

Sunday 2 December 2007 at 10am: Advent Sunday

Prayer at the boundary of the church and the world

Readings: Isaiah 2.1-5, Matthew 24.36-44

In the reordering of the church the new p.a. cupboard displaced the Prayer Board. So we had to give some thought as to where the Prayer Board should go? Just like at home, the more people get involved, the more possibilities emerge. With the Prayer Board, we came down to two good options. One was at the head of the north aisle, by a votive candle stand. It made an obvious focus and helped frame the sanctuary. Prayer is one of the core things that church is for, and having the Prayer Board in such a strong position would have helped establish that for the regular congregation as well as our visitors.

But I think the Prayer Board belongs on the boundary between the world and the church, where people come in and go out. Some of the bits of paper left there are prayers written by people who prayed when they came to church and who wanted to leave a written prayer behind. But others are requests for prayer, which at least some of the people who left them could not really pray for themselves and ask us to do so for them. They remind me of a line in T S Eliot's poem Ash Wednesday:

*"Will the veiled sister pray for the children at the gate
Who will not go away but cannot pray."*

As used to be said about the News of the World, on our Prayer Board, "All human life is there". It gives insight into the burdens people carry and it collects people's hopes. Often there are prayers for a home and a job, as well as for good health, love and happiness; or there are prayers to share the burden of sickness and for the peace of the world. Our Prayer Board is a terrific insight into what people hope for and Advent is the season of hope, not just of Christ born long ago but of our longing for Christ's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

Our Advent theme this year is Reading the Signs of the Times, and the meditation booklet has material for us to use through days to Christmas to help us explore it and pray it. This morning I want to say three things about Prayer and Hope

1. When Jesus taught people to pray he gave them a model prayer, the Lord's Prayer and he told them to be simple, honest and to ask God for what they wanted. The very process of voicing what you want has the effect of deepening our desires, our hopes. I often ask the parents of children to be baptised what it is they most want for their child. Nearly always the answer is something like 'health and happiness', and usually the conversation moves to something deeper and much harder to express but which is to do with fulfilment and the purpose of life.

So just having a Prayer Board doesn't just say Prayer is a core activity of church, it teaches people how to pray by asking us to voice our prayers, and in voicing them to offer them and deepen them. What do you hope for, what do you want, for yourself, for your neighbour, for the world? As with our Advent meditation booklet, praying our hopes is a way of helping us to read the signs of the times. Offering them to God helps us discern and deepen our yearnings, our hopes.

2. By locating the Prayer Board at the boundary of church and world there is an expectation of a connection between what happens 'out there' and what happens 'in here'. By and large, I'd say St Martin's is pretty good at making that apparent but this is a time of year when it's easy to get caught out.

In preparation for the season of Carol services, the clergy received an email from one of the regular congregation pointing out that it's hard to sing a carol like 'O little town of Bethlehem' in present political circumstances, even after Annapolis. Maybe the words need changing, or maybe the Christmas crib needs a wall adding to it, preventing the Magi from making the last stage of their journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. It prompted an interesting conversation about whether the Christmas story is now so full of fantasy that it lacks the earthy reality of the incarnation, God come among us, challenging us, not just sweetening us.

Our Prayer Board earths us, strengthens the relationship between church and world and helps prevent us from becoming over sentimental about religion. "God so loved the world".

3. As a young Christian I remember being told that prayer is difficult. It isn't; it is as natural as breathing. We all learn to pray better by doing it, by the practice of prayer, though, as with everything, some people are better at it. Both on Tuesday night at the last of the Autumn Education course when there was a guided meditation, and on Wednesday when Justthisday gathered people here who practice meditation, it was obvious that some people can lead and teach prayer in ways that help us to deepen our own prayer.

It's not praying that's difficult. What's difficult is living the consequences of prayer. The Abbot of Worth, where we had our Parish Weekend this year, has a strong insight about people who come to the monastery on retreat. He says that they are usually come to discern the will of God. What most of them don't spot in advance is that that's the easy bit. It's being obedient to the will of God that is much harder. That's what I now think must have been meant by the people who told me prayer is difficult, and they were right.

If we learn to pray by doing it, it seems to me fairly obvious that we will learn to be obedient by doing it as well. Trying to live obediently through the habits of living justly, by being attentive to the others, and to God. Perhaps that's one of the things doing the Christmas Appeal gives St Martin's, as opposed to what St Martin's gives the Christmas Appeal?

Just as the Prayer Board in church is located at the boundary between church and world, so our prayer is in the connection between inward contemplation and outer action. What Advent quickens us to do, is to be alert, alive, energetic, expectant, ... of God among us in Jesus Christ, and the coming of God's kingdom that will fulfil the deepest hopes of the world.