

“DANGEROUS TALK”
Acts 4:23-31

It's a kind of new beginning this morning – as with so many other organisations, we tend to arrange things around the school year and a new one is just about to get going. Along with all the other things that are kicking off again, our children's and youth programme is too, which is why we've commissioned all the members of the team once again. We've heard their pledges, made our own and prayed for them. And we've done that here because we're all in it together, aren't we? There's something helpful and supportive about being together and praying together in a Sunday morning service.

But for many of us, I suspect, prayer, like faith, can become a purely personal matter – a private, individualistic, domesticated activity. We go into our room, find a place where we will not be disturbed, and engage with God on a one-to-one basis. That's part of the spirit of our times: “I'm on my own, I don't need anyone else, it's personal between me and God – and I'm in control.” Now, I'm not denying for a moment that the Bible is scattered with examples of the men and women of God praying alone to him – having a “one-to-one” with him, as the mobile 'phone adverts put it. But it's not the predominant model of prayer. Prayer is not a safe, private matter. It is not the activity that many people would like it to be – like having a cup of tea and a chat with some elderly and benevolent pillar of the community. Prayer is risky and dangerous, it is a step into the unknown, it is an audience with the One who holds in his hand your eternal future and that of the whole world. Let's look at a story, an example from the Bible – the one which was read to us a few moments ago.

Just a bit of background to help you see where this episode fits into the story of the first Christian community. We're in the few weeks after Pentecost, the time when God transformed his Church by the arrival of the Holy Spirit. The first disciples are still enthusiastic enough to be going round telling everyone about the wonderful news of Jesus. Peter and John have taken Jesus at his word and demonstrated the power of the Spirit in the healing of a disabled beggar who was sitting at the entrance to the Temple. The Temple authorities – the religious establishment and their military supporters – can now see that the execution of Jesus has not (as they expected) brought an end to the activities of his followers, but has actually re-ignited the passion of the first Christians. And they are scared, anxious lest this fledgling movement brings to an end their power over the people.

So they haul the two men up before the Sanhedrin, the magistrates' court, and tell them that they are not to preach about Jesus any more. They make a number of threats to them – which Luke doesn't actually specify – then let them go. Of course, Peter and John immediately go back to their friends and tell them everything that has happened. That's where we picked up the story in our reading. Now, I'm sure they had some idea before this happened, but now they really know it's serious: being a follower of Jesus is not going to be easy. This is the beginning of the persecution that will continue in different places and in different ways for the next twenty centuries. Being a follower of Christ is no doddle. It will mean opposition, it will mean imprisonment, it will mean torture, it will mean death (as it still does today, which is why we pray for the persecuted church). So what do they do? This is God's work. He has called them to it. He has given them the Holy Spirit who has, in some ways, got them into this mess. He has filled them with this burning, bursting passion to tell other people about it. So let's talk to him about it. And Luke's story continues.

“When they heard this, they made some little prayer cards and all went off with the promise that they'd pray about it during their next quiet time.” No! *“When they heard this they promised to pass the word around so that other people could pray sensitively about the situation, without having to get involved themselves.”* No! Luke writes, *“When they heard about this, they raised their voices **together** in prayer to God.”* They prayed **together**. We are so often tempted to think about prayer as a part of our Christian life that we get on and do on our own, noiselessly and discreetly. We've maybe looked at Jesus' words in *Matthew 6:6* about going into your room and locking the door to pray, and assumed that's the last word on the subject.

The truth is, there seems to me to be far more in the Bible about praying together: it is a corporate activity. I always remember what one of my early Baptist mentors, Don Black, once said to me. Even when he was praying on his own, he told me, he still always used “we”, to remind himself that praying was a participation in the life of the whole Church – praying was never, for him, a private affair, even if he was alone. Jesus might have talked about going into your room, but he also said a lot about “*when two or three agree in prayer*” and Paul’s letters seem to take it for granted that people will pray together. And then we have the book of *Acts*, the story of those first Christians, struggling to form a community and then having to cope with the problems as that community grew and spread and developed. Sisters and brothers, you cannot get by – and you will make no headway here – without praying with others.

Praying is a communal activity. These first Christians “*raised their voices together in prayer to God.*” I suppose you could call it a prayer meeting – but it wasn’t really that, was it? They were together anyway. They identified a need – and they prayed. It seems so natural the way Luke records it here. But, over the centuries, we have programmed it, domesticated it, taken all the adventure and risk out of it. We’ll meet one day a week or month to pray, and someone will come along and give us some ideas of what to pray about. Fine: we need that kind of structure to give some shape to our corporate life – but if the communal prayer activity of the people of God who meet in Wade Street Church is limited to a handful of people who meet for an hour or so a week, then I think we might be getting less out of it than God wants us to.

Praying together – whether it is in that regular prayer meeting of the Church, or in the context of a housegroup, or in a prayer triplet or cell group, or a special interest group – praying together actually accomplishes something. We are not simply doing it because we have the example of it in the New Testament – we are doing it because we believe prayer is important, and because, by doing it, we are saying some very important things.

Praying together says that **life cannot be compartmentalised and personalised**. As we pray together – whether it’s two of us or fifty of us – it is a way of saying that the individualism, the privatisation of the culture around us is not the way of the church. Praying together is, if you like, a prophetic witness: you cannot get by on your own, you need other people with whom to share your Christian commitment.

Praying together says that **we want to encourage one another**, we want to build each other up in faith and love. As we pray together, we share each other’s burdens, “*and so fulfil the law of Christ*” as Paul puts it in *Galatians 6:2*. As we hear other people’s prayers, we can rejoice when they are answered. We can pray in the knowledge that we are not alone in our concerns. Hearing other people say “Amen” to our prayers brings a sense of strength. Listening to the halting, stammering prayer of the person who is being crushed by their anxiety, or the weeping words of the one whose life is fraying at the edges, or the inarticulate rejoicing of the one who has been overwhelmingly blessed by God’s grace – they show that we recognise that we’re in it together.

Praying together says that **we are all committed to participation in the life of the Kingdom of God**. We all have some part to play. We share in the responsibility of making known the message of the cross, of demonstrating the power of the resurrection, of witnessing to the transformation brought about by the Holy Spirit. In this context, there is no such thing as a private Christian, an anonymous follower of Christ.

Can I encourage you as we start a new cycle of church activities to dabble with the idea of prayer as a communal activity? It would be brilliant to see everyone at a weekly prayer meeting – but I know that’s not possible for all kinds of reasons – but if you could come and you’ve never tried it, then give it a go. Could you make a commitment to pray with one or two other people who live near you at a mutually convenient time? Could you seek out another Christian at your workplace or your school or college and arrange to pray at some point during the week? Could you join with others to pray for specific projects in the Church or community, or in the wider mission arena? I believe that prayer is not only the individual “*Christian’s vital breath*”, as James Montgomery’s hymn puts it, but it’s also the basic fuel of the Christian community – without it there is no light, no heat, no passion, no progress.

And once you grab hold of that idea, you see that prayer is also a pretty dangerous activity. When people “*raise their voices together in prayer to God*”, things happen. Once we realise that prayer is not a domesticated and closely structured activity, mouthing set words at set times to Someone “up there”, we see that it is the most powerful weapon in our spiritual armoury. I always remember Brian Haymes speaking at a ministers’ conference several years ago and as part of his talk he said, “*We sing ‘Come, shake the earth again’, but we don’t come into church wearing crash helmets, do we?*”

Why is it such a dangerous activity? Well, let’s just stop and think what we’re doing when we pray. We have probably got so used to the words that we don’t really think about them. Yes, we’re talking to “*Our Father*”, but it’s that Father who holds “*the kingdom, the power and the glory, now and for ever*”. These increasingly nervous Christians here in Jerusalem, about whom Luke is writing, address their prayers to “*Sovereign Lord*”. They acknowledge him as Creator, they recognise that he has spoken into this world through the mouths of the prophets (and they were pretty powerful messages), they speak of his “*power and will*”. This is the God to whom we address our prayers, the Supreme Ruler of the universe. If you stop and think about it for more than a couple of seconds, you can see that we are treading on very dangerous ground, let alone holy ground, when we speak to him. This is the God who killed a man for touching the Ark, the God who brought plague after plague on Egypt, the God who thundered from Sinai, who ripped the curtain of the Temple from top to bottom. Oh yes, he loves you, he cares about you, he lifts you up on wings like an eagle, he will not forget you any more than a mother would forget the baby at her breast – but he is still the Sovereign God. Never forget that. The regular habit of prayer – good as it may be; the use of certain forms of words – good as they may be, can easily blind us to that. Martin Buber once wrote: “*There is nothing like religion to mask the face of God.*”

And we come into the awesome presence of this mighty God with our requests – sometimes so glibly, so flippantly, so casually. Praying doesn’t just link you up with other Christians, it isn’t simply a means of participation in the life of the Kingdom – it is communicating with the awesomely majestic, powerful, glorious and wonderful God who made you and who holds in his hand the power of life – eternal life – and death. I reckon that could be a pretty dangerous undertaking – so don’t take it too lightly. Especially as one of the specialities of that God is actually answering your prayers.

What happened here? The Christians “*raised their voices together in prayer to God*” and they asked him for boldness. They asked him to “*heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of his holy servant Jesus.*” How often have you prayed prayers like that? And have you ever expected them to be answered? I don’t know about these first Christians, but I suspect they were a bit more expectant than we often are when we pray. And God answered them. They finished their prayers and the house shook. The Holy Spirit came into their lives and filled them up. They went out and started telling other people about Jesus with a boldness that refused to be diminished in the face of persecution. And as we read on into the next few verses, we discover that their whole lives were transformed – spiritually, emotionally, financially. Man, that’s dangerous praying! They say that “*prayer changes things – usually the pray-ers!*”

In the church where I served in London, there was, as there often is in churches, a kind of ruling dynasty, a family that had worshipped there for generations and who kept a tight grip on the key offices in the church. Two of the most powerful were the 70-year old Sunday School superintendent and his cousin, the equally elderly church secretary. This was in the early eighties and there was a sense that the church needed to move on, but these two men and their close families were providing a bit of an obstacle. Several people committed themselves to praying together that God would remove the obstacles to progress – and the Sunday School superintendent died unexpectedly and suddenly. It was coincidence, of course, but we kept praying. And very shortly afterwards, the cousin dropped dead. From that point on the church experienced a great deal of growth. Make of it what you will. It scared us!

Do you actually expect anything to happen in response to your prayers? Spurgeon’s first student at his new college in South London, T W Medcalfe, came up to the great preacher one day and said that,

however hard he tried, he didn't seem to get many people turning to the Lord when he preached. Spurgeon looked at him in mock surprise and said, "*Surely you don't expect people to be saved every time you preach, do you?*" "*I suppose not,*" replied Medcalfe. "*Well, there's your problem, then,*" Spurgeon shot back. Again, at the church in London, the senior minister and I used to pray together each week for the Sunday services. One week, John prayed very energetically that people would respond to the gospel on the next Sunday morning. At the end of the sermon there was an invitation for people to come forward if they wanted to commit their lives to Christ. Fourteen people lined up at the front. Afterwards, John said to me, "*That was a bit of a surprise. Why do you think that happened this morning?*" "*Because we prayed about it, stupid. Don't you remember?*" I replied. John's reply was something along the lines of, "*Oh yes, but I didn't expect it to work.*"

Could you cope with things happening, anyway? If you pray for this community to come to Christ, do you have any idea what it could mean? People in some churches pray for years for the congregation to grow – and when it does there are actually those who complain – they don't know everyone any more: there aren't enough seats; they have to queue for coffee after the service; there's too much noise before the service. Things are different. Well, of course they are. If you don't want things to happen, to be different, don't pray about them. At least then, when they do happen, you can say, "Well, it wasn't my fault!"

You know, it would be great to get into some dangerous praying, to take some risks, to see whether it does work today (of course it does – but I'm not sure we really believe it). How about you? Would you like that great God of ours to give you more boldness to share the gospel? Would you like to see lives changed, people healed, souls won, buildings shaken? I believe God can do it. I believe he may be actually waiting to do it here in Lichfield as we move into the third century of our story. But I believe he is waiting until we really start praying together so that we can be powerfully encouraged by seeing it as an answer to our prayers.

But here's the big challenge. Remember that what you are doing is a dangerous business. Be assured that God's not going to do anything he won't help us to cope with. But pray as if you really believe it – no, not "*as if*" you believe it: get on and actually believe it. Pray for God to move, to act by his Holy Spirit, to make a difference. He's done it before. He can do it again. Give it a try.

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Remember that what you are doing is a dangerous business. God's not going to do anything he won't help us to cope with, but pray with faith. Pray for God to move, to act by his Holy Spirit, to make a difference. He's done it before. He can do it again.

Questions for discussion

1. Do you have any preference for praying privately or together with others? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
2. We often seem more reluctant to pray together and in many churches the prayer meeting is the worst attended of all activities. Why do you think that is? What could we do to change it?
3. Should we expect "*miraculous signs and wonders*" in response to our prayers today. Why/why not?
4. "*Prayer changes things – usually the people who pray.*" Have you ever been changed by praying?
5. Do you find this passage encouraging? What will you do about it?