

WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2018

“Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? [Malachi 2:10]

“Pray then this way: Our Father...” [Matthew 6:9]

“Tuhi mera Mata Pita, hum tere balak sare.”

All people pray – faith and non-faith based people pray.

We can pray for each other, and I also want you to observe people in prayer.

What is your earliest memory of prayer?

Mine goes back to when I was two or three years old, and takes me to the Sikh Gurdwara in the Landhia Mawe housing estate in Nairobi where we lived.

The Temple was just a few yards away from our home. My family participated in worship daily. I spent hours in the Temple for worship and prayer. The Temple grounds were my playground too. I regularly shared in the Langar, the open community meal, and took my place alongside others to serve food and then to wash the dishes, and tidy up.

Worship in the Gurdwara is centred on the reading of the Holy Book, the Guru Granth Sahib. Whenever I sense, or smell the aroma of Incense, I am back in my mind to those earliest days of worship and prayer in the Gurdwara in Nairobi. The reading or chanting of the Word of God, the prayers, the Incense...the mixture is such that the very atmosphere is like the breath of God. You breathe it in and you absorb it. I spent hours in this atmosphere of prayer.

Primarily, as a child I observed people in prayer, and listened to prayers, prayers which remain absorbed within me. One line of the congregational prayer that has stayed with me from my childhood, and informed my understanding of God and our relationship with God is:

**TUHI MERA MATA MITA
HUM SARE BALAK TERE.**

“You are my mother, father,
We are all your children.”

From my childhood I have been fascinated with prayer, and am deeply moved by observing others in prayer.

BEHOLD HE PRAYETH: PRAYER AS A COMMON ACTIVITY

Prayer is an activity that common to people of all faiths, not just all Christian Denominations. People who profess no particular religious faith will turn to prayer too in moments of real crisis as a last resort. I have even seen people at football matches, praying for their team!! I recall sitting with the poorest people I knew on earth. This was following the awful Tsunami destruction of Boxing Day in 2004. I visited the devastated villages along the east coast of Sri Lanka. At one point I found myself sitting with fishermen in the sand along the beach in Thrikkuville. These men had lost family, friends, their make-do shacks, their fishing boats...indeed all they had were the T Shirts and Trousers they wore. From their point of view, and in their own words all they had left was “prayer”.

There is a beautiful moment in Acts 9 where we read that God sends Ananias to Saul in Damascus, Ananias objects, "I have heard many things about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem..."

God dispels Ananias' fears with the words [to quote an older version, from Acts 9:11], 'Behold, he prayeth'. Saul, soon to be Paul, had lost all his power. All he had left was prayer.

Prayer is equally accessible to all people, the powerless and the powerful, those who profess religious faith and those who profess no religious faith.

OBSERVATION OF PRAYER

People in prayer, folded hands, bowed down, kneeling, prostrate...whatever the posture...are seen to be profoundly humble, unarmed and non-violent, in an attitude of openness and receptiveness. There is something very moving and beautiful, disarming and inspiring to behold in people in prayer...whether they are Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims or Sikhs or whatever.

I have observed people in prayer in Churches, Mosques, Synagogues, Mandirs, Viharas, in open public spaces, in Buses...and very often in aeroplanes especially when the ride gets a little bumpy!

Recently I was in India with a group of pilgrims from Britain. We visited Sikh Gurdwaras. I asked my group to observe people in prayer. The reflections of my group following such observation was that surely all prayer is heard by the One God, and that it is difficult to deny that there is something of God in people of different faiths.

'Behold he prayeth.'

I am profoundly inspired by people in prayer.

It is good to share in worship and prayer. It is good to observe worship and prayer.

I recommend observation of prayer to you.

Visit Centres of worship of different denominations and faiths.

In a Sikh Temple, each worshipper goes up to the front of the worship hall to offer personal prayer before sitting down for congregational worship.

Whenever I can, I go to my local Quaker Meeting house and join in the shared silence.

Whenever I can I go into a place of worship to just sit, to be quiet, to light a candle, to pray.

For 17 years I have been minister with the congregation of the upper Wincobank Udenominational and Independent Chapel on the Flower Estate of Sheffield. Our Sunday morning worship is not centred on preaching but on prayer. Younger members insist on parties and prayer, not preaching and prayer. Members of the congregation, all ages, stand around the Altar Table, and in turn say who or what they are inviting prayers for. We conclude by lighting a candle, reminding ourselves that God hears our prayers, and by joining in the Lord's Prayer.

The prayer Jesus taught is beautiful. He said, "Pray then in this way. Two syllable words, and can be said without haste in 30 seconds:

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts
As we forgive our debtors.
Do not bring us to the time of trial,
And rescue us from evil.”
And of course some texts add the words:
“For the kingdom, the power and the glory
Are your forever,
Amen.”

Beautifully simple. The prayer Jesus taught has few words, and does not instruct God on how to order the world!

Take the first few words: Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Every time we say these words we acknowledge a close relationship with God, without in the slightest confining God to our own circle of faith and community. To locate God in heaven is not to place a boundary around God's presence and activity. It is certainly not to say God is far and remote from us, “up there” or “out there”. God is without geographical or religious boundaries. God is immense, unfathomed and unconfined. John Wesley saw and acknowledged “the finger of God” in other faiths than his own.

To refer to God as Father is not to confine God to a particular gender any more than it is to say that God is a piece of stone when we say God is our Rock; nor is it to characterise god as some of the violent, abusive or absent fathers we may be aware of or hear about.

To call God father is to acknowledge that we all have One Creator; that we are all made in the image of God; that we are family, brothers and sisters, and we belong to each other.

The Prophet Malachi may only have been addressing the divided Children of Israel but he too challenged them with words that are not inappropriate for the people of Israel and Palestine today: “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us all? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?” [Malachi 2:10] There is a universalism in Malachi [see 1:11] that is consistent with other Hebrew Prophets [eg Amos 9:7].

It is this one God and father of us all, who says in the words of the prophet Joel, “I will pour my spirit on all flesh” [Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17] It is this one God and father of all, defined in the Gospel according to John as “the true light which enlightens everyone” [john 1:9].

Hallowed be the Name of God in all prayer and worship, in our lives and in our prayers. Hallowed be the name of God in all Creation. For it the One God and father of us all who creates us male and female In the Image of God, whose spirit is poured out and present in us all, and who illuminates and enlightens us all. It is to this One God that we all pray.

Our approach to prayer is influenced by our understanding of where we believe God is, the ways of God and the grace of God. We believe God is with us. There is also a connection between prayer and our understanding of suffering and the causes of suffering.

Is God with us always, or is God called into situations by prayer? Can God be persuaded to act in particular ways by prayer? Is suffering caused by God; is it the result of bad [sinful] behaviour?

So what are we doing when we pray? Prayer is not about what we say and the length of the time we spend saying it. It is more about listening to God, and discerning what God is calling us to do, and responding with appropriate action.

There is value also in holding, or remembering people or places, or situations before God, because it is good to share with someone else what matters to us.

Prayer does include sharing with God exactly how you feel, including expressions of disbelief at what may be happening, and outrage or anger at God over what you or others may be going through. Even Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" [Mark 15:34]

So let prayer be simple. Don't make prayer too wordy. Prayer can be silent. Silence can aid listening. Silence is not the absence of noise, but a capacity to shut up, pay attention, and listen deeply, with a stillness of mind and being. In such listening there can be revelation and discovery. Such silence can be achieved in the midst of noise as well as in a quiet atmosphere. Prayer is a way of achieving deep levels of listening, connecting and communing between God, and the spirit of God, and human beings.

What particularly distinguishes holy and spiritual leaders from the rest of us is that they learned to listen, connect and communicate at these deeper levels. Perhaps this is the connection between prayer and healing. We are not all great spiritual leaders, but we can all pray. Let your prayer remember, hold and hallow the name of God and the names of people and places.

Jesus asked those who pray to think their intentions carefully. Prayer can be public but is not about making a public show. Pray in public with a purity of purpose and intention. Prayer is always to hallow the Name of God and not any person.

Prayer that does not hallow the name of God, such as prayer that glorifies death and destruction, cannot be called prayer without humiliating the Name of God and those who offer it. Pray for an end to hatred and harm but here can be no hatred or harmful intention in prayer. Publicly pray for peace, for honest politics and policy, for the eradication of poverty. Pray without instructing God how to order the world.

But in prayer, make time to listen to God and to discern the will, the way and the word of God. In prayer make time to hold before God your deepest desire and the welfare of all.

The prayer of God is very simple. From a Gospel perspective it is expressed in the life of Christ. It is a prayer that says: "I am with you always." That is the prayer communicated in the whole of who and how Jesus is. The life of Jesus is a prayer. He did make time for personal prayer. For him prayer was about spending focussed time with the Father. Jesus knew times of anguish when he found himself crying out like the Psalmist: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Yet his

whole life is an act of prayer, a response to God who says, "I am with you always." A life fashioned after the life of Jesus will be a life of prayer in recognition of and response to the commitment of God. Understand the whole of life as an act of prayer.

Let all your activity and conversation, listening and quietness be conducted in the spirit of prayer. Only speak words when necessary, and words that are prayerful. Let your hands only do that which is prayerful. Let each step you take be consistent with your pilgrimage of prayer. Let your whole life be one great act of communion with God.

Within this let there be times, when like Christ, we will want to make focused time to be in attention to God, and to listen to God. This can be alone or congregational. Let our congregational times not be one way conversation in which we do a lot of talking and allow little or no space for silence and listening.

In such lone and communal times of prayer we can deepen our relationship with God and Christ and others.

A gift we can offer each other as people of different Christian denominations, and as people of different faiths is to grow and deepen our shared experience and understanding of prayer. We can do this by observing prayer, praying together and exploring the beauty of shared prayer, and that includes the very powerful experience of shared silence.

We all pray. We are prayer. Prayer can heal us and our divisions. Prayer does not require us to say more, but to listen more.

So I'll shut up now and let us take a couple of minutes together to shut up and listen.

Thank you.

Inderjit Bhogal

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, January 2018