish some of them did it more regularly. And we can join them, both in Church and in our own private prayers. God sees and hears us all.

We can pray for healing for those who have been injured. We can pray for support for those who have lost loved ones, or are waiting to hear whether loved ones are alive. We can pray for those who are traumatised by the event. We can pray for the emergency services, who are often called on to show enormous bravery and skill – and may also experience trauma. We can pray for those who have died. We can pray for those who are homeless as a result. We can pray for justice – remembering that justice doesn't just mean punishment for those responsible but putting right what is wrong – whatever that may mean. We can pray for the authorities who have to deal with the aftermath – and who may also be implicated in some way. And I doubt if that list is exhaustive.

We can pray a simple prayer – “God, please heal those who are injured.” We can try something more elaborate if we wish, or know more detail. We can pray with passion, screaming our hearts out to God if that is how we feel. Or we may find words fail us.

But, however we pray, and whoever and whatever we pray for, and whatever we say or don't say, what are we actually doing when we pray?

¹ Vehicle mows down pedestrians on bridge, followed by stabbings – Westminster 22/3/2017 and London Bridge/Borough Market 3/6/2017. Suicide bomber in Manchester 23/5/2017.

² 14/6/2017

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Are we trying to persuade God to do something when he seems reluctant? Are we trying to get God to change his mind over what he was going to do or let happen? Are we trying to remind God of a need or situation he seems to have forgotten about or not even noticed?

I'm sure, put like that, most of us would say that cannot be. We know God loves us – he cares for those who are injured, killed, traumatised, made homeless or who have the difficult job of helping others and trying to save them from harm. I guess he was weeping from the moment the terrorists struck or the flames took hold – if not sooner. He doesn't need to be bombarded with prayer to make him care. And he cares for matters great and small – whether it's Grenfell Tower or a child who has fallen over and hurt his or her knee.

And, as Jesus tells us, he knows what we need before we ask³. We don't have to remind him.

Yet Jesus asks us to pray – commands us to, even – and to ask – “Ask and it will be given you”⁴. That, of course, raises all sorts of questions for us – we sometimes get wonderful answers to our prayers, but not always. Dealing with those questions is not something we can do today. We need to remember, however, that that command and promise from Jesus need to be read in context and in the light of other things Jesus says. In particular, we need to remember that Jesus told us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done”⁵ and whatever we ask for needs to be in accordance with God's will. While one way to look at that is to say that every time we ask for something it ought to be followed by the words “if it is your will”, probably a more important point to appreciate is that Jesus wouldn't have asked us to pray for God's will to be done if it was going to happen anyway. God's will is not a simple thing that God will do regardless, for his will is tempered by his love, and in his love he doesn't force his will on us or on any part of his creation.

If we pray for someone, or for a situation, what we are doing is saying to God, “Your will be done.” What we say may not be exactly in accordance with God's will – it is impossible for us to know God's will in every situation – if at all. What we are doing is praying in love and care – and that is what is important. Our prayers are not like missiles we fire at God to stir him into action – they are his Spirit working in us to direct more of his love and care, as well as our love and care, to the situation.

It's as well to remember something St Paul says – “When we cry ‘Abba, Father’ it is [the] Spirit bearing witness...”⁶. He also says, “...we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes...”⁷. Our prayers are the work of the Spirit within us.

So yes – pray. Pray for terrible situations like the Grenfell fire and the terrorist attacks. Pray for God's healing, support, care, love and justice to surround all those involved – and the

³ Matthew 6:8

⁴ Matthew 7:7

⁵ Matthew 6:10

⁶ Romans 8:15-16

⁷ Romans 8:26

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whole situation. But pray also for the smaller things – your own needs, those of your loved ones, those of the Church. Pray also for the even bigger things – like the peace of the world and the threats to the environment. In all these things we pray, not to bludgeon God into action but to share in his care and concern. In our prayers we are co-operating with him in doing his will.

But Jesus didn't just command us to pray "Your will be done". What he said was, "...pray... 'Your kingdom come, your will be done'". In a way, to pray for the kingdom to come is to pray for God's will to be done – totally, everywhere. But it's really more than that. The kingdom isn't even just a realm in which tower block fires and terrorist attacks don't happen. It's a realm in which God's love and care reign supreme, in which all are welcome and live in peace together. And, if we look at our reading from Matthew's Gospel, you'll see – in chapter 9 verse 35 – that the kingdom of heaven is what Jesus proclaimed – it was the centrepiece of his message:

"Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom..." [NRSV]

And, just after that, in chapter 10 verse 7, he sends the disciples out with the same message:

"As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near'" [NRSV]

The Bible often describes the kingdom in terms of a feast, and I love this vision of the kingdom of heaven described by Julian of Norwich. She says:

My mind was lifted up to heaven and I saw our Lord as a lord in his own house where he had called his much-loved friends and servants to a banquet. I saw that the Lord did not sit in one place but ranged throughout the house, filling it with joy and gladness. Completely relaxed and courteous, he was himself the happiness and peace of his dear friends, his beautiful face radiating measureless love like a marvellous symphony; and it was that wonderful face shining with the beauty of God that filled that heavenly place with joy and light.⁸

It is to the kingdom that Jesus calls us and has made it possible for us to get to. Our Old Testament lesson recounts how God declared that the Israelites would be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" – that's in Exodus 19 verse 6. To be a priest, or a priestly nation, is to be someone or a nation who helps others to draw near to God and have a relationship with him. In many ways the Israelites failed to be just that for the other nations – they were too wrapped up in themselves. It had to wait for Jesus to come and fulfil those words and make it possible for us to join God in his kingdom.

It is not just for healing, support and justice that we are to pray. It is not just for God's will to be done. It is for the kingdom that Jesus asks us to pray: "Your kingdom come."- as well as for all those other things. In so doing we are co-operating with God in bringing the kingdom near. We could even say that the more passionate and frequent our prayers, the better!

⁸Julian of Norwich, Showings (Revelations of Divine Love) Long Text chapter 14