



Time for Prayer.....

Free Church National Day of Prayer – Nov 30th 2016

As I post this I am watching news of a most extraordinary event – the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA. Whatever this will lead to the only appropriate Christian response is prayer. The Free Church has called a national day of prayer – not because of the American election, but I'm sure it will be part of praying for our nation and for the whole of God's world.

When you see the headline of this article I wonder how you react? A good idea? A bit ambitious? Pietistic? Maybe you have a more jaded and cynical response. After all no professing Christian is going to be against 'prayer' – it's like a politician being against apple pie and being progressive! But I suspect that many of us, when we hear about the Free Church Assembly arranging a day of prayer for Scotland on St Andrews Day, will 'like' the idea and then do nothing. Can I make a plea that we take this seriously and make an effort? It's not that the amount of prayers earns some kind of reward in heavenly answers – it is that prayer is the most phenomenal gift that the Lord has given us. We do not pray for the work, it IS the work.

I have a special interest in this. I believe that the last time the Free Church called for a national time of prayer was in November 2011, when I was lying on my death bed in Ninewells Hospital. To say the least the prognosis was not good! The Assembly Clerk put out a request that that Lord's Day the whole church should engage in prayer for me. Apparently this call was widely heeded, not just in the Free Church but also throughout other churches in the land (and indeed across the world – the Malaysian Baptists were one of many groups who joined in). From that day I began to get better – so much so that within six weeks I was home without being brain damaged, crippled or all the other effects that we were warned to expect. Some people would call it coincidence, but we know different. My Muslim surgeon told me that the only explanation he had for my recovery was answered prayer. This does not mean that everything we ask for we get – but it does mean that everything we ask for in accordance with the will of God we get, and if we do not ask, we do not receive.

As Christians we follow Christ and we listen to what he says to us in His Word. The Bible encourages us to pray for:

Political Leaders:

1Tim. 2:1 *I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people* **2** *for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.* **3** *This is good, and pleases God our Saviour,* **4** *who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

We can be depressed/angry/cynical/hopeful at the state of our political leadership, but the one thing we must never forget is to pray for our political leaders. All of them – from local councillors to the Queen, from UKIP to the SNP, Theresa May and Nicola Sturgeon, and the new American President, Donald Trump...On Nov the 30th lets pray for all our political leaders that we may live peaceful, godly and holy lives.

The Lord's People

1 Samuel 12:23 *“For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people, because the LORD was pleased to make you his own. As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right. But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. Yet if you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will perish.”*

This is an extraordinary passage. If we fail to pray for our fellow Christians, we are sinning against the Lord. I find that far too often in my prayers I am praying for myself, or when I pray for others it is often what Derek Thomas calls ‘an organ recital’ (we pray for Mrs. Y’s heart, and Mr. X’s lungs)! Its good and important that we pray for peoples physical conditions – but how often do we honestly pray and plead that our Christian brothers and sisters would grow and flourish in Christ? This Saint Andrews days lets pray for all the saints. You’ve got the whole day! And the whole world to pray for!

Evangelism

Matthew 9:37-38 - *Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”*

Once on a Highways and Byways mission we found that every prayer meeting we had during the mission mentioned one particular lady whose door we had knocked on. She became a Christian and decades later is still going strong. I have found that regularly praying for non-Christian friends, family and acquaintances opens doors for the Gospel. Maybe we need to remember that the first step in evangelism is not talking to others about the Lord, but talking to the Lord about others? May God grant that November the 30th would be the beginning of the re-evangelisation of Scotland.

Sometimes the situation is so dire – and we are so weak – that prayer is our only resort. But what a resort! Annabel and I (and Andrew and Becky) came to St Peters in 1992 – the situation was desperate. Seven people in a church that could hold 750. I remember saying to the handful of people that we would all sit together in the middle of the downstairs section (the front would have been too much for Presbyterians) until such time as we used the balcony. When I said that we would use the balcony when we reached 100 people, there were a few wry smiles. That seemed an impossible number then. Last Sunday there were 300 people in St Peters and if you came in five minutes late – you had no choice, the downstairs was full and you had to go upstairs. How has this happened? It is the Lord’s doing and marvellous in our eyes. We had nothing...I don’t have great abilities, we had little money and little strength in other areas. But we had the ordinary means of grace, the Word, the sacraments, the church and prayer. Let’s use them!

In order for Scotland to be ‘harvested’ we need workers. Endless rotas are the curse of the modern church. Mainly because in our busy life’s people are finding it harder to volunteer. And the church, more than any other organization is dependent on volunteers. We need workers for Sunday school, door duty, cleaning, outreach, elders, deacons, youth workers, designers, administrators, accountants, visitors, writers,

musicians, singers, church planters, preachers, pastors.....and much much more. Maybe instead of endless guilt inducing pleas to the congregation, we should first of all, plead to the Lord to thrust out worker into His harvest field? Let's not drag them – lets plead with the Lord to send them.

Once we do so we quickly come to realize that the harvest field is not maintaining our own wee garden patch congregation – the harvest field extends to other churches, the whole community, our country and to the ends of the earth. On November the 30th let's not forget our brothers and sisters throughout the world – we are One body.

Scotland

2 Chronicles 7:14 - *if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*

St Andrews day. Scotland's day. Andrew brought people to Jesus. We need to bring the people of Scotland to Jesus. And we start with prayer. Actually we start with humbling ourselves. Recognising our weaknesses, failures and sins. Repenting of our pride, arrogance and lack of love. We pray. We seek Gods forgiveness and as the Lord hears his people, he forgives and heals. What a promise to inspire us to repent, pray and believe!

We must not repent for other people but for ourselves. As a denomination the Free Church needs to be really wary of complacency and pride. We can very easily develop the Laodicean ('we are rich and have need of nothing') or the Pharisaic ('we thank you Lord, that we are not like others') spirit. That can apply in the local congregation as well – we can compare ourselves with others and sometimes feel despair and sometimes feel a sense of superiority. But this type of comparative reflection is not usually helpful. One of the most dangerous prayers we can pray for our denomination, congregation and selves is that the Lord would give us the gift to see ourselves as He sees us. We, as the Lords people, need to humble ourselves.

Preachers of the Word

Eph. 6:18 *And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. 19 Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.*

The preaching of the Word is essential to evangelism. The preaching of the Word is essential to the health of the Church. I remember asking a godly Free Presbyterian lady, how many people were in her church. I've never forgotten her answer – "we have 40 praying people". I knew that the attendance was around 100 – but what a great way to describe the church. We are to be a people of prayer. Maybe your preacher is not the greatest in the world? Maybe the services in your church are a bit dull and lifeless? What can you do about it? Not moan to the people around you – but pray to the Lord. As a minister and someone who has opportunities to bring the gospel in the public square I am deeply grateful for the prayers of the Lords people. You are the troops! I had finished speaking in a Gideon's meeting in Dunfermline one evening when a lady came up to me and gave me a row. Not about the talk, or my appearance, or something I had said. No, she was concerned that she wanted to pray for me and she didn't know where I was speaking next or what I was writing etc. Her words actually really convicted me and because of her I

started a private prayer letter – not the kind that seeks money or support, but just simply for those ‘prayer warriors’ who maybe can’t come to meetings, help with the practicalities or speak in public...but they can speak before the throne of grace. It is the greatest gift any preacher, evangelist, elder can ever receive. Take November the 30th to pray for your Christian leaders.

I’ve said enough. Far too often we talk about prayer and don’t do it. And we seem especially weak on collective prayer (which is the biblical norm). As a young 24-year-old minister I went to the wonderful village of Brora. It was a small congregation but I will never forget the night that we knew God was really at work – that night we had more in the Thursday evening prayer meeting, than we had in the Sunday morning service (in those days the evening was better attended). When our services, homes, church buildings, visits and lives are known for their prayerfulness – then we will know that the Lord is in the midst!

Some Practical suggestions:

If you can set aside the whole day. But as most of us will be at work, why not set aside specific times? Before you go to work, lunchtime, coffee break, returning from work, the evening.

I hope your church are organizing collective times of prayer – try to support that – even if only for a short while. Maybe your church building (if you have one) will be open all day....pop in when you can. If there is one prayer meeting make that a priority.

Have you ever tried praying with friends or colleagues? Why not form a prayer triplet and begin regular prayer on Nov 30th?

Although the Free Church are organizing this why not take the opportunity to invite other churches to join in. True biblical ecumenism is when we pray together. And why not pray for other churches in your area? That those who teach a false gospel would be converted or silenced and that those who are faithful to Jesus would prosper and grow.

And maybe you are like many of us – in the busyness of life we have let **family worship** slip. Why not use November the 30th as a relaunch of the practice in your own home. We have Dutch friends who after every meal read a short portion of Scripture and pray. It is an excellent habit to get into.

What about fasting? It is a biblical practice that we seem to have forgotten. Fasting from food – even for a couple of meals really helps concentrate the mind (once you stop thinking about food!). But why just food? Some of us seem addicted to social media and our phones. Why not have a day without your phone? Without looking at all at the Internet? Without watching TV?

Prayer is fed by God’s word – so instead of that hour you spend eating or watching TV, why not take some time to read, meditate and digest God’s Word? And there are some wonderful devotional works that inspire and move to prayer – my own favourite is John Flavel.

Another practice that I find quite helpful is to **prayer walk**. Walk through your village, town, city and pray for the people within the buildings. Or why not do what Jesus did – withdraw to a solitary place and pray. I have several places I love to go – one is up Dundee Law which is the hill at the centre of the city. From there I can see the whole city in one 360-degree panorama. Another is just walking along Broughty Ferry beach and another is just going to one of the many city parks and green areas and just sitting in silence with my bible on my phone. Find out what works best for you and is most practical. And just do it!

Another old but helpful practice is keeping a prayer diary or journal. The danger of course is that we end up just making lists but a prayer journal should be more than that. It can be a helpful form of meditation and a reminder of where we are at and what has been happening to us. Something I have found really helpful is the prayer App – PrayerMate. It's a great aid to intercessory prayer. Let's use modern technology to help us in our walk with the Lord.

I used to think it was almost heresy to read prayers. Until I almost died in 2011 and lying in hospital was given the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. It was, and is, manna for my soul. I use it every day along with the wonderful Valley of Vision and of course the greatest prayer book of all, the book of Psalms.

Remember that prayer is not just intercession for ourselves and for others. It is worship. All prayer should include (and ideally begin and end with) acknowledgement of, and adoration for, the triune God. We pray in Jesus name, in the Spirit, to our Father. Let all prayer be an act of worship, and all worship be prayer to our God.

One final suggestion – between now and November the 30th why not read a book on prayer. The disciples asked the Lord 'teach us to pray'. We need taught. It does not come instinctively. In the past year I have benefited a great deal from Tim Keller's *"Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God"*. It is the best book I have ever read on prayer because it is an amalgamation of the best books I have ever read on prayer.

Happy St Andrews Day. May we all be in the Spirit – and may it mark a renewal and revival not only for the Free Church, but also for the whole Christian church in Scotland

David Robertson, Minister
St Peters Church
Dundee
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