

WEY VALLEY – WEEKLY CIRCUIT LETTER 1 March 2023

Barrie Tabraham

“In our thoughts . . . and prayers?”

Dear friends,

As I write this, yet another tragedy has hit the headlines, this time the recent shootings in Liverpool. Local politicians and leaders have said that the families affected “will be in our thoughts”. An interesting phrase, that. Between now (the beginning of January) and the time that this letter appears, we will surely hear that phrase uttered or written many more times – whether it refers to the victims of a natural disaster, or the innocent civilians suffering the horrors of war, or families of murdered relatives.



But when you think about it, what does ‘in our thoughts’ in fact, mean? You and I would probably say “You will be in our prayers”, and maybe preface that to include ‘thoughts’, possibly to indicate that we are showing more than a temporary, one-off expression of concern and care. It does pose interesting questions, however. When, as Christians, we say “thoughts”, are we really meaning ‘prayers’? And when the word ‘thoughts’ is used by public figures

who may not be Christians (and who are we to judge!), what is actually happening, in terms of their thought processes?

Sometimes I’ve wondered whether many people really do mean ‘prayers’ but they are embarrassed to admit their allegiance to the Christian faith, or any faith, for that matter. Or maybe some feel that prayer is not very effective device, as it were, in our technologically advanced age. Or possibly they’re unwilling to treat God like a celestial Father Christmas or a ‘Mr Fix-it-all’! When I was in Merseyside in the 1980s, on one occasion a church member said to me (rather smugly), “Every time I park my car I touch the bonnet and pray, ‘Lord, keep my car’ – and it’s never been stolen!” Mine was, however – three times!! Then on a more serious level perhaps, I’ve heard the following (or similar) on more than one occasion, “I prayed for my father/mother to be cured, but sadly s/he died – does that mean God didn’t hear my prayer?” And I wonder how many people at the moment are saying to themselves, “I’ve prayed for the war to end in the Ukraine, but God doesn’t seem to listen, because it’s still going on.”

It seems to me that one of the reasons why the subject of prayer is treated with such reticence, or avoided altogether, is that praying is sometimes seen as a stratagem for getting God to do things that we are unable or unwilling to do ourselves – for example, to live in peace and harmony with each other.

Of course, there’s no easy answer to these questions. However, I do believe we shall get further in our understanding of what, essentially, is a mystery, if we think of prayer primarily in terms of *relationship*. St Augustine once said that “*we were made for God*” – made, in other words, for fellowship with Him. And, when you think about it, love cannot live in isolation: it depends upon and needs a relationship. Jesus wanted his disciples – and you and I who follow in his footsteps – to share in the life that God offers to us – *his* life, eternal life. This is why he taught them to pray. This life is in many ways a foretaste of the life to come. And that is why Charles Wesley wrote in that quintessential Methodist hymn:

*Anticipate your heaven below
And own that love is heaven.*

So when we say to someone, “You’ll be in my thoughts and prayers”, we are surely implying that we’re doing more than simply talking to God, and certainly not giving him a shopping list of personal requests. ‘Talking *with* God’ is a more fitting description, perhaps, but ultimately ‘*being* with God’ is better still, since it is more about what prayer is really like.



When we pray we are cultivating an awareness of God’s presence. Not just telling Him things, not even, just listening – but sharing ourselves, our hopes and dreams, our guilt and fears, our joys and sorrows, our concerns and anxieties – all in an intimate relationship in which we are increasingly caught up, and by which *we* are gradually changed.

As Christians we know that this is important because our praying (as well as our ‘thinking’!) matters to God, for He longs for us to draw ever closer to Him in the loving relationship that He has intended for us. It matters to others, since the quality of our lives inevitably affects those with whom we live and work. And of course, praying is vital to us. We were meant for fellowship with God, and though we may exist, we cannot really *live* without the loving relationship we share with Him.

A prayer (from a hymn by Charles Wesley, *Singing the Faith* 366):

*Thy mighty name salvation is,
and keeps my happy soul above;
comfort it brings, and power, and peace,
and joy, and everlasting love:
to me, with thy dear name, are given
pardon, and holiness, and heaven.*



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Resources

Are you interested in Interfaith Dialogue?

We need you! There are six interfaith forums across Surrey that get together to organise events to develop understanding and community cohesion. These forums are especially in need of more Hindu, Sikh, Jewish, Buddhist and Muslim representatives. If you would like to get involved with deciding topics, helping to find venues, promoting the events or just attending to get a feel of what is involved, please get in touch with our Faith Links Adviser, Kawther Hashmi:

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