

Pray for those in Authority

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings, and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”

We looked at this passage three weeks ago when we considered the importance of praying for everyone, and we’ve picked up on issues relating to prayer over the past couple of weeks. As I promised I would I’ve now come back to focus on those who Paul had mentioned for particular attention: “kings and all those in authority”.

I think that it is important that we remind ourselves of the context in which Paul wrote these words. He lived and ministered when the Roman Empire was at the height of its power and most of the known world was under its control. There were several occasions where Paul found himself in bother with the authorities at various levels. It was the Roman authorities who inflicted him with unjust punishments including beatings and imprisonments, and eventually his execution.

Taking that into account we may find Paul’s attitude to the civil authorities somewhat surprising. He writes in Romans 13:1,2 “The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted.”

I appreciate that the reality, both in Paul’s time and in our own is far more complex. There was a long tradition in Israel of the prophets calling those in civic and religious authority to account, confronting injustices and the abuse of power. Our reading from Daniel demonstrates that those who are in positions of power are placed there by God, whether they realise it or not. However, they are ultimately answerable to God and will have to give an account as to how they have used that power. Despite his earlier arrogance, Nebuchadnezzar eventually came to recognise that and acknowledged, “the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men”. Although Belshazzar knew this and was without excuse and continued in his arrogance until it was too late and he literally saw that the writing was on the wall for him.

Paul understood that whatever power earthly authorities might appear to have that ultimately they were subject to God’s authority. As Proverbs 21:1 says, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.” He saw it as his responsibility, and the responsibility of the Church to pray for those in authority. When he appeared before Festus, the Roman governor and Agrippa, the puppet King of Judea he declared, “I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”

William Barclay comments on our reading from 1 Timothy: “This passage distinctly commands prayer for kings and emperors and all who are set in authority. This was a cardinal principle of communal Christian prayer. Emperors might be persecutors and those in authority might be determined to stamp out Christianity. But the Christian Church never, even in the times of bitterest persecution, ceased to pray for them.”

Paul goes on to say why we should pray for those in authority: “that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” That’s not the only reason, but it is the one that Paul highlights here. He believes that our prayers can make a difference in how God works in the lives of those in authority, and that in turn can have a big impact on the context in which we live.

One of the most significant events in the history of the Church, and indeed the history of the world was the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the year 313 which brought about his decision to put an end to the persecution of the Church. That certainly enabled Christians to live more peaceful lives. It opened up many more opportunities for spreading the gospel. It also brought its challenges as it was much easier to be a nominal Christian without any real depth of faith and the Church at times did abuse the power that came with being the state religion. Having said that, I still believe that it was a move of God in response to the prayers of his people.

Any events are open to differing interpretations, but I would say that the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, the end of Apartheid in South Africa and the Peace Agreement in Northern Ireland are all examples of the same kind of thing in our generation. None of these have gone completely smoothly. They have all had their problems and shortcomings. And yet who could have imagined that such transformations were possible?

I was interested to note from the poll results that I showed last week that while 71% of people who pray have prayed for their families, only 24% have prayed for global issues. Perhaps the number who pray for national and local issues is slightly higher, but I would suspect that it probably still comes nowhere near the number praying for more personal issues such as their families. Our more personal prayers are important and indeed most of the testimonies used in *Try Praying*, which I was promoting last week, are at a more personal level. For anyone who is not familiar with prayer it is good place to start. However Paul wants to take us beyond that. “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings, and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” As I emphasised when we first looked at this passage, for Paul prayer is a priority. He moves on later to other practical instructions for Timothy, but his first concern both for Timothy as an individual and for the church is that everything be undergirded by prayer.

We do bring various issues before God in our Intercessions Sunday by Sunday. It is right that we do so, but do we carry that through into our own prayer lives. It is so easy to be cynical, negative and critical about our leaders. Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not for one moment suggesting that they should be above criticism, but do we understand the God given responsibility that they have and their need for his wisdom, his leading, his guiding, whether they acknowledge him or not. We may not agree with them, we may not like their approach, we may think they have got certain things badly wrong, but we are still called to hold them up in prayer. Paul believed it made a difference, and the evidence from history shows that he was right.

Over the years I have come into contact with a number of MPs MSPs and Councillors from different parties. I’ve been more sympathetic with the views of some of them than I have with others and yet I have been able to sense a

desire to be of service and make a difference, even if I don't necessarily think they've got it right. I considered it a great privilege when Provost Jim Todd, who is also a Councillor for the Riccarton area invited me to his office for a coffee and a chat a few years ago. I was so pleased that he allowed me to pray with him, not just for himself, but for all the Councillors, whatever their party.

I have prayed regularly for every Prime Minister for nearly 40 years, and for every First Minister of Scotland. They have an awesome responsibility and will be held accountable to God for how they have discharged it. We too will be held accountable for our attitude to them. There is not one of them with whom I could not find some fault and something with which I would strongly disagree. However I am reminded of Samuel's words to King Saul after he had confronted him about his disobedience to God. "As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you." (1 Sam 12:23)

I suppose there is a danger that I could get into condemnation for failing to pray as much as I should, but I take that as a reminder and as challenge to take seriously Paul's words to Timothy, and to increasingly put them into practice in my own life.