

## Proper 21 Year B

And so we come to the end of the Epistle of St James - this extraordinary letter, quite unlike anything else in the NT. It really belongs in the OT tradition we call wisdom literature, full of practical advice on how to live, how to live the Christian life, with its emphasis on works of charity, patience, humility, biting your tongue, impartiality and right use of wealth - the latter omitted from our public readings - I wonder why? A practical handbook, one could say, for someone setting out on the Christian journey - but then, right at the last, we have this exhortation to prayer. When you have taken on board all the other stuff, James seems to be saying, remember to set everything in the context of prayer.

'Pray for one another, that you may be healed'. James is always very practical in his advice. 'Pray for one another'.

We call it *Intercession*. At every service, in our tradition, and as far as I know in every other Christian tradition, prayers are said - hopefully prayers are prayed - for those who suffer and for those in need. In the 1980 Liturgy - the blue book it says - Prayer is offered

*for the world and its people*

*for those who suffer and those in need*

*for the Church and its members.*

Have you ever wondered if there is a reason that these intercessions are laid out in that order -

*for the world and its people*

*for those who suffer and those in need*

*for the Church and its members.*

Think about that - the order in which we are asked to pray.

Sometimes we stray a little from that blueprint, but this is essentially what we are bidden to do.

We are asked firstly to pray for the world and its people - and not just for those we like, those of whom we approve. Indeed, those we find it difficult, sometimes impossible, to like or love, are perhaps most in need of our prayers. We are probably all quick to pray for refugees, but what about the evil people who cause all this pain and suffering, this fear, this desperation? Are we quick to pray for them? It is hard, when you want to curse someone, some organisation, some ideology, to turn that curse into prayer - but it needs to be done. Jesus said 'But I say to you who are listening (are we listening?) 'Love your enemies, do good to those that hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those

who treat you badly'. If I were a Syrian Christian, I would find that very difficult. But then, would I be able to pray for the Polish border guards who try to stop migrants getting into Europe by driving them back into a freezing forest; could I pray for Taliban fighters who try to stop people leaving Afghanistan or even for the British Government, determined to keep as many people as possible out of the UK, when we are desperate for workers, and they are desperate for security?

Secondly we are asked to pray for the sick, they are usually at the top of our list, the sick not only in body but in mind and spirit - asking God that those who are on our hearts might be protected from doubt or fear, putting their trust in God - and remembering that healing and cure are not the same thing. And we pray for those who suffer - old age brings its problems, even though it is not a sickness - a growing lack of mobility, mental agility, growing dependence on others, the fear of being a burden. And people with disabilities - both mental and physical - those who would not be called sick, but are often in need of enablement or encouragement, to live full, enjoyable lives. Intercession involves us in the deepest of relationships for it involves us not only with God but with all of his creation. In

Intercession, we are expressing our love of and trust in God, our love and concern for each other, our love and concern for the whole world. Our prayer in church will, of course, be different to our personal prayer at home, although there may be some overlap. At home, an easy way to begin is to sit at the feet of God and talk to him about someone or some concern close to our hearts and to recognise that we and the person we are praying for are both within the heart of God. And that intercession goes on when you leave your prayer time, with the awareness that God is in your heart, as you approach others in love and care, knowing that they are also in the heart of God. That 'on-going-ness' of prayer is often signified by the lighting of a candle - some churches have special stands where candle can be lit and safely left - a sign to us and to others that our prayer, our love, our concern is ongoing, even when we have left the place.

In coming to God in love, we seek to lay our whole life before him in surrender.

Intercession should never be a shopping list - a message line - of needs set out before a celestial Father Christmas. It is seeking to place all before God in love and saying 'Your will be done'.

Intercession is sharing our hopes and our fears, our joys and our sorrows, sometimes even our anger and despair, sharing all of that with God in the knowledge that he cares for us all.

And Intercession is also a commitment, a commitment of offering our lives to Him that he might work through us.

Intercession can be a time when we allow God to speak to us, to let Him give us a nudge, spur us to action - and then He sends us out to live and work to his praise and glory.

Through Intercession we learn to work with God for the good of all. If your Intercessions are just a message line, time and time again, they could be in danger of becoming dull - but prayer should never be dull - if it is, change the way you do it, as I suggested last week. After all, God is never dull - He is the God of Surprises, the God of challenge, the God of life and love.

So we need to make sure our asking prayers are full of life and love. We need to ensure that our intercessions are part of our living relationship with God - an affirmation of the presence of God and of his love for all in this worshipping community, in our world and in each one of us.

So finally, we are asked to pray for the church and its members - after we have prayed for all these others. I wonder why that is?

Just another lesson, I suppose, to stop thinking about 'us' and 'them', and to hold everyone in the love of God. Joshua was concerned about the two men who were prophesying in the camp - the wrong place - but Moses had a bigger heart than that. John was worried about someone who wasn't 'one of us' using the name of Jesus - but Jesus wasn't worried. He didn't divide the world into 'us' and 'them' - he said 'come unto me all you who are burdened and heavy laden'. For Jesus there was no 'us' and 'them' - and there should be no 'us' and 'them' for us, either.