

Have you ever been given the opportunity to do something and somehow you've never quite get round to taking up that opportunity? Perhaps it was something relatively minor. I don't know about you but through our door we quite often get offers from a garden centre whereby for a certain period of time you can buy certain plants for a certain price and it feels like an absolute bargain. But the next time you pick up that piece of paper you realise you've missed the opportunity because you were too busy doing other things.

Sometimes those opportunities are more important than bargain plants. Perhaps there were times when if maybe you had been trying a little harder in your preparation for an exam, if you had worked a little harder on a project at work, or if you had just allocated that little bit more time to doing a job around the house the outcome might have been better. But in all these cases the busyness of life gets in the way, other attractions seem more attractive, and perhaps you didn't quite achieve what you had set out to achieve.

Today we reach the end of our sermon series on James. and as we come to the second half of the last chapter of the book, James comes to prayer: when to pray, how to pray, and he even gives us an example of an absolutely amazing prayer from the Old Testament as a means of encouraging us – the prayer of Elijah. James talks to us about difficult times, about good times, and a specific time – and in all three times he encourages us to pray – to talk to God

Lets look at each of those three times in turn.

First, talk to God when suffering.

Are any among you suffering? They should pray.

Are you going through a tough time – so talk to God. And it makes sense to talk to God because he is the one who made us and knows us. If your television breaks down you don't call a plumber. If you don't know the best way to cook a piece of fish, you probably don't call a bricklayer. So where do you go to if you "break down"? Go to the one who made you and knows you. Talk to God.

But – and this is an important point when it comes to the message James has been teaching us – if you go to God when you are suffering, there is no guarantee he will sort it out. If you were here when we started our journey through James you may remember that he said this to us in chapter 1:

"Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing."

So talk to God when suffering, but try to ask him not "Why?" but "What?" as in "What are you teaching me Lord?" Now, if you are going through a really tough time that message can be really difficult to accept, and I don't believe that God causes us to suffer for no good reason – if there is no good reason then if you go to God he will help you – but if there is a good reason, when you go to God, he will make that clear.

Second, talk to God when you are happy.

Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

You would have thought that of the opening two questions and responses this would be the easier, but somehow that is often not the case. I will be the first to admit that it is when I have a problem, that is the time when I rush to the Lord in prayer. It's when I don't see a solution, I go to Him to ask for one. But when I get that solution, how quick am I to go to God and say thank you? I can be on my knees to

God to ask and ask and ask, but am I then leading the praise of thanks to Him when He answers? I hope I am pretty good at saying, "Oh thank you God" but do I burst out in songs of praise?

Third, James get very specific.

Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.

There is an awful lot in those couple of sentences that we need to look at. Let's look at each phrase.

Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you. Don't worry about the use of the word elders as the word is interchangeable with bishops or ministers or pastors - we're simply talking about someone who is skilled in praying for someone who is sick.

Anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. It's important that we recognise the use of oil in these occasions. If the person is healed it is not the oil that heals them. The oil is simply there as a reminder of the power of the Holy Spirit, but on such occasions it can be useful to have a physical reminder of that power.

Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick and the Lord will make you well. I'm sure some people here will struggle with this sentence. Your initial understanding of the sentence is that if a prayer is offered then the sick person will be healed but we all know that is not the case. Sometimes a sick person is healed through the skills of medical professionals and I would suggest that this is also a gift from God as the skills of those medical professionals comes from God. There are also occasions where people are made well through the power of the Holy Spirit in a miraculous event and those occasions are ones which we should truly thank God for. But there are other occasions when the person does not become well.

Underlining this is that phrase, "a prayer offered in faith", or sometimes translated as "a prayer of faith". This prayer of faith is that unique working of God within the ones doing the praying where God gives a special sense that he is going to heal. God chooses when to bless someone with this impression, a subjective assurance of faith, a strong sense that this sickness will be healed, and God gives that assurance, on occasion, to those who are praying. But the prayer of faith is not guaranteed to occur in every situation. Therefore we must guard against any notion that a person "must" be healed. Physical healing is not always God's will this side of heaven.

Whilst we don't know exactly what Paul's thorn in the flesh was many scholars believe that it was a physical malady of some kind. In any case Paul's prayer that it might depart was not granted. Physical healing is not always God's will. And I'm afraid understanding when God chooses to heal someone and when he doesn't is one of those questions we can't possibly understand this side of heaven. But that's not to say we should ignore James' instruction.

And then, "and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven". This is not a linking of specific illnesses to sins. This is a reminder that the reason there is sickness in the world is because of the fall of Adam and Eve right at the beginning of time. And because of the decision they took, there is sickness, there is unhappiness, there is death, and until we are reconciled with Christ on the last day those things will continue. Healing from an illness, we must remember, is a temporary healing until we meet our Saviour again.

We then come to this quite amazing verse, "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results."

That second sentence gets me really quite excited. "The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results." So, if we are able to combine the prayers of all the people in our churches together, can that not have an amazing effect on our individual and our collective lives?

But then that first sentence tells us what we need to do to achieve that collectiveness. "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." Now that sounds a little trickier. So what is James really saying here? First – confess your sins to each other. I think what he is meaning is that to confess your sins to God is not always enough. If we have harmed someone else in your church, if we have upset them, even perhaps if we have just talked in an unhealthy way about someone to someone else, we must admit that to the person in question, and say sorry. Until we get that level of togetherness within our church communities, our power as a praying community is restricted.

But hopefully there is not too much, if any, of that in our churches which means we can adopt the second part – we can pray for each other – and perhaps even pray with each other – and I know for a lot of people that would be hard at first. There is a group who meet together each Tuesday morning to pray together on Zoom – but at the same time the formal prayers that we use may not be to everyone's taste. But look out for opportunities to pray with someone else in your church. It may feel very strange to start off with, but can be very rewarding - or as James says, "The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results".

Which brings me finally to a specific thing you can do.

Thy Kingdom Come was an initiative started by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in 2016. God put on their hearts the importance of Evangelism and Witness and of course this must start in prayer, and so the archbishops put out a call to prayer to the Anglican church worldwide to pray for people to come to faith in Jesus Christ. They decided this should happen from Ascension to Pentecost drawing on the traditional time of prayer as the disciples did in Acts 1 and 2. In those chapters we hear, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth. When Jesus had said this he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. Then they returned to Jerusalem and were constantly devoting themselves to prayer. When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, and that day about three thousand persons were added."

Since then other denominations have joined in with Thy Kingdom Come, rediscovering the richness of this historic tradition. Momentum quickly built up with Christians of different traditions praying together during these 11 days for 5 people they knew to become Christians. Year on year more Christians joined the global wave of prayer gathering to pray in small groups, churches, families and as individuals.

Now Christians in more than 100 countries are uniting in this prayer – Come Holy Spirit, Let your Kingdom Come during this time.

And this year, we want to observe Thy Kingdom Come in this benefice.

And you can join this in a number of ways.

First, and more importantly, identify 5 people you know who are not yet Christians, and commit to praying for them each day during the 11 days between Ascension Day and Pentecost, that they will become Christians. At the same time pray for us as churches, that we can help them in that journey.

Second, I'm afraid we came to this slightly late but I should have 50 copies this book coming hopefully in the next day or two which is the Thy Kingdom Come Novena – a daily devotional worship booklet to cover the 11 days. If you would like a copy of this then please sign the list at the back and I will get it to you by Thursday. But please do request it otherwise I will have a big pile of these sitting in our study.

Finally, make a real effort to come to the Ascension Day service on Thursday at 8pm at St George's Thriplow, or one of our services on Pentecost Sunday to join together in prayer.

The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. The earnest prayer of a righteous worshipping community will have even greater power and produce even more wonderful results.

Amen.