

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 29th November 2015 11am

Revd Val Reid

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13

Luke 21: 25-36

The Church of England creates an advert for praying.

People in all walks of life are saying the Lord's prayer as they go about their daily business.

Farmers, gospel singers, a guy in a gym, paramedics at an accident, a bloke on a train, a mixed race couple in a greasy spoon, school kids in assembly.

Prayer is for everyone says the final screenshot.

#Just pray

Of course the ad has hit the news not because prayer is the hot topic in the run up to Christmas.

But because Digital Cinema Media refused to show it before the new Star Wars film.

In the aftermath of Paris, we are all a bit sensitive.

And anyway, DCM has an anti-religion-and-politics advertising policy.

Since the ban, a surprising number of unexpected defenders have come out of the woodwork to support the dear old C of E.

Even Richard Dawkins.

What's not to like?

It's just the Lord's Prayer.

Who could possibly be offended?

Well, indeed, who *could* possibly be offended by the ad?

It's relatively harmless.

It's not changing the world.

It's not challenging the status quo.

It rather reminds me of John Major's England – a country of 'long shadows on county cricket grounds, warm beer, green suburbs, dog lovers, and old maids cycling to holy communion through the morning mist.'

Even the praying nuns look as though they have stepped out of a L'Oreal ad.

No-one has suggested banning the John Lewis Christmas ad.

A lonely old man, living without friends or family in a remote place, is cheered up by a telescope from John Lewis.

Now he can watch other families enjoying themselves at Christmas at a distance.

Even though he is still alone.

As I was writing this sermon, 18,604,559 people had viewed #ManOnTheMoon on You Tube.
The C of E had only managed 422,592 hits.

What's all this got to do with Advent, you might be asking?

Because, of course, today is Advent Sunday.

And contrary to common understanding, although we have just survived Black Friday, and even civilised Saturday, Advent is not about realising that there are only 25 shopping days to Christmas, and the Waitrose delivery slots are already booked up...

Advent is about waiting.

Waiting not for Christmas, but for the end of the world.

Waiting for Christ to come again.

Not as a baby in a stable – we'll do angels and shepherds and wise men and donkeys in a few weeks' time.

But coming in a cloud, with power and great glory.

Coming to sort out the mess we have made of this world.

Coming to put everything right.

The term Paul uses in his letter to the church in Thessalonica is *Parousia*.

The *coming* or *presence*.

But for Paul this is not a religious term.

Not religious like the C of E ad.

A soft-focus, this-will-make-you-feel-better kind of attitude to prayer.

Parousia is political.

It is the coming of a King who will shatter the *Pax Romana*, shake the stability of the Roman Empire.

Turn the status quo upside down.

The Christians in the church of Thessalonica are challenged to live now in the light of what will happen eventually.

To put into practice the values of the kingdom which is not yet come.

This is not easy.

Living counter-culturally made the Thessalonian Christians unpopular with their fellow citizens.

Who wants to spend Christmas Day with a vegan on a diet?

It also made them a political threat.

The Roman administration was deeply uncomfortable with a group that questioned the way they ran things.

That pledged their loyalty to a different set of values.

In a society where success and status was heavily dependent on colluding with the regime, worshipping the right gods, being seen in the right temples, to step out of line with the prevailing culture was to risk social failure.

No wonder Paul was praying that God would strengthen their hearts in holiness.

Not the kind of holiness that separates itself from the world and shuts itself away from temptation and complex moral decisions.

But the kind of holiness that wrestles with what it means to live in the here and now, but to march to the beat of a different drum.

So perhaps the #Just Pray ad is more subversive than it looks.

Karl Barth said that *to clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.*

If we took the Lord's Prayer seriously, we would be doing something distinctively challenging.

We would be living, like the Thessalonians, in the world but not of it.

We would be asking daily what it really means to want to see signs of God's kingdom in this consumer society.

We would be praying to have enough – just our daily bread.

No more.

We would be avoiding conspicuous consumption.

Perhaps we would be talking to those who trespass against us, not bombing them.

This was the problem Jeremiah faced.

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah a second time, while he was still confined in the court of the guard.

He was still confined in the court of the guard because the king, Zedekiah, didn't like what he had to say.

The Babylonian army is besieging the city, and Jeremiah tells the king that the city deserves to fall to the enemy.

Because the people are not taking God seriously.

They are not living in the light of God's covenant love.

They are selfish and careless and obsessed with themselves.

No political administration likes to hear that kind of criticism.

So Jeremiah is thrown in prison to shut him up.

And Jeremiah does two things.

Knowing that Babylon will overrun Judah, and the people will go into exile for generations, he buys a plot of land in his home town of Anathoth.

It's a mad thing to do.

But it is a statement of faith in the future.

And in a future anchored here in the real world.

I'm investing in this place.

This place that means so much to me.

I believe we can do better, even here in this flawed world.

And as well as this speculative property investment, he offers a prophecy.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord...

Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety.

And this is the name by which it will be called: the Lord is our righteousness.

In a previous prophecy, 'The Lord is our Righteousness' is the name of the King who will come and rule righteously.

Here it is the new name of Jerusalem.

Not the saviour who will sweep in and sort it all out.

But the city.

The real place where real people live.
People bruised by exile.
People deeply insecure about their relationship with each other and with God.
But people nevertheless.

The repetition is not accidental.
The city is the place of God's rule.
If there is going to be righteousness in the land, we will have to work for it in the places where we live and work and buy things and interact with our fellow human beings.
That is the locus of God's kingdom.
Not some pie-in-the-sky future paradise.
But this place.
These streets.
This week.

Advent Sunday is the beginning of a new liturgical year.
The liturgical year starts neither at the beginning of the calendar year – that's still over a month away.
Nor even – despite everything in CPD – with the new Methodist Connexional year, back on the first of September.
Ministers may move, new church council cycles may begin, but that is not when things start afresh.
They start now.
In Advent.

In the film *The Lady in the Van*, the writer Alan Bennett watches life going on through the window of his house in Camden, and wonders when he will start living, instead of writing about the lives of other people. *We don't mark time*, he comments to his alter ego, the frustrated self who wants to take some risks in life. *Time marks us*.

Liturgical time marks us as people who do things differently.
People who are not simply swept along with the commercial calendar.
People who are committed to engaging with life.
But taking with us the values of the Kingdom.
And wrestling with the resulting chaos.

Anything can happen at any time, says Jesus to his disciples.
And it will.
And as we look at Paris and Aleppo and Mali and Brussels, we see that it does.
We need to be ready for it.

The intention is not that we pore over the history books and the newspapers, predicting exactly when to expect the rapture.
The intention is that we need to expect chaos.
And we need to stand up straight and sniff the air, looking for signs of the kingdom in all the messy stuff that makes up our lives.

I'm going to pause the sermon here for a few minutes, and invite you to think about what this means to you.

Turn to the person next to you.

What will you be doing this time tomorrow?

At around 11.35am on a Monday morning?

Tell your neighbour.

Tell them what will be difficult about it.

Tell them where there are signs of the kingdom.

And listen to what they will be doing this time tomorrow too.

... ..

There is a risk that the Parousia feels so far away, that we don't need to think about it.

There is a risk that the chaos of the world feels so overwhelming, that there is no point in even trying to make a difference.

There is a risk that there is such a wide gap between kingdom values and real life, that we might as well give up trying to build bridges.

There is a wonderful little quote from the Talmud, the Rabbinic commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures.

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.

Do justly now

Love mercy now.

Walk humbly now.

You are not obligated to complete the work.

But neither are you free to abandon it.

That passage we heard earlier from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians reads like a benediction.

The sort of thing we normally hear at the end of a service.

*And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another
and for all,*

just as we abound in love for you.

And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness

that you may be blameless before our God and Father

at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

That final blessing at the end of the service is a key moment.

I remember, as a teenager, being deeply surprised when our minister told us it was the holiest part of the church service.

Really? Holier than the gospel? Holier than the moment when you take the bread during communion?

Holier than a hymn by Charles Wesley?

Yes, I think it is.

Worship is structured. Worship is special.

We sing together in harmony. We re-state our shared values.

We reaffirm our sense of being a community. We have time to think.

And then we go out into the chaos of real life.

We have to make sense of all this – out there.

We have to improvise.

We have to compromise.

We have to take all the things from in here, and apply them out there.

This time tomorrow.

As Jürgen Moltmann said, as he spoke about the title of his first great work of theology:

With 'Theology of Hope'...I tried to present the Christian Hope no longer as an 'opium of the beyond', but rather as the divine power that makes us alive in this world.

So *#Just Pray* is rather more complex and challenging than it might at first appear.

It's not just saying the Lord's prayer.

It's putting it into practice.

Thy kingdom come.

So that our response to a lonely old man on the moon is not to encourage him to buy into the consumer dream, but to do something pro-active.

Perhaps to visit him, to invite him to join in, to campaign for better living conditions on orbiting planetary satellites.

So at this time tomorrow, I invite you to remember this time yesterday.

What are the links between Sunday worship and Monday morning in your life?

And remember the neighbour who shared with you what they will be doing at this time today.

Hold them in prayer.

And know that you too will be being prayed for.

*And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another
and for all,*

just as we abound in love for you.

*And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness
that you may be blameless before our God and Father
at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*

Amen.