

Thursday 23rd April: People who pray

Today's reading Acts 4.23-37

Our reading for yesterday saw Peter and John appearing before the Sanhedrin or the Council and released by them because they find no legal case against them. This action by a Jewish Council signifies vindication by God, who then becomes the object of widespread praise.

In today's reading the apostles' release is celebrated among 'their own', perhaps the other apostles or the small circle of disciples who, earlier in the Acts (1:14, 2:42) had been depicted as a community of prayer.

As I read the New Testament I am struck again and again by the early church as a praying community. It's something that I have tried to model with churches throughout my years as a Methodist minister. From my first appointment I said my morning prayers in Church and invited others to join me if they wished. Most days there were one or two people there, but sometimes it was just me – and that's OK.

Now that I am the lead minister at Alderley Edge Methodist Church I am trying to do that again, by inviting people to join me in my study, by means of Facebook, to share in my morning prayer and it seems to be something that's growing as people join me not only from Alderley Edge but from different parts of the country and, sometimes, other parts of the world.

It seems to me that if the Church is not a community that prays then it is not really the church at all. That may sound a bit extreme, but I believe it to be true. After all, there are other groups that sing together, others that serve the community as we do, but (as far as I am aware) no other group offers to pray as the church does! And, furthermore, the Acts tells us that when the disciples prayed things happened. That so true in my experience – when a church council really prays, things happen. We tried it in our last church council meeting at Alderley Edge Methodist Church.

We are joining in the ecumenical 2020 prayer movement this year. On the 20th of each month, at 20.20 we invite people to stop and pray for 20 minutes, for our world, our nation and our community and pray that God will lead people to faith this year. In February, it so happened that the 20th of the month fell on the date of our Church council so, at 2020 we stopped and prayed for 20minutes. I'm not claiming that anything dramatic happened that evening, but I believe that it will, as a result of the church being a praying community, as was the early Church. What will it mean, in the brave new world post lockdown, for the church not just to be a community of people who pray, but a community that prays together too?

Just down the road from where we lived a few years ago, in Sheffield, was the Montgomery chapel, recognising the ministry of the hymn writer James Montgomery and here is a verse on prayer from one of his hymns:

Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air,
Our watchword at the gates of death;
We enter heaven with prayer.

Rod Hill