

The Adventure of Prayer

3. PRAYER MINISTRY

This is the third in the Adventure of Prayer series that we are reflecting on through this term. Today's is a bit of a change of emphasis from our personal experience of prayer to the subject of Prayer ministry.

Every week we see in the service book and often hear spoken during the notices, an invitation to go to the chancel or Lady Chapel for someone to pray with you for anything that may be on your heart, something for yourself or for someone else. Every week two people are there, ready to minister to you in prayer.

Prayer ministry is, of course, much wider than just the ministry we offer week by week here. It can be offered by any Christian to another, opening ourselves to God together in shared prayer for a situation or person. We should not be afraid, if someone is sharing a concern with us, to offer to pray with them, even the simplest prayer, which offers the situation to God and asks him to make his love known in it.

But today I am focusing on the more formal offering of prayer ministry in Church or on behalf of the Church. So why do we offer it?

First of all because Jesus invites us to ask for what we desire in his name. And he also said that there is a special sense of his presence when two or three people gather in his name. The apostle James speaks of Christians visiting those who are sick and praying with them – sometimes with the laying on of hands or anointing with oil. And some Churches will offer prayer ministry with either or both – one of the oils blessed at the Chrism Mass on Maundy Thursday each year, is the oil of healing. Priests and other ministers may offer (though not impose) laying on of hands or anointing with oil when they visit the sick. These gentle and loving actions symbolise God's loving touch and his presence with a person at a difficult time.

We also offer it because we recognise that there are times when people face real hardship and profoundly painful times, and often those are times when God can seem very far away. In prayer ministry we hold the faith that the God we pray to is one who knows, through Christ, what it is to suffer pain, loss, injustice and fear. We offer prayer to express God's love for those in pain, his understanding and his desire for their wholeness, and

that love and understanding can be made real in our empathy and support.

People who offer prayer ministry can be ordained or lay. Usually they will have received some training and reflected deeply on what prayer ministry is about. Those who offer it should not be seen as offering healing – prayer ministers are not healers, but we can pray for God to bring healing and wholeness to a situation, a person, or a relationship, in Jesus' name, by his Holy Spirit. We pray, but the work is God's.

Prayer ministry may not change the reality of a person's situation – miraculous healings are rare - but it can change their experience of it. And what can change it is a sense of the presence of God with them, and his love enfolding them. It is an awareness that whatever happens, God is with them.

Prayer ministry always centres on listening – hearing what a person feels they want to pray for. Allowing someone to tell their story, or say something about the story of another person they care about is powerful in itself. Being listened to is quite a rare gift in our society – the kind of listening where someone doesn't seek to make judgments or chip in with their comments or advice, but simply focuses on what another is saying. The prayer offered can then reflect what the person has expressed and offer the situation to God's loving care. The ministry also involves listening to God, allowing space for God's gentle promptings – sometimes a verse or an image comes to mind that may be meaningful and speak into what someone is feeling. We do not seek to tell God what to do about a situation, but seek to hold the person and our loving God together in what Maurice Maddocks, a writer on prayer for healing, describes as the crucible of our loving hearts.

AI defines a crucible as, metaphorically, a 'severe test, ordeal or a transformative situation where different forces interact to produce something new.' That is a powerful description of prayer ministry. We do believe prayer changes things, and that, if we hold situations under God's loving gaze, change can happen. Sometimes it renews a sense of hope, or a sense of being held in God's love, a sense of not being alone. It can help to bring some peace and comfort, to ease the sense of helplessness that can assail us when faced with what we feel powerless to change. Whatever we cannot do, we can pray, and it does make a difference, within us if not outwardly.

The quote that David chose for the opening to the leaflet about this series is very relevant here. It says, 'Prayer begins as the opening of my heart and mind to God's love for me.' That, I believe, is at the heart of prayer ministry. Prayer ministry seeks to enable, in the face of painful times, the opening of people's hearts and minds to God's love for them.

Of course we can always pray by ourselves and that is a huge blessing, but there is something quite special about asking others to pray with us. Prayer ministry should always be confidential, so information shared will not be passed on. Those who pray will continue to hold the situation in their own personal prayers.

In addition to praying in difficult times, you can also bring to prayer ministry things that you wish to thank God for, things you want to celebrate. It's lovely to pray with others about what fills your heart with joy.

Any one of the prayer ministry team here would be happy to talk to you about what we do, and answer any questions you may have. And I do encourage you, if there is anything you feel is weighing on your heart from your own or someone else's experience, do take up the invitation to go for prayer ministry. We would love to pray with you.

I would like to close by reading again the words of today's collect for Trinity Sunday, which expresses something about what prayer ministry seeks to offer:

Holy God, faithful and unchanging, enlarge our minds with the knowledge of your truth, and draw us more deeply into the mystery of your love, that we may truly worship you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen