

Minister's Letter Newport Pagnell United Reformed Church. June 2017.

Greetings. We come to June (where has the year gone!) and our Mead Centre launch day on 10th June and then our part in the Vintage Weekend on Saturday 17th. We hope as many people as possible can get involved. It is through activities such as these that we develop links and relationships and we can do our part in reaching out with God's love to people and enable opportunities to talk together, work together and share together. Through the Mead Centre we hope to enable Community Building: groups, organizations, individuals, townsfolk, all finding something that helps them and helps support relationships and, in turn, enables lives to be enriched. We believe that this is the next step in our being part of God's mission to the town. God calls us to share the love we receive, with others. God calls us to be the change we want to see in the world. And our taking part in God's mission through different projects is a way that we can show the love of God by our words, actions, donations and help. But there is one thing that makes what we do in churches different to just being supportive or helping a charity or group or being a club or enabling activities or providing space: **prayer**. We believe that God calls us to act and respond- and through prayer we can seek direction, we can offer our thinking and actions and we can seek to respond as God communicates with us, too.

It is kind of hard to define prayer, isn't it? At a recent session on prayer led by Dr Rob Ellis, Principal at Regents Park College, Oxford, he said that you do not try to answer this question!! He went on to say that: 'Prayer is a mystery. It is not an incantation (like a spell from Harry Potter) or a charm or a technique to be mastered or learning the 'right' things to say and prayer will 'work'. It is more like a relationship: a personal relationship that is always developing'. And that is what makes prayer so difficult to understand. We talk blithely in church circles using language or images or words or scenarios that we would never use in our everyday life. We wrap the love of God up in words that actually make things harder, I feel. We create a complexity round God that confuses and often stops further engagement. We do things that other people who are not in church circles can find confusing- and often, if we are honest, we find confusing but we dare not question because it seems like everyone else understands and knows and we fear being the odd one out or made to look silly. But the bottom line is that God wants us to be in contact, God wants us to find hope through prayer and through faith, God does not want us to be afraid of being honest or to go through the motions without question because that is what everyone else seems to do. God wants our authentic worship and praise and our honest engagement and relationship.

And so with that in mind, how do we approach prayer? The important thing is that our prayers are real. They are honest. So sometimes they will be about us, about how hard life is (if you want to hear other people's prayers talking about how tough life is, read some of the Psalms!). Sometimes they will be about other people. Sometimes they will just praise God as we encounter something amazing in nature or we find ourselves in a situation that fills us with awe and wonder. Other times they will be giving thanks. Other times we will seek God's forgiveness for getting things wrong and living in ways that go against the love of God. And finally, sometimes our prayers are just listening to what God is trying to say to us. Now this is one of the times that it is hard to understand what we mean. How on earth can we say that God communicates with us? If we were not in a church community, we would question this (and if we are honest, many within church circles question it). God finds the best way to communicate with us according to how we are able to hear and respond!

Once again I quote Rob Ellis: 'We can easily feel guilty about prayer. Prayer can feel like hard work and we put pressure on ourselves. Prayer can feel like no one is listening. But our prayers don't begin with us- they begin with God. God is already praying inside us. It is only through God's Spirit

that we are even able to pray at all. Prayer is not something we do ourselves- we allow God to move in us as we pray. Prayer is not about us making the effort but about God working in and through us.'

Whether your inspiration comes through a dream, through a conversation that speaks into where you find yourself; whether you get an idea whilst at the allotment or on a car journey; whether you come up with a thought or a solution to a problem whilst sitting outside in the garden or whilst watching a film or TV programme- I believe that when we find hope and answers, when we are prompted to act or given a solution to a problem, that is of God. What we have to do is find the way that works for us. Surprisingly, I find God speaks to me through conversations and through things that happen in relationships and encounters. (I kind of feel that God tries to talk to me through the silence but I fall short on the listening front!) But each of us can find where God is engaging with us.

If we were not People of the Way we may say that these 'answers' are coincidences or just the working of our sub consciousness. And maybe that is true- but we believe in an all loving, all knowing God who is in everything and everyone. A God who created all that is and all that has been and shall be- so why do we confine the workings of God only to those people who come to church and profess their faith? God works in mysterious ways- ways that are usually way beyond our understanding! But what we can do, instead of worrying about others and what is happening to them, we can focus on where we find ourselves and how we act and live.

God speaks to us and through us. Prayer is a powerful tool to enable this communication. But beware, prayer changes us as much as it changes the world around us. When we stop and reflect and share with God our worries and concerns and fears, these thoughts change us. And that is the power of prayer- both the world and we as individuals can be transformed by God's love and blessed by God's Spirit, especially when we take time to hold before God the things that worry us, concern us, affect us and make us sad. God wants this world to truly reflect the kingdom and that is where we come in.....

Our Week of Prayer for the Life of the Church provided opportunities for us to hold before God the church we are and to seek God's guidance and will for the future. Some people came into church and prayed together, others prayed at home (or away) where they were. There was a book in church where people could note down things that they had felt prompted to share: 'We need to get to know each other better and share our experiences and our faith journeys and what our faith means to us as individuals, also developing closer relationships by inviting our fellow church travellers to our homes to share food; we need to be prepared to talk more openly about what our faith means to us; we, as a church community, need to feel more able to express what we believe; we need to seek to deepen relationships with those already part of our church life; how about walking round the town 10 times to 'claim' the town in God's name? Visiting 'growing' churches to find out about their life may give us an insight into what is happening rather than rely on our fixed ideas on what makes them grow- we may have our thoughts confirmed or we may get some surprises!'

So, as we move forward as a church community with our part in God's mission and as a worshipping community, let us hold all we do and say and will do, before God and trust God to work through us and help us, but also change us. And let our worship and praise be honest and open and may we be free to admit doubts and fears as we journey together in faith.

Blessings, Jenny.