

**A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite**

**Praying for others to come to faith. (Easter 7 C /Thy Kingdom Come Season. June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019)**

**Acts 6.16-34**

**John 17.20-26**

We're in the space of time, between Ascension and Pentecost, when the Archbishops have asked us to pray 'Thy Kingdom Come', with the special intention that others might come to share our faith in Christ. So, here's a personal question for you;

Do you pray for your children, that they might share your faith? A surprising number of Christian parents apparently, according to a relatively recent survey don't do that – don't even feel they have any responsibility for passing on their faith to their children. (I can't quite remember the percentage – but it did seem surprisingly high.)

Perhaps you don't have children, in which case, I apologise if you feel left out in this sermon already. Maybe there are other family members – a spouse, perhaps, or sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews, your parents, even – or godchildren that you might ask

yourself about. Do you ever pray for them, that they might share your faith in Christ?

If your answer is 'no – I don't pray for them to share my faith' should we be surprised? Maybe. Obviously your faith means something to you, or you wouldn't be here. We know we no longer live in the days of conventional churchgoing. There's something which is of value to you motivating you to get out of bed on a Sunday morning and come to worship. If it's of value, *why shouldn't* you want to share it with your nearest and dearest? Why shouldn't you at least pray for these people, and for their spiritual unity with you in faith.

I've been thinking about that, and here are some possible reasons. First of all: perhaps you don't pray outside church services. That's perfectly possible – but if so, I'd like gently to suggest that you ask yourself some questions about that. Why not? What's stopping you? When did you fall out of the habit? What are you afraid of? If you want to have quiet conversation with me or anyone else in the church about that, please do. I promise – we shan't jump down your throat and tell you you're a dreadful Christian. We'd mainly want to listen, and then gently explore with you what the

possibilities might be of enriching your Christian experience by starting to pray – again, or for the first time.

Secondly, you might not pray for others to share your faith because of that great British inhibition – not wanting to interfere. We try to mind our own business socially, and perhaps we tend to carry that over into the spiritual sphere, too. We treat religious beliefs as a very ‘private matter’, where everyone has a right to their own opinions.

Well, I’m not at all convinced that religion is a private matter, otherwise, how would we have come to share the Christian faith ourselves if everyone around us had kept it completely locked inside? But, of course I support the principle that people should have liberty of conscience and belief. But I don’t think that should exclude us from longing to share something which we find extremely valuable – and the longing of the heart to share should be the origin of true prayer, just as it’s the origin of warm recommendation. However, sometimes people might resent being prayed for, or prayed for in certain way. A friend of mine got married soon after she’d converted to Catholicism, so she was in

an intensely committed frame of mind over religion; but the trouble was, that her new husband was an atheist, and he obviously had that feeling that being prayed for to be converted would be a sort of interference, and a sign, maybe, that she didn’t really love him as he was, (which she did). So he forbade her from praying that he should come to share her faith. And she felt, out of love, that she must respect his wishes. So – she told me – she simply resolved to pray for him *‘that God would do the very best thing for him’*. Perhaps, if we feel inhibited from asking for their conversion, we could at least pray for our nearest and dearest in that open way, without excluding the possibility that there might be a significant spiritual component to the very best thing which God could give someone!

But maybe we think that faith just isn’t that important in making someone a good, well-rounded person; and of course, there are many good, well-rounded people who don’t[share our faith; they may have another one, they may have none. But it could be that when the chips are down they might have need of something more; I know that when my own brother contracted myeloma last year, he – who had once told me that ‘Christianity left him cold’ – really showed signs of

thinking about these things in a more open way. I had one or two long conversations with him, down the phone to Australia, when he talked about wondering about death and what would happen, and he wanted for once to hear what I had to say. I'm not saying he was converted, and he's had pretty successful stem-cell treatment, and is shortly to be among the first in the world to have an absolutely new treatment – but for a short time, at least, he let me see that the spiritual door wasn't completely closed. I continue to pray for him, though not as regularly as I should. I know he's grateful, and I'd love him to share my faith. I don't think he'd be any less himself. In fact, if we come to know God, I believe it makes us more ourselves.

Do you pray for your nearest and dearest, that they might come to share your faith?

It could be that, in the scale of the world's problems and woes, you think this all a bit pietistic and individualistic – more important to pray about halting climate change, or creating world peace with justice. And I agree, it's extremely urgent to pray about those things. But we also know that huge political decisions, changes of economic direction, the challenge to violent

and cruel nationalisms, requires a radical conversion of minds and hearts. It requires a spiritual motive and dynamism, to verse the selfishness and habitual destructiveness of our nature. People do find such spiritual energy in a variety of directions, but I believe that it's the work of God's Holy Spirit which brings it about. I pay for that Spirit to visit the hearts of millions – of billions – of every single person who can make the changes which are necessary. Within this, I pray for people to find faith in God – a faith which isn't just narrow, and concerned with their own salvation, but which is realistic about human sin and the strength we need from elsewhere to combat the huge and hidden forces of evil and greed – the 'powers and principalities', within us each individually, but also beyond us in society. I find such a faith in Christianity, so I pray that others may come to share it. And within that, I pray for named individuals - a sort of focus for my more general prayer, but also a prayer for people I might have the opportunity to connect with – to help on their way to faith by what I do or say.

Our reading from Acts told us that Paul and Silas were imprisoned for advocating laws and customs opposed to the great might of Roman culture – and indeed, they

were. In the end, the faith which Paul had only just brought to Europe, conquered mighty Rome itself. We also heard in that reading of an earthquake – no doubt a real, seismic event in that part of the world. But a symbol, too, of the power of what Paul was bringing – or rather, of the power of the Holy Spirit of God – to turn things upside down. But the immediate result of these massive events was the conversion of individuals – a frightened gaoler and his family baptised, and their immediate response in washing the wounds of their prisoners, and eating together in fellowship. Never underestimate the power of these things – the converted individuals and groups who wash wounds and share bread together in the name of Christ.

In our Gospel, we heard Jesus at prayer in the Upper Room before he was betrayed; part of along and involved prayer. But note two things: he prayed not just for his disciples gathered around him, but also for us – yes *us* here this morning – who have come to believe through their message. (John 17.20) And he prayed that because of the way we live, that the world might come to know him as the one sent by the Father (John 17.23).

Do we dare to join his prayer that other people might come to share our faith? That, I believe, is what he's asking us to do. And why not start by prayer for our nearest and dearest on a regular and committed basis?