

“A HOUSE OF PRAYER”
Ephesians 6:10-20; Isaiah 56:7

Over the past few Sundays since the beginning of this new year, we've been taking a bit of time reflect on our vision as a church. The original mission of the church remains as it has done for a while now – “*A church at the heart of the city with Christ at the heart of the church*”: that's still very much what we're about – but that has been given a sharper focus as we've looked back into *Isaiah 54 – 56*. Two phrases have come out of that exploration, two aspects of our life together and our witness to this community that we think are especially important for us at the moment. Having recognised that the bedrock of all this is to follow God's command to “*maintain justice and do what is right*” (*56:1*), we have been thinking about being **A Place of Welcome**, where everyone and anyone is accepted. God welcomes us all just as we are – no strings attached – but wants to transform us into people who are truly part of his Kingdom, his renewed and restored creation.

The second phrase, the second thrust of our mission this year, is found twice in *56:7*. We believe God is also calling us to be **A House of Prayer**. According to what Isaiah proclaims here, this will bring joy to God's people and will also embrace “*all nations*” – that idea of a wide welcome again. Now, we looked briefly at the subject of prayer back in January, drawing our inspiration from the letter James wrote to the first Christian community and we know that prayer is a vital part of our Christian experience. It is key to our development as Christians, as followers of Jesus: we cannot really make and progress if we are not somehow linked in to God through prayer. And that is because it is key to our relationship with him – we need to communicate with God on a regular basis just as we do with any human whom we love and respect.

The Bible, of course, is full of teaching on prayer and the New Testament is particularly helpful in this regard. Jesus himself taught his followers about prayer and told parables which encourage us to get stuck into prayer. Usually we take this all to be about personal prayer, about our individual communication with God. And if we see prayer as being integral to a relationship with God, then that that is understandable. Jesus himself was very keen on that aspect of it and people often look to what he said in his *Sermon on the Mount* about private prayer. Look at what he says in *Matthew 6:5-7*. And many people take that to be the definitive word on how we should pray – on your own, just you and God – despite the fact that Jesus is clearly here offering an antidote to the showy and empty prayers of the hypocrites, rather than giving the final command on how to pray.

Personal, private prayer is, indeed, very important – as we've said, we cannot really develop as Christians without it – but in the words we're considering this morning, Isaiah speaks of “*a house of prayer*”, which is clearly about people praying **together**. This isn't about retreating into our little corner and isolating

ourselves from others – “*You in your small corner and I in mine*” as the old children’s hymn rather erroneously puts it. In our increasingly privatised and individualistic culture, we must not lose sight of the communal aspects of our faith. The vast majority of us are not called to live the solitary life, to cut ourselves off from contact with others. In our society at the moment, we face no penalty or persecution for gathering together to express our shared faith. We must not lose sight of the need to pray together, just as we worship together and witness together.

In this church, as in any other, there is a need for us to create a culture of prayer. It should be woven into all that we do, and that cannot happen just on a personal, individual basis. Prayer is a natural and indispensable part of our common life. Remove prayer from what we do together and the church would soon wither and die. It should happen amongst us as naturally as any other part of our conversation. The principal of the theological college where I studied was a man called David Wheaton – a godly man and a man of prayer. You could not get out of his study without his praying for you! I remember one occasion when I had to go in and see him to let him know I’d be missing his liturgy lecture because the college quiz team, of which I was a part, was in the final of a quiz on Radio London. He insisted we prayed about it before I left the room. (We lost, beaten by Birkbeck College, but that’s not the point.) How can we foster that attitude of praying together, that atmosphere of prayer which will pervade all that we do together and fill these buildings with a sense of God’s presence that overflows into the surrounding community? Well, here are some very practical and specific things we can consider – many of which you may already be doing, but bear with me.

To start off with, we can make use of what’s already in place. I don’t know of any of the opportunities for praying together that we currently offer that are over-subscribed. I don’t recall ever attending a prayer event here where there wasn’t space for everyone who wanted to participate – so be encouraged: there will be room for you! There’s the monthly **Prayer Focus Meeting**, on the second Thursday of each month. As we spend the week focussing our prayers on one aspect of the church’s life, that meeting gives us an opportunity to come together and encourage one another in our praying. Even if you’re not into praying aloud, just being with other Christians who are praying is an encouragement. There’s also the **Weekly Prayer Meeting** on a Tuesday afternoon in the Darwin Room, when a small group of people get together to remember the needs of the church and the world.

There are also **Prayer Groups** that meet to address specific concerns – prayer for the youth work, prayer for our work in the community, prayer for local schools, and so on. It’s focussed, concerted prayer. And it “works”, if you want to use that terminology. This month’s Messy Church was probably the best one we’ve ever had and was absolutely packed out with children and families. We were almost taken aback by the number of people who came in and then someone pointed out that we had specifically prayed

about it the evening before at the monthly Prayer Focus Meeting. Prayer goes on in **Housegroups**, too – that may be mainly for the particular needs and concerns of the people in that housegroup (I understand the wholesale price of broccoli was the subject of prayer in one group last week), but, again, that is a great encouragement and a source of support for those who need it. There are services of prayer for healing, where we pray together for those in need. Some of you will be part of **prayer couplets or triplets**, too, meeting regularly with one or two other people to support and help each other through prayer. You don't need a Church Meeting resolution to set up that kind of shared prayer – just suggest it to a friend and get on with it.

I'll just mention here as well the national prayer initiative that will be taking place around the country in a couple of months' time. It comes from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and is entitled *Thy Kingdom Come*. From Ascension Day until Pentecost Christians are encouraged to pray specifically for others to come to know Christ. Something will be happening in this church, but there will also be two main shared events in Lichfield for all Christian to come together and pray. Look out for details and resolve to get involved.

Now, I don't know how prayers "works" – why God should take more notice of several people praying than one person praying, although there are places where Jesus talks about two or three gathering in his name, or two or three agreeing on something in prayer – but praying with and for each other is certainly an encouragement. So, once again, why not develop that kind of interaction as a habit. It doesn't mean you've got to behave like a holy Joe all the time or go around with a pious smile on your face. Just naturally get into the way of sharing and praying. There was a lady called Peggy at the church we went to in London and she was one of those who was always praying for people. The trouble was, she did it so naturally you sometimes couldn't tell whether she was talking to you or to God. I remember travelling to Spring Harvest one year with her in the back of the Mini and she didn't stop talking from London to Prestatyn, half the time to me or Sally and half the time to "her Jesus"!

It doesn't have to be long, eloquent, flowery prayers – that's what Jesus was speaking against in that bit we read from *Matthew 6* earlier – just a couple of short sentences. Maybe after a service has finished you could just pray with the person sitting next to you. Maybe when you're out having a coffee with someone from the church. Look for opportunities to pray for and with others. It will encourage them and it will encourage you, too. Some of those with a particular gift or burden for prayer will be working together as a **Prayer Ministry Team** here in the church, people who are identified as pray-ers, whom you can go up to and ask for prayer about your concerns after a service or during the week.

And, as we're mentioning prayer for those who request it, don't forget again those things that are already up and running. If you are connected to the Internet, you can use the **E-mail Prayer Chain**. Send or 'phone your prayer request to Marilyn Maguire and she will circulate it round those who have asked to be kept in touch. Or use the **Church Facebook Page** to share your prayer requests – Doug Neil or Liz Bridle can give you details of how to join that. Feel free to 'phone others for prayer or get in touch with the Church Office. And we are hoping to re-introduce some small **prayer request cards** around the buildings so that anyone who comes onto the premises can request prayer, anonymously or otherwise.

Having mentioned the premises, there is, of course, the **Prayer Room**. It's a quiet space that can be used any time and can be accessed from the outside of the building. You can ask the Church Office for the code to enter and then go in at any time to pray on your own or with a couple of others, or leave a message on the whiteboard for others to pray for you. It's another way in which we can continue to get these buildings soaked in prayer – so they become literally a House of Prayer. And it does make a difference. One of the groups that meets on these premises – not a church group, but some members of the church are a part of it – included at one stage a woman who identified herself as a Wiccan. She would become visibly and noticeably agitated on occasions when other people were praying in the buildings, even though she didn't know they were.

Which is where, I suppose, we come to the reading from *Ephesians 6*. We are engaged in a battle with the forces of evil. As Paul writes in the verses we heard just now, it's not a physical battle: it's a spiritual battle, a battle in which we engage through prayer (6:12). Prayer is our weapon as we stand against the powerful, but ultimately futile, attempts of the forces of evil to fight against the forces of the Kingdom of God. As with any battle, we can get involved in that as a lone soldier, but that leaves us vulnerable and open to attack. We can also get involved as part of a group, part of an army, which means we can help, support and encourage one another.

Just as we really do want this church to be known in the wider community as a place where anyone is welcome and where God can do his transforming work, so it would be great if this church – buildings and people – could be known as a House of Prayer, where the people of God, the followers of Jesus who meet here are known as those who are praying for the good of this community. It would be great to know that there was a kind of thread of prayer running through the week on these premises, that this was a spiritual powerhouse interceding on behalf of this city. It would be wonderful to walk down the Three Spires Centre and spot folk from this church praying in Costa or sitting on the benches praying with others. It would be great if we had to make regular trips to Ikea because the chairs in the Prayer Room were wearing out so quickly, great to hear the hum of quite prayer after a service as people pray through what they've heard before going off to talk about it over coffee, great to know that people coming into the

office to book rooms or coming along to Toddlers or Messy Church or Monday Lunch could just sense something very different about the atmosphere of this place. May those who worship here week by week become true prayer warriors as we build a House of Prayer!

A HOUSE OF PRAYER
Isaiah 56:7; Ephesians 6:10-20

Most of this week's sermon was about practicalities, ways of realising the idea of A House of Prayer at Wade Street Church. If you have a copy of the sermon, you could refer to parts of it and then continue in discussion about prayer in our church, using some of the following questions to spark ideas.

- 1) Do you prefer to pray alone or with others? Why?
- 2) Is it right to stress praying together as part of our common Christian life? Why/why not?
- 3) What are the benefits of praying together? Are there any disadvantages?
- 4) Are there opportunities for praying together that are currently used among us that weren't mentioned in the sermon? Share ideas that you may have encountered in other churches or through your reading.
- 5) How could we encourage more people to get involved in praying together?
- 6) What do you think about the "*struggle ... against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*" (*Ephesians 6:12*)? Do you have any experience of "spiritual warfare" that you could share with the group?
- 7) What would it take for Wade Street Church to be known as "A House of Prayer" in the wider community? Would it make any difference to us/to the community?

Try to make some time after your discussion to pray together about it all.

If you have any good ideas, please feed them back to the church leaders.