

***Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> June 2013 Christ Church 6.30 pm***

***A healthy church – Praying for one another – James 5:13-20***

What does a healthy church look like? Over the past 3 weeks we've seen that the fundamental task of the church is making disciples – so whatever else might or might not be going on in a church, if it isn't resulting in disciples being made, it can't be a healthy church. We are doing a lot to celebrate our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary – work on the church, special services etc. But we mustn't let those things take our eye off the ball. The Lord has placed Christ Church here so that people in Moreton can be turned into disciples of the Lord Jesus.

Part of that is that Christ Church should be declaring the praises of God. And we saw last week that God brings people together in his church so that we can support one another – carry one another's burdens. It is not easy being a Christian in a post-Christian society. If we take disciple making seriously, we will face opposition, there will be much hard work. We need one another.

And tonight we turn to one specific way in which we can carry one another's burdens – another vital sign of whether we are a healthy church. In a healthy church, Christians will be praying for one another.

**READING**

*Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray.* James 5:13

I guess that doesn't come as too much of a surprise. In fact most people only pray when they are in trouble. They see prayer as a last resort – if all else fails, pray.

Life does have its troubles. And God's people have never been immune to suffering. In the Old Testament the prophet Jeremiah suffered terrible opposition and persecution. Ezekiel suffered bereavement. Hosea suffering marriage breakdown. In New Testament times, Christians suffered exploitation, breakdown in relationships, illness. And today, Christians still suffer.

I think that when it comes to our brothers and sisters here in Christ Church, when we know that someone is going through some crisis, we know we should pray for them. Sometimes we might struggle to do it, but prayer in such situations seems the natural thing for Christians to do.

But James isn't just talking about prayer in crisis. *Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.* James 5:13

Trouble and joy – the 2 poles of our human experience. And in both of them, not just trouble, we need to be relating back to God. Prayer in a time of well being, and prayer in a time of difficulty, are both acknowledgements that God is the sovereign Lord over all. Because if God isn't in control, what would be the point of prayer?

But even though James writes this in what sounds like quite individualistic terms – 'is anyone in trouble – he should pray' I think it would be a mistake to just read this as an instruction which we should pay attention to as individuals. I've said often before, I know, but I do think that one way in which we really struggle to understand the NT is remembering that it was written, not to isolated individuals, but to churches.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians he compared the church to a body, and he said *If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.* Writing to the Romans, he said: *rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.* Romans 12:15.

And James sets what he says here in the context of being part of the church – what makes a healthy church is a big theme in James. So prayer in times of trouble and praise in times of joy should be something that we should share with one another within the church. Not just in times of crisis, but regularly. Praying for one another seems to be an assumption of the writers of all the NT epistles.

And that is certainly the case when we come to v.14 *Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.* I have to say this is quite complicated – especially the reference to oil. He might have been talking about using oil medicinally – it was the standard medicine and the word James uses ties in with that.

Or he might have been talking about using oil symbolically – representing God's touch on the person prayed for. But what he does say is that the elders should pray. And that prayer does make a difference v.15 *And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well, the Lord will raise him up.*

That seems quite straightforward. But ... I guess we all know people who are ill, and who have been prayed for – maybe we have prayed for them, and yet they have not got better.

Some people might say that's because those people didn't have enough faith, or that those who prayed didn't have enough faith. The problem with such arguments is that they tend to reduce God to being like a genie in a magic lamp, who, if I believe hard enough, or if I use the right words, he will have to do what I tell him. But the Bible doesn't give me that right. God is sovereign, not me.

Right at the end of 2 Timothy Paul writes that he had to leave Trophimus sick on Miletus. Even Paul couldn't dictate to God that he must heal. And there, for whatever reason, it was obviously God's plan that Trophimus wasn't well enough to go with Paul.

So – what is James on about? We need to look carefully at what he says and the words he uses.

Is any one of you sick? That doesn't just refer to being ill – the word James uses literally means 'weak', so it covers all those areas of suffering in our lives – physical, emotional, social, spiritual. When we are in that position we should expect to find strength for our weakness through others within the church praying for us.

So – the elders of the church are called. I don't think that means that they are people with particular gifts for this, but that the elders in this context represent the church, on the churches behalf they pray for the person.

And as the elders, on behalf of the church, pray for the weak person, so God **will** be at work. It is the basis on which our prayer ministry team was set up – as members of the team pray for you, they represent the whole church – it is as though we were all praying for you.

But what will God be at work doing?

*And the prayer of faith will make the sick person well.* Literally what James says is, *And the prayer of faith will **save** the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.'*

Now if James used that word 'save', rather than the word 'heal' – he must have had a reason. And I think it is that 'save' has a much wider meaning than just physical healing. God will be at work bringing his wholeness. That might mean physical healing. But it might not.

I've preached on this passage a few times – so you might well have heard me say all this before! But the key thing to remember is that what James says here points to an important principle – that within the church prayer for one another should be a natural thing.

We say the same thing last Sunday morning when we looked at Paul prayer in Colossians 1. He wasn't praying for a church in crisis – he prayed that they would go on growing as disciples. It is a great prayer – if you are ever stuck for what to pray for for the other members of Christ Church, just use Colossians 1:9-14.

So – whatever is happening – we should be praying for one another. When something serious – some weakness – hits a church member, the normal thing should be for them to seek prayer – maybe through the PMT, maybe from some of the leaders here. And the promise of this passage is that as we do that, God will be at work for their good.

One important rider to that. v.16 – *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you may be healed.*

They say that confession is good for the soul. We should confess to anyone we have sinned against. We confess to God because all sin is ultimately against him. But we can't use that as a cop-out from our relationships within the church.

James isn't saying that I need to confess to you all the things I've done wrong this week. And he isn't saying that you need to confess your sins to a priest. What he is saying is that we need to confess to one another when we have done something wrong against a brother or sister here. We need to say sorry, and as far as possible to make amends. We need to ask for, and give, forgiveness. Sometimes that will be important for our physical health, because bitterness and guilt are known causes of much illness. But it will definitely be important for the health of the church.

And it will impact on our freedom to pray for one another. Put simply, you will never really pray for someone you hold a grudge against. A healthy church will have the sort of relationships where we can pray for one another because we really do trust and love one another.

Broken relationships, apathy and indifference, tragically things that happen inside church can result in someone drifting away. But whatever the reason, people turn away from the Lord.

It is all too easy to close our eyes to that. But for James, the care we show for one another should extend to those who have drifted away:

*My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring them back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

It is much the same as we saw last week in Galatians 6 – *Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.* It is one of the ways in which we carry one another's burdens.

So – how do we measure up against this mark of a healthy church? Are you praying regularly for others in Christ Church? And, of course, there is the other side to the coin. When you have a problem, do you ask others to pray for you. When God blesses you, do you share your thanks to him with others?

It never ceases to amaze me how few people make use of prayer ministry after our services. So often I'll stand at the door after the service, and someone will be leaving, and tell me that they aren't well, or that they have some big problem they are dealing with, and I'll ask them if they have asked the prayer ministry team to pray with them. And usually they look at me as though I'm from another planet!

And what that means is that that person either doesn't trust God, or they don't trust their brother and sister Christians here. There can't be any other reason. And either of those reasons is so sad.

Praying for one another is a vital element of what it means to be a church. None of us will ever flourish as a Christian without the support of our brothers and sisters here. And at the heart of that support is praying for one another. We will never be a healthy church without it.