

**“PRAY TO THE LORD FOR THE CITY”**

*Jeremiah 29:7; 1 Timothy 2:1-8*

I'd like this morning to draw together four different strands in what I have to say, four aspects of the same issue, four threads which all end up leading in the same direction. Let's start by reminding ourselves once again that this is one of the occasions in the year when we are able to welcome into this building some of the people who have committed themselves to working in and on behalf of the community in this city. We are pleased to have the Mayor and Sheriff and other representatives of the civic establishment here with us today, and it gives us an opportunity to acknowledge all that they do for this city, not only in their capacity as traditional figureheads of the community, but also as councillors who have to put in a lot of hard graft week by week as they try to give some direction to the life of Lichfield. It also reminds us that we are a part of the community, too: we cannot partition ourselves off in some little ghetto to concentrate on singing hymns and printing tracts, but we need to realise the extent to which we have responsibilities as citizens.

The second strand is the new banner which was finished just before Christmas and which we haven't really had an opportunity to consider yet. We're very grateful to the people who are part of the banner group for their hard work in producing it – a representation of the community of this city, with words from the Bible, *“Pray to the Lord for the city”*, clearly written on it. It's there in front of us each time we come into this place as a reminder, again, that although our primary allegiance is to God we also have clear responsibilities towards the place where we have been called to live and work. Our Christian faith is not without a context and the particular context in which we explore our faith and seek to give expression to our worship, work and witness as a church is this city of Lichfield.

Thirdly, as we begin another year, it's good to remind ourselves that, although the progress may be slow, we are still working away at our development project, trying to improve and extend our premises here in order to be better able to serve the community. And the vision which lies behind that project is that we should be *“A church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church.”* Once again, we have tried to make explicit the belief that we are here for more than just a Sunday morning sing-song. We have a calling from God to try and make a positive difference to the city from a position which is geographically, demographically, theologically, ecumenically, culturally and politically at the heart of this community.

Of course, this is not just something that we have dreamed up from nowhere, ideas thrown together by the church leaders in an attempt to try and drum up some enthusiasm from the people in the pews. The fourth strand is, I hope, apparent from the two passages we have read from the Bible this morning, one from the Old Testament and one from the New. There is actually a biblical mandate for all this. Our attempts to involve ourselves in the wider life of this city, our participation in the civic and cultural life of Lichfield, our relationship with the wider context within which we find ourselves is part of our obedience to the Word of God as we find it in the Bible.

It's clear from the two passages we read – and from many other places in the Bible – that God's people are not given the option of retreating from the wider world into a kind of sanctified ghetto. To put it crudely, if we want our dustbins emptied, our children educated and our streets lit at night, we have to pay for it – and if we pay for it, we've also got to delegate to someone the responsibility to organise it, whether we are Christians or not. God has so ordered society that there will be those who have some kind of authority and those, like most of us here, who delegate that authority to them through the ballot box or whatever.

But what's interesting to me is that in both the passages we've read today, the people being addressed are trying to live out their God-given mandate in very inhospitable circumstances. We are not talking here

about people who are living in the kind of liberal social democracy which we enjoy in this part of the world at the beginning of the third millennium. Just think for a moment or two about the political and social contexts in which the people addressed by Jeremiah and Paul were living.

Jeremiah was writing to people who were living in exile. These were God's people, the Jews, who had seen their country overrun by one of the greatest tyrants of the then known world. Nebuchadnezzar, emperor of Babylon, had swept eastwards towards the Mediterranean and had destroyed the tiny nation of Judah, ransacking its religious and cultural heritage and deporting most of its population. Jeremiah was one of the people who had been left behind and he sends a letter to the leaders of the exiles telling them to pray for the good of Babylon. Can you imagine their response to this? Here they were, aliens in a culture that was steeped in the worship of pagan gods and goddesses. They knew that they would never see their native land again, and even if they did manage to return, their religious heritage was destroyed. Their scriptures warned them repeatedly about getting too involved with pagans, and when they did try to express something of their faith in the land of their exile they were despised and ridiculed by their captors (*Psalms 137* is all about the ways in which the Babylonians wanted to be entertained by the quaint worship songs of the Jews in exile).

And now they are being told to settle down here, to build houses and start growing vegetables because they're here for a long stay. They're to get on with life – working, marrying, reproducing, involving themselves in the life of the city – and to start praying for it, praying that it will prosper! It seems almost incomprehensible to them, surely. But that's the call: that's the mandate – *“Pray to the Lord for the city.”*

And then think about the people to whom Paul is writing. The letter is to his young protégé Timothy who has been left in charge of the church in Ephesus in proconsular Asia, where Turkey is today. Paul tells him that the people in the church should be praying for the kings and leaders, those who are responsible for the running of the Roman Empire. As far as we know, the letter was written sometime around 63-65AD, just as the persecution against Christians was really starting to hot up. Here were Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, who were having to put up with discrimination, punishment, torture and possibly death because of their allegiance to the gospel, being asked to pray for the very people who were responsible for their plight.

Although it was growing, the Christians community was still very small at this time. They were swamped by the almost universally pagan culture of the Empire, the worship of the old gods and goddesses of mythology alongside the brutally enforced obligation to worship the Emperor and indulge in practices that were completely at odds with their new faith. The man who was soon to be taken under armed guard to Rome and eventual execution was now asking these people to pray for their civic leaders in order to be able to live quiet and peaceful lives. Some of them must have thought Paul was going off his head!

And in both these situations (Babylon and Ephesus) the prayer is not to be for the conversion of the perpetrators of such injustices, nor that they should be deposed or removed from office. Paul tells Timothy that God does want everyone to be saved, but that's not the thrust of the prayer. The prayer is for political stability and economic prosperity. The people of God, even in these situations of difficulty and distress, are told to pray for the general good of the community. Of course, there's a spin-off for them in that they will get to share in some of the benefits of peace and prosperity, and the sub-text is clearly that their own involvement in the life of the community, if lived with integrity, will have the effect of communicating something about God. But the mandate is to pray for the community and its leaders.

I believe that the mandate is still effective today. The same call comes to us to pray for the city and its leaders, to bring before God – regularly and seriously – the needs of our community and the long-term good of its people (including ourselves, of course). There are many contemporary stories from around the

world which tell of the impact that praying Christians have had on their communities. There are examples from our own country of places where prayer offered, for example, in crime-ridden housing estates has been linked to decreases in crime. And I have a video with stories of four cities in Latin America and Africa where concerted prayer seems to have had a powerful effect on communities.

Now, I believe that God works in answer to prayer – I have no doubt about that. There is something supernatural in the way in which prayer can affect things. But part of the effect that prayer has on communities comes about because the prayers themselves are in some way changed. If you decide to pray for a specific issue, not only do you utter the prayers, but you also become more eager yourself to **do** what you can in response to the problem, even if it's only to become better informed. Praying touches the pray-ers and forces them to get involved too.

Now we may not be in anything like the situation that those people who read Jeremiah's and Paul's letters were. Despite what the scaremongers and sensationalists may say, we are not persecuted in our society, nor even in imminent danger of persecution. We are not living in an alien culture – although some might argue that the culture around us is in some ways alien to the ways in which God calls us to live. But we are none the less called, commanded by God to pray for the city. At the beginning of this new year (well, almost the beginning!), I want to assure those of you who are leaders in our community that you are prayed for regularly by people here – and I hope will be prayed for by even more people after this morning.

And I want to challenge those of you who worship here regularly to take seriously this call from God. The banner will be there each week for a while to remind you. Don't pray for this city at the expense of any other praying you might be doing. Pray for it in addition to all that. Pray for its leaders – the Mayor and the Chairman of the District Council, councillors, elected and employed members of the Councils. Pray for our MP, Michael Fabricant for most of you. Pray for those who are involved in education, in health care, social services, the police and emergency services, those who work in the city, those who live around you. Pray for peace and prosperity – it's there in the Bible – but pray that the prosperity will touch the lives of every citizen, not just those who are already pretty well off. If you're stuck what to pray for, read your newspapers – you know, those free ones that you only use to line the cat's box. See what the issues are. Approach your own councillor and ask if there's anything specific to pray for. Listen to the concerns of your neighbours, of the people you meet in the supermarket or on the train.

We are very fortunate here in Lichfield in all kinds of ways. But let's not allow our relative comfort and prosperity to blind us to the need to keep praying to the Lord for the city. And as we pray for peace and prosperity, let's also keep praying for what Paul calls "*godliness and holiness*" – a deepening awareness of a need for God and for salvation. After all, if we Christians aren't going to pray, who else will?

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

What benefits do you enjoy through living here in this community? Take a few moments to thank God for them.

What criteria should we use to decide to what extent we should participate in the life of the community around us? Are these absolute criteria, or will they depend on each person's situation?

Would you agree that, as Christians, we are "aliens" in this culture? Why/why not?

In what ways do you think this church could be more effective in its mission to the city?

What do you think it really means to "*pray for the prosperity*" of the city?

To what extent should we pray for the success of a particular political party? (Note *1 Timothy 2:8!*)

What have you learned from this passage?

Have some copies of the local paper available (*The Mercury, The Post* etc.) Look through them and identify some specific topics for prayer. Spend some time praying about them together.