

Thoughts and Prayers

Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1; I Timothy 2:1-7

It seems to have stopped for the moment, but there was a time in the last couple of years when just about every terrible atrocity or disaster that took place in the news was accompanied by some genuine political, or religious, leader being interviewed and saying, either at the very beginning or the very end of their interview, “and of course, our thoughts and prayers go out to those affected...” I know when I was asked to respond to some horrific events in our country or abroad, often with very little notice, it was more than challenging to find the right words to say. A bombing incident in Egypt where many Coptic Christians were killed; the Manchester arena concert where young people were killed and injured; the London Bridge atrocity; a fishing boat sinking in the west of Scotland with all hands lost. The phone would ring, or you’d get a text or email, and you would find yourself trying to come up with words that were concerned, compassionate, and hopefully giving enough for those desperate for someone to say something just about enough to know that someone, somewhere, was paying attention.

But it was hard to avoid the cliché. “Our thoughts and prayers...”

The same is true at a more local level. A family coming to terms with a bereavement, expected or unexpected. Someone facing the reality of a life-changing, maybe even life-ending medical diagnosis. A long-term or short-term relationship coming to a bruising end. Redundancy, unemployment, retirement, the disappointment of dreams crumbling, someone letting you down very badly by deceit, or default, and you see someone holding the shattered pieces of life in their hands and they turn to you, an ordinary person, and you feel you ought to say something, or write something, that isn’t trite, or meaningless, and you fight back words, ‘you’re in my thoughts and prayers.’ When I was looking for an image for the Church poster for this morning’s sermon I typed ‘thoughts and prayers’ into a search-engine and one of the first images that came up was of a box with the words, ‘thoughts and prayers on it’, but the box was empty.

Of course, let me be very clear, there is nothing wrong with thoughts and prayers! It is absolutely essential, for the person of faith, to start off any response to any situation with thinking and praying. Paul, in his letter to the young Christian Timothy, is adamant that prayer is where the person of faith starts. For those who are nearest and dearest to us, for those whose situations concern us on a wider stage in life. We should pray for our nearest and dearest, and the great and the good, and everyone in-between. But it should not stop at thoughts and prayers.

There might even be a kind of resistance to the spiritual response, when we grow tired and weary with praying when nothing seems to change. It is as old as the time of the prophet Jeremiah, and that was around the 7th/6th BC. People struggling, misery around, harvest past and summer ended and still the people were not saved. "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" Gilead produced a balm that was used for medicinal purposes in ancient time. But not even it, according to Jeremiah, was enough to remedy the chronic, morbid crisis of his day. Rubbing lotion on the sores of society wasn't going to be enough. Thoughts and prayers, well-meant, on their own will not be enough either.

Someone has said, "It is better to lend a hand than to point a finger." I think what our Bible passages today call us to do is to do both. We need to point a finger – that's the thoughts and prayers bit. We need to be aware of what is going on around us, what is wrong, what is hurtful, what needs changing. We need to think about what we might be able to do, and to pray for the strength and perseverance to do it. Then we need to lend a hand. There will be some things in life that we are able to sort by ourselves. But more often than not, we're going to need help. Help from other people, and help from God.

Thoughts and prayers are the 'first of all' matters, but then there must be some form of action and response, with others, and with God. If we do that individually, we will be enabled to do that corporately. When we do these things in tandem, we become the Church.

In his ongoing Chalmers lecture series, 'A Future bigger than the Past' (you can catch up on line at the Church of Scotland website), Sam Wells, Vicar of St Martins in the Fields, London, has suggested that churches have a greater future than they realise or dare dream of, if they are willing to adapt, transform, and engage with the communities around them. What kind of church, beyond thoughts and prayers, might that be?

In contrast to the fear that grips so many parts of our world, and our lives, churches should aim to be recognisable communities of hope, embodying a liberating story of reconciliation and grace. We can stand alongside people who live in fear. Fear of death, fear of the stranger, and fear of loss of meaning in a world where meaning and truth are becoming lost. We have a story of hope to tell, in the life and the action of Jesus.

Sam Wells goes on to say that churches that refused to turn inwards on themselves, and become a kind of club for the initiated, will become thriving churches if they reach out to and seek to include, welcome and affirm the community around them. Such churches become a blessing to their communities. Such churches notice what the needs and concerns are for the area in which they are located, and try, and maybe fail, and then try again to find ways to help those around them. It is not without risk, but then following Jesus is a risky business. The work we are hoping to do here around supporting those with dementia is one such way in which I believe we will be a blessing to our community, alongside the other things that we currently do in through our congregation. We have demonstrated for many years that we are a church that consistently goes beyond 'thoughts and prayers' by putting into action what we believe. That the Church is a place that consistently strives to be a place of gracious welcome and engagement, showing what we believe through what we do.

Faith in the C21st has to be shown to be relevant. Not only what we believe, and we must never lose sight of that, but also what we do. What kind of difference does a Church make? How do we decide what our mission truly is, and then how do we go into the community, and to the wider world, to carry this out? How does what we are and what we do touch, comfort, challenge and inspire the community where God has placed us? How are we a blessing to the people

around us? How do we share Who God is and why that matters, and how do we show that following God makes us more human?

Being the Church means speaking the truth to power, but also to the local community. Our inspiration comes first from the thoughts and prayers, but must then transform into words and actions that face outwards. As the Church looks at the world, ours is a voice that has something to say about suffering, weakness, injustice, laziness, and the failure to take responsibility. Ours is a voice that has something to say about economic hardship, homelessness, climate change and political malpractice. We speak, not simply because we have thought and prayed, but because we have acted and demonstrated the practical difference our lived out faith makes to the way we make our decisions, and engage with the needs of those around us.

If we fail to do this, we fail to be the Church. But when we do act in this way, and maybe encounter abuse and accusation for speaking out, we stand shoulder to shoulder with the wounded healer Who is Jesus Christ. He thought and prayed, then went on to speak and act. That's our vision, that's our aspiration, and that's our way ahead.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen