Trinity 14, Bilbrough and AAW Rufforth 1 Timothy 2:1-7

Thankfully I have stopped having nightmares and cold sweats about having to go and see Archbishop Sentamu prior to being allowed on the ordination pathway, and then on subsequent visits during the process. But his question of ‘why do we pray Martin’ has stuck with me since that memorable day when I gave him all the reasons I could think of only for him to come back with ‘yes, but God already knows all of that, so why do we pray?’

So why do we pray? How do we pray? Do we pray often enough? Should we pray kneeling, sitting or standing? Should we pray silently or loudly? Can you remember ever being taught how to pray, and that’s not school telling you to be sat still, hands together and eyes closed.

It seems that Saint Paul’s priority for worship in the new Christian churches he was beginning to form and encourage was prayer. St. Paul tells the young Timothy that when it comes to worship, one thing is to be a priority: “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone”. If Archbishop Sentamu is right, and God knows all of what we are praying for before we even pray about it, why do we pray so much during our services? Why don’t we sing more and rejoice more, and even have more cake and coffee during the service as well as at the end? Prayers can seem the dullest part of the service, a lot of standing and listening, resulting in wandering thoughts and eyes.

Paul obviously has other things in mind when he urges us to pray as a congregation. He says when you gather for worship, pray, he then goes on to teach us how to pray, who to pray for, and the God to whom we pray.

The primary reason that we have many different prayers throughout our service is because God wants us to pray for all kinds of people on all kinds of occasions. He wants all of our prayers to be the result of hearts that have so much to say. Paul uses four words to bring out the wide-ranging nature of Christian prayer: requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving.

With requests we are to come to God like a child comes to his father or mother to ask for whatever we need, knowing that we come to him with empty hands and that he fills us with everything we need, be it health, peace or forgiveness.

With Prayer is a very general term indicating any kind of devotion or praise to God. When we make intercession to God, we are boldly asking God to do something on behalf of others. Interceding is what we do when we see pain and suffering and ask God to give support and relief where we cannot. Finally, Paul says, we are to offer thanksgiving: this brings our prayer full circle, so that the blessings we receive from God return to him again in the form of gratitude.

Paul’s encouragement is not only a good model for our prayers during a service, but for our personal prayer life as well. Sometimes we get into a rut of prayer that is centred on us and what we want and need. We pray for ourselves but forget to pray for others. We ask God for stuff, but forget to thank him for the stuff he has already given us.

Just as important as how we pray is who we pray for. Paul urges us to pray for everyone, which can seem a little difficult at times, and even overwhelming, how can I possibly know what 8 billion people need, how would I ever have the time to intercede to God for every one of them? In fact, this prayer is very simple. We pray that God would carry out his will for all people, a will which Paul spells out: God our Saviour…wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.Our prayer can be as simple as the words of the Lord’s Prayer: thy will be done; or as focused as a prayer for a specific person we know who is struggling.

Praying for everyone obviously means that we exclude no one and Paul encourages those very first Christians to specifically pray for kings and all those in authority. This was no easy thing for those first Christians to do. Those Christians saw their friends and family dragged into coliseums throughout the Roman Empire where they were tortured and sacrificed as entertainment for pagan Roman crowds. Those Christians found themselves targeted for persecution by the Roman government and Roman people who falsely blamed them for all kinds of problems in society. There are Christians sadly still being persecuted and paul is suggesting that we are called to pray for the persecutors. Paul encouraged Timothy to pray for the very leaders who hunted them down and tortured them for their Christian faith. Surely it’s not as bad as that for us.

There are many good reasons to pray – but the most important one of all is that God wants us to. It pleases God when we bring all our thoughts and concerns and praise and thanks to him. In the end, the power of prayer doesn’t come from how we pray or who we pray for. Prayer is not powerful because we are eloquent and earnest when we pray, prayer is powerful because of the God we pray to.

When we do come to prayer we need to do so with humility and sorrow, because we know our sins and how they have ruined our relationship with God. But, as Paul’s words to Timothy suggest, we cannot come to God on our own, and, we don’t have to. We come in Jesus’ name; as his invited guests. That’s what makes the last line of our reading so important. Paul writes: “There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men.”

Many people have asked me, and I’m sure ask Karen, to pray for them because they deem me to be closer to God, this line from Paul’s letter strengthens my answer to people when I reply that I am no nearer to God than they are, and yes I will pray for them but I would rather pray with them and would rather instil in them that they can pray as well and as successfully without me

So what should we do when we gather for worship? Expect to be entertained? Motivated? Moved emotionally? Paul tells us we need to pray. Pray for everyone – because it is God’s will that all people be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. Pray for our nation’s leaders and government that they too might come to faith and that we may live peaceful and Godly lives. Pray at all times and in all places to our Almighty God, confident that he has the power to do whatever you ask. Pray, because Jesus lived, died and rose to give you that privilege. It should be in his holy name that we pray today and every day. Amen.