

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

Dear Friends,

This last Sunday I led a joint Covenant Service online for 3 of our churches where I introduced to those watching the Methodist Way of Life. You may already be familiar with it as it has come out of work that our former Chair of District Rev Dr Roger Walton shared around the District a couple of years ago. The project has now been taken up by our Methodist Connexion and some of our churches will be using it over the coming weeks and months as a resource for worship and study.

The Way of Life outlines 12 commitments that it encourages the Methodist people to integrate into our understanding and practise of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Each commitment is introduced by the phrase *“As far as we are able, with God’s help...”* This introductory statement is important on three counts. First, it indicates that the Way of Life is a tool to help us, not a rule we must follow. It is not aimed to turn us all into Pharisees for whom the letter of the law is more important than the meaning or spirit behind it. *“As far as we are able...”* Sometimes we will forget. Sometimes it might not be possible or practical in the context that we find ourselves. Sometimes we will choose not to and then will come to our senses and commit to start again. All that is ok. We are human beings made in God’s image and in whom Jesus Christ dwells but we are not yet perfect!

Second, it reminds us that a life of discipleship is reliant upon the work of God within and through us: *“with God’s help...”* To become more like Christ we need the life, love, goodness and guidance of Christ to come to us. Again, this reminds us of the life-giving power of the Spirit which is often set to one side when we focus too much on rules and not enough on the relationship with the One who offers them to us for our own good.

Third, it speaks to us of a two-way relationship of love and trust. *“As far as we are able, with God’s help...”* We cannot do it all ourselves in our own strength. Neither can God do it all for us – we are called to be partners with Christ in our own Christian living and spiritual formation.

The quotation with which I began this letter gives an indication as to what the first of the 12 commitments is all about. It says this: *“As far as we are able, with God’s help, we will pray daily.”* I wonder what prayer means to you? I wonder whether your

experience or practise of prayer is positive or negative or a mixture of both? I wonder if prayer is something you do occasionally, or when you are taking part in a service, or is prayer something you do or could practise daily?

I often think that learning to pray is like learning to talk. To learn to talk as a child, you must first listen to the sounds and words you encounter all around you. And then you begin to mimic them. And after that you begin to understand something of their meaning and power. We cannot learn to pray without first learning to listen to the language of God. And that language can be expressed in so many ways: audibly; silently; pictorially; through nature; through dreams; through physical manifestations in some aspect of our body (I often get a knot in my stomach that I have learned to discern is a sign of when God is trying to get my attention!); through action and many more besides.

In fact, as I referred to on Sunday, Rowan Williams once likened prayer to sun-bathing. You just relax and let it happen! And Elaine Heath describes prayer as “Gazing into the face of Jesus who gazes back with infinite love.”

Our quotation from 1 Timothy 2 comes at the opening of a section where St Paul is offering guidance to Timothy on issues relating to worship. And Paul immediately puts the emphasis on prayer as the primary expression of worship: “*I urge, then, first of all...*” Indeed, the word pray or a form of it is used in Paul’s letters some 59 times and that is not including other related words such as thanksgiving, confession, petition, or intercession!

The reason prayer is so vital both for worship and for a life of Christian discipleship is because it is a means through which we: open ourselves up to God’s influence; humble ourselves in God’s presence recognising that we are not the fount of all wisdom or the source of all knowledge; seek God’s guidance; and bring the world in which we live and our concerns for it before God for God’s blessing. Through prayer we deepen and strengthen our relationship with God and we gradually become like Christ.

And Paul encourages us to pray for all people because God wants all people “*to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*” There is no one who is outside God’s scope of interest and no one God cannot reach. Surely this challenges those deeply held, often unconscious beliefs that some people are more important than others, that some are in favour and others are cast out! So, we pray for all people. But Paul does then urge us to pray especially for “*kings and all those in authority.*”

Now there are not too many kings left in this world, though there are plenty of would be’s! We can interpret this as all those who govern and hold authority over others be they Monarchs, Presidents, Prime Ministers, Dictators, CEO’s, and all those in any sphere of life, including the church, who have decision-making responsibilities. We should pray for them all so that “*we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.*”

When we look around us at the world we live in, how we long for all people to live peaceful and quiet lives! Sadly, it is often those who hold authority and make decisions that prevent us from living such lives by the decisions that they make and the words

that they speak. They need our prayers. If you are ever at a loss for what or who to pray for, then start with these words of guidance from St Paul and God will lead you on from there!

And at this time, pray especially for our political leaders for wisdom and guidance as they make daily decisions in relation to Coronavirus that affect us all. Pray especially for our NHS staff who are so overwhelmed and tired and yet who just keep on doing their jobs for our benefit. Pray especially for our school staff as they seek to continue meaningful learning for our children in such difficult times. Pray especially for all those involved in the production lines for food and medicine that all people might have access to what they need to live. And pray too for our Ministers, Circuit Leadership Team and Church Councils as we try to find both creative and safe ways of enabling the worship life and mission of our churches.

With every blessing,

Rev Tim