

Sermon – Easter 7, 17th May 2021 Church Centre

Acts 1:15-17, 21-end. **Prayer and making choices**



As we were waiting for a bus in Sheffield, a Christian friend of mine prayed out loud, *'Lord if you want me to go on that holiday to Costa Blanca, let the number 11 bus come along'*. Sure enough the number 11 bus came along shortly afterwards! Was my friend's prayer answered or was he looking for an answer to justify what he had already decided? Sometimes our prayer requests are targeted at forcing God into a corner; my friend's request required God to answer (a) within a short timeframe and (b) with a clear-cut reply. In our Bible reading from the book of Acts, we follow a group of disciples who also want an immediate answer to their prayer request, but unlike my friend, they have prayed, sought guidance from scripture, and as for God's will to be done. This occurs after the death and resurrection of Jesus, where the remaining disciples feel it's right to find a replacement for Judas [who had betrayed Jesus]. They use a time-honoured method for Jews, drawing lots. This is the last recorded incidence of drawing lots in the Bible, which is significant as we'll see in a moment.

How do we approach God in our prayer requests? Do we attempt to put God in a corner, looking for a binary outcome, and do we require God to answer within our timescales? Prayer was central to Jesus' busy ministry – we could say he was too busy not to pray! The New Testament records many incidences of Jesus praying: at his baptism (Luke 3:21), withdrawing from crowds (Luke 5:16), after healing people (Mark 1:35), before choosing the Twelve (Luke 6:12), at the Transfiguration (Luke 9:29), before teaching his disciples the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:1), before he was captured (John 17, also today's Gospel reading). Jesus prayed about the challenging decisions in life, like when he prayed before selecting the original twelve disciples, and the disciples in praying for a replacement for Judas are clearly following in Jesus footsteps.

There is a model for prayer we can identify from New Testament teaching, and helpfully it has an acronym that is easy to remember. In Luke 18:1-8 Jesus told his followers the parable of a widow who persisted in her request of a judge for justice. Jesus used this to underline the importance of regular and persistent prayer. So our first point is **'Persist'**. Buddhists believe constantly rotating prayer wheels and repeating mantras will get their prayers heard, and whilst I like their sense of prayerful meditation, I don't believe that God is persuaded by the pure mechanics of repetition. Instead, as today's Bible reading from Acts tells us, God considers *'what's in our hearts'*(v24). In persisting in our prayer requests, we are bringing what's in our hearts before the Lord, and as a loving Heavenly Father we also know he has our best interests at

heart. In repeatedly raising our requests, we gain not only a sense that God is hearing us, but that our hearts move more closely to what's on God's heart. Our will becomes more aligned to his.

Secondly, we are called to **Reflect**. We know from the Gospels Jesus frequently withdrew from crowds to reflect and pray. Reflection has somewhat pejorative overtones in modern politics: *'so and so should really reflect on their actions'* however reflection is a longstanding inheritance from the Christian monastic tradition. When we reflect we are opening our minds to God. God has given us intellects, a gift He expects us to use. When I visited a longstanding Christian friend about two years ago he complained to me that he had made a large investment of money, and *'God had let him loose it all'*. It seemed to me he was blaming God for his own investment choice. Sometimes we can blame God for our own muddles, it's really convenient when we don't want to face responsibility for our choices. Jesus calls his disciples to be *'in the world but not of the world'* (John 17:15,16). Yes, we face the same choices as everyone else, but as Christians we should be reflecting and using our intellects – does our choice fit with the 10 commandments? What is the impact on our neighbour, our planet, our family? Will the outcome honour God? This matters even in the little things. For example it doesn't really matter whether we have Shreddies or Weetabix for breakfast, but if we have a MacDonaldis for breakfast everyday we can say even without praying that it's probably not a good idea, because of the impact on our long term health, we're not honouring God with our bodies.

Rev. Andrew Hiscox

Thirdly it's right to **Ask** for God direction in key decisions – such as when we recently discerned the vision for our parish or are buying a new house or moving to a new place. Our reading from Acts is the last recorded occasion of drawing lots in the Bible, because at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came, whom Jesus describes as *'the comforter, who will guide you in all truth'* (John 14:26). God has promised through his Holy Spirit never to leave us or forsake us. His Holy Spirit is on hand at all times and in all places to help us and guide us. All we have to do is **Ask**.

If you've driven in America you will have seen the word 'Yield' instead of 'Give Way' on roads. There are times when we need to **Yield**, to 'give way' to God. After we've persisted in prayer, we've reflected on what we're bringing before God our Father, we've engaged our intellect and asked for the Holy Spirit's leading, we then have to be prepared for God to lead us. Sometimes our request may be answered in just the way we wanted, other times it is not. Yet we believe as Romans 8 says, that God will work out all things to the good of those who love the Lord Jesus. As we PRAY we are submitting or 'yielding' our own will to God's, asking ultimately for his Kingdom to come, and His will to be done. In faith we trust it will be so. So....

P	Persist
R	Reflect
A	Ask
Y	Yield

[Finish with notice about 'THY KINGDOM COME' 13-23 MAY]