

WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: JOINING IN WITH THE SPIRIT



Session 5: Joining in with the Spirit in the battle.

In what ways is it helpful to think of God's mission as a "battle"?

How involved can Christians be in the world?

How important is it to pray for others?

Does God always get what He wants? If not, why not?

Can faith affect prayer?

When we pray for others what do we need to know?

How can using the Scriptures, the gift of tongues or the practice of fasting help me to intercede?

What right do we have to act on God's behalf, and where do we get any power to do it?

How do we seek peace and justice in a Christlike way?

Why is caring for the environment a mark of mission and why is it a battle?

In what ways is it helpful to think of God's mission as a 'battle'?



Catherine Booth is an example of a Christian who confronted injustice and changed the culture - the life conditions and ways of being - of thousands of people. She was the co-founder of the Salvation Army with her husband William.

With her husband, she campaigned for women factory workers to receive the same wages as men, and for better working conditions for all. She particularly campaigned on behalf of 'match girls' (women working in match factories) who were only earning 1s. 4d. for a sixteen-hour day, and who were also risking their health when they dipped the match-heads in the yellow phosphorus supplied by manufacturers such as Bryant & May. A large number of these women suffered from 'Phossy Jaw' (necrosis of the bone) caused by the toxic fumes of the yellow phosphorus.

Catherine Booth led a campaign against the use of yellow phosphorus. She pointed out that most other European countries produced matches tipped with harmless red phosphorus. Bryant & May responded that these matches were more expensive and that consumers would be unwilling to pay these higher prices. In other words, profits were more important than 'disposable' workers.

Even after Catherine's death in October 1890, William Booth was determined to force match companies to abandon the use of yellow phosphorus. In 1891 the Salvation Army opened its own match-factory in Old Ford, East London. Only using harmless red phosphorus, the workers were soon producing six million boxes a year. Whereas Bryant & May paid their workers just over twopence a gross (144 boxes), the Salvation Army paid their employees twice this amount.



William Booth encouraged MPs and journalists to visit this 'model' factory. He also took them to the homes of those "sweated workers" who were working eleven and twelve hours a day producing matches for companies like Bryant & May.

The bad publicity that Bryant & May received forced the company to reconsider its actions. In 1901, Gilbert Bartholomew, managing director of Bryant & May, announced that the firm had stopped using yellow phosphorus. Catherine's hard work had had a transforming impact upon British factories.

In addition, Catherine, along with other Christians like Josephine Butler and William Stead, was also appalled by the 'white slave trade', a Victorian euphemism for child prostitution. They exposed the white slave trade in England, collecting three hundred and ninety-six thousand signatures, and saw the practice outlawed.

The Booths believed that this kind of political activity was an essential part of their Christian witness. (It's interesting to note that the Booths were highly effective in seeing many working-class Londoners come to faith, but their approach to mission was holistic and culture transforming.) (Story from Mark Roques of 'Reality Bites')



In this session we look at how discipleship leads to joining in with God's mission to restore the broken parts of creation and society.

The Booths worked to change and challenge injustice in several ways:

- By campaigning and advocating.
- By engaging with the political structures of the world.
- By establishing alternative ways of acting which reflected God's justice.

They reflected (before its time) much of the content of the final two marks of mission - transforming unjust structures of society, challenging violence of every kind and sustaining and renewing the life of the earth.

As we have seen, our invitation as disciples is to join in with God in the healing of His kingdom, which affects every part of life, responding to God's gift to us of being restored through Christ.

Nevertheless, to follow Christ and to do the things He does will always involve a realism about the cost and the struggle involved. This is reflected in some of the words we use at baptism: "Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?...Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?...Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the world and the devil...May almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness...Will you persevere in resisting evil...Will you seek and serve Christ in all people...Will you acknowledge Christ's authority over human society, by prayer for the world and its leaders, by defending the weak, and by seeking peace and justice?"

It is also reflected in the way that God's people are described as the "church militant" here on earth – willing to struggle with self-giving love for God's kingdom and against darkness. While the way God exercises power in the world is the opposite of the way in which many human systems work, nevertheless military language to describe mission is used in the New Testament to portray the seriousness and cost of these marks of mission. (Paul talks about Christians as "fellow-soldiers" and says, "I have fought the good fight". (2 Timothy 4:7))

We experience this conflict for two main reasons:

We live in the 'in-between' period during which God's kingdom is present, but not yet fulfilled.

As we explored in 'Becoming like Christ', through Jesus' life, death and resurrection God has begun to reunite heaven and earth, restoring what was broken, but we are still waiting for the day when this healing will be complete, when "God's dwelling place (will be among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'" (Revelation 21:3-4)



Nevertheless, because we live in the time between Jesus' first and second coming, we know that while the decisive battle has been won, we are still waiting for the war to be over (between D day and VE day).



In many ways, when we pray and act now for God's wholeness on earth, we are looking for the presence of God's future to break into today.

Because in God's future there will be perfect justice, we look for that justice to become real now. We are living in the overlap between what Jesus called this "present evil age", and the age to come, when creation will be renewed.

Knowing that the kingdom of God is 'now' but also 'not yet' can help us pursue healing and justice now, while knowing that we may still struggle and experience it only partially. This understanding can help us not to be overwhelmed by the fact that there is still so much suffering in the world, or surprised when we still have to fight battles.

God's kingdom remains opposed.

We may experience conflict because we can be opposed by people, or by spiritual forces. Jesus taught His followers, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first....If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." (John 15: 18,20) Jesus' own ministry attracted praise and fury.

Within one story we read that Jesus "was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him" and then a few verses on we read, 'All the people in the synagogue were furious...' (Luke 4: 15, 28) The visible reason for this may be that the call to be disciples can challenge our priorities, and the idols we might base our life around.

But, as we saw in 'Becoming like Christ', the Bible reveals an invisible source of opposition as well. As we have seen, the world was created with an unseen landscape (the heavens) populated by forces which are both obedient to God, and rebellious. Jesus saw His work on the cross as disarming these rebellious powers. He came to set the oppressed free - as John wrote, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." (1 John 3:8)

The final defeat of these enemies is to come, but in the meantime God's kingdom remains contested. C.S. Lewis put it, "There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan."



This should not cause us to be afraid, but to be vigilant and persevere. Paul writes to the Ephesians that a realistic stance in life is to "Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6: 11-12)

As well as helping us to participate in God's mission even when it is challenging, because our struggle is not against "flesh and blood" this perspective might also help us not to see people as our 'enemy', but to understand how the difficulties we might face need to be fought spiritually – particularly through prayer.

As disciples we are not surprised by suffering and conflict, and this knowledge can equip us with the strength to work for God's kingdom, in every area of life, despite challenges and the sense that the task will never be complete until Christ's return. As William Booth said,

“

While women weep as they do now, I'll fight; while little children go hungry as they do now, I'll fight; while men go to prison, in and out, in and out, I'll fight; while there is a poor lost girl upon the street, I'll fight; while there remains one dark soul without the light of God, I'll fight – I'll fight to the very end.”



How involved can Christians be in the world?

Christians have had a developing and often different approach as to how, and how much, to be involved in the world and its culture (the environment created by human life). For example, while some might feel that being politically active is an essential part of discipleship, others might be wary of doing so – and politicians may criticise the church for being caught up with political affairs.

If we are disciples who are in a position of influence in society or culture, we can be uncertain as to how much our faith should guide our decisions.

There has been a spectrum of approaches to these questions which is shaped by how we answer two questions:

Should we emphasise the world as fundamentally good, or fallen?

How active should we be in influencing the world?

For example, when it comes to political involvement, those Christians whose emphasis is that the world is fundamentally fallen and that we are called to focus on only influencing the church might see politics as irrelevant to discipleship.

Those at the other end of the spectrum, who emphasise the world as fundamentally good and that we are called to join in with redeeming every part of it, are likely to see politics as a necessary part of discipleship.

Writers such as H. Richard Niebuhr are well known for describing the spectrum of different approaches Christians have taken in their approach to culture, and involvement in the world.(He calls them: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, Christ the transformer of culture).

Slightly adapting these, we could characterise these different approaches as:



Withdraw: Disciples are called to be separate from the world.

Christians who take this approach will emphasise that the world is 'secular', heavily affected by sin, that there are two 'kingdoms', which God relates to in different ways. They will emphasise Jesus' words, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36) as advocating withdrawal. They are likely to see discipleship as just being focussed on church and spiritual growth.

They will draw a distinction between church and world, emphasising that the church is called to be light in the darkness, and that we should flee from the world. On a personal level, they would avoid watching films or reading books which they do not see as 'Christian', seeing them as fallen.

Christians who have been part of monastic communities which have focussed on practices of self-denial (ascetics) might be an example of this approach. However, it might be hard to see how Christians who work and live alongside many people could genuinely separate themselves in this way.

Critique: Disciples are called to critique society, but from the outside.

Christians who take this approach will emphasise that the world is fallen, but the role of the church is to influence by

demonstrating in our life together and voicing what loyalty to God looks like. They might emphasise Paul's words telling disciples to be "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life." (Philippians 2: 15-16) They will emphasise that the church is called to be a prophetic voice which keeps its integrity by not being involved from the inside. On the personal level, they might see watching films or reading books which are not 'Christian' as a 'necessary evil' – to be read or watched to help us to engage with the world in which we live. Christians in Anabaptist or Amish communities might be a visible example of this approach. However, it might be hard to see how such a lifestyle could be possible for every disciple.

While these two approaches have historically been adopted by some, most Christians have seen this as splitting life up into sacred and secular, and instead have fallen somewhere between the following two attitudes:

Cooperate: Disciples are called to look for the good in society and cooperate where possible.

Christians who take this approach will still live with the tension that many aspects of the world are fallen, and that their primary loyalty is to Christ. But they will see God's grace outside the church, as well as within it, and believe that there is good in society already. They will work with others to seek the good of all, and look to encounter God in the church, but also in the wider culture. The role of the church is to offer the vision of Jesus as the one who can enlighten and fulfil society. They might emphasise Psalm 24:1: "The world belongs to God, the earth and all its people."

While many have affirmed this approach, they have pointed out the need to be vigilant in holding the balance between accepting parts of culture but rejecting others at the same time. The conviction that society can only be truly healed through Christ needs to be kept at the centre.

Transform: Disciples are called to join in with the transformation of the world in every aspect.

The fifth mark of mission, which looks for the transformation of unjust structures, assumes this view. Christians who take this approach see the world as 'in between' good and fallen. But as disciples in God's image, they are called to both develop the goodness of God's creation, and to join in with Him in restoring what is broken in every area of life.



They emphasise that Jesus' restoration was not removal of people from the earth, but restoration of the earth, and that there is no aspect of life on earth that is unaffected. As Abraham Kuyper said, "There is not one square inch of creation over which Jesus does not say, 'It is mine!'"

At a church leaders' conference, the convenor asked the assembled participants what the greatest problem was in their countries. Almost all included bribery and corruption, often as the most serious problem they faced. The convenor responded as follows: "If corruption is the major problem, then why are we preparing our young people only to be pastors and evangelists? Why aren't we training them to be the godly entrepreneurs, economists, policemen, judges and politicians that our countries so desperately need?"

This perspective emphasises that Christians are called to be culture-formers and not culture-followers. They believe biblical wisdom can transform any area of life bringing God's justice, mercy and kindness, in a way that, for example, a consumer view of the world cannot.



Reflecting on Jesus' words that disciples are called to be in the world but not of it, they would see the world, not as God's creation, but as the parts of life that can be 'worldly' by pulling us away from worshipping God, or by having values which do not reflect God's kingdom.

Rather than there being separate sacred or secular/worldly parts of life, any part of life can either be 'worldly' or transformed by Christ.

They would watch films or read books that are not 'Christian', seeing them as reflecting the God-granted gift of human imagination and culture, but still aspiring to being set apart for God in their lives as the highest good.

However, they will know that, because societies are constantly changing, and because no disciple is yet perfect, this transformation will be about setting direction rather than providing the blueprint for a perfect culture. They will also avoid aggressive power which, for example, might try to coerce those who do not identify as Christians into going against their own consciences.

Whether we are thinking about politics, or art, or media, or economics, or science, or any area of life, it is likely that, while the priority is to join in with the Spirit in the transformation of the world is, we may also draw helpful insights from the other approaches at different times and depending on our situation. There may be times to emphasise one model over another.

For example, if we live in a very corrupt culture or under an oppressive government, we may need to 'withdraw' to protect faith, or to critique prophetically.

Nevertheless, to look at the question of politics, the transformation perspective may lead us to agree with Desmond Tutu's words, "I am puzzled by which Bible people are reading when they suggest that religion and politics don't mix."

We might remember how in Scripture God creates government to bring public justice, and calls governments to account saying, "Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless." (Isaiah 10: 1-2)

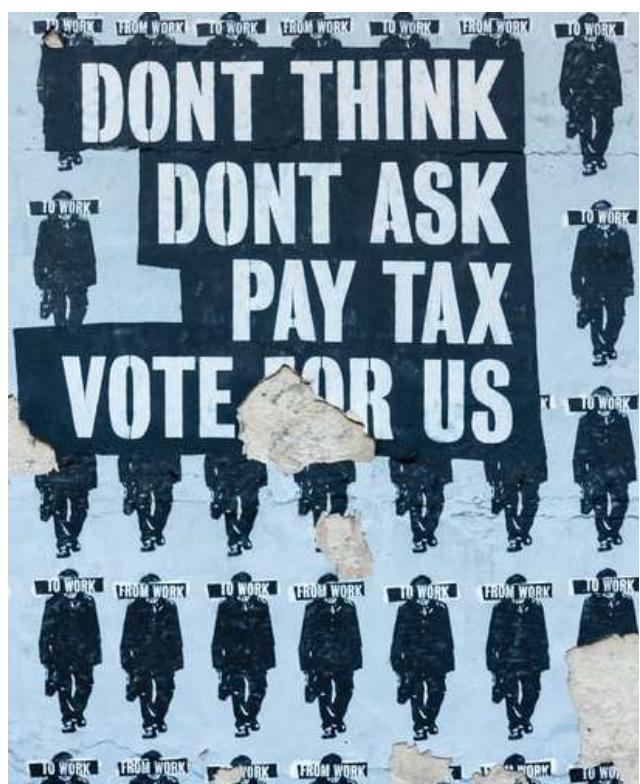
We might look at how being involved in politics can help us develop something good in God's creation, or to struggle against injustice on behalf of others.



We might be strengthened in our involvement by knowing that God's kingdom is the only holistic source of eternal change - God wants to change both structures and people - and that if hearts are not convicted to change, no amount of political control can be long-lasting.

At the same time, the way in which those who withdraw, or critique, remind us how fallen the world can be might help us be examine the values of our political party or movement, and ensure as far as we can that they are in line with those of Christ. We might agree with Martin Luther King who said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool."

We might find worshipping with others regularly an important help in ensuring that our ultimate allegiance belongs to God, and not to any party. And the knowledge that we ourselves are works in progress - both good and fallen - might help us to be humble, learning and loving in the way we engage with those who disagree with us.



How important is it to pray for others?



As we look at the ways we can join in with God to see the world healed, one of the main ways in which every disciple is offered the chance to join in God's work is through the gift of praying for others.

Prayer can be many things – chiefly the way in which we worship and draw close to God in love – but it is also the main way in which we can cooperate with God in the struggle to see His kingdom come.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray not just so they could enter into relationship – but so that they could see a genuine difference in the world.

This kind of prayer is known as intercession (literally “standing between on behalf of others”) or petition. When we intercede, we join in with the Spirit in the battle in praying for others.

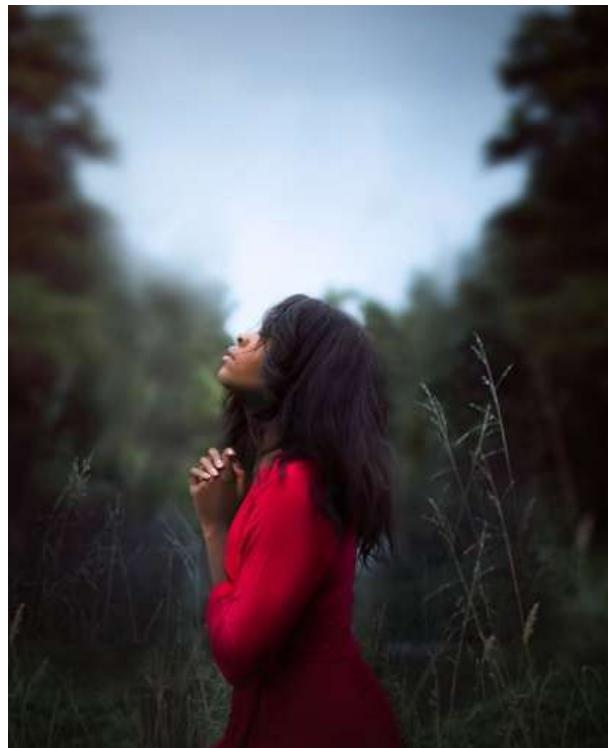
God repeatedly commands us to pray “...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:14)

Karl Barth said, “To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.” Archbishop Justin Welby says, “there has never been a renewal of the Church without the renewal of prayer.” James writes that “the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective”. (James 5:16)

The partnership God entrusts us with in being able to pray is an expression of the relationship He created us for. We have seen how God creates and restores us to enjoy a meaningful partnership with Him in affecting the world – from the first task given to human beings to unfold the potential in the world to Jesus’ commissioning His disciples to go and make disciples.

Part of the amazing dignity God gives us as His children is to enable us to join with Him in having a genuine impact on the way the world is.

God has set up the universe so that talking to him affects Him and affects what comes to pass. According to the story of the Bible, things genuinely hang on whether we pray.



This is because if our relationship with God is to be real, actions and communication must genuinely impact both parties. If they only affect one party, it is not a true relationship. Yet while the call to be in relationship and to pray is clear, it raises many questions which can undermine our confidence in thinking prayer matters and turn it into a duty done by rote.

For example, if God wants to answer why do we need to be persistent? (Our children only have to ask for things once.) How does prayer make any real difference when God already knows everything? If God always does the best thing because it’s His nature, what difference can my praying really make? Isn’t God going to do what He wants anyway?

In addition, we are used to seeing the world in terms of cause and effect, yet intercession rarely works so directly. We know too that often our prayers seem to go unanswered. The combination of these complex questions and mysterious experiences can undermine our confidence in prayer and make it hard for us to deal well with difficulties.

Does God always get what He wants? If not, why not?



If a child is ill, and people pray, but the child dies, is this because it is God's will?

Jesus never suggested that suffering was God's will, or even linked to people's sin (He rejected the idea in Luke 8). Instead, He displayed God's character by healing all who came to Him and insisted: "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11) According to Christ, tragedy is not an expression of God's will, and His goodness can be relied upon.

Yet while God's complete victory over sin and death is sure, until heaven and earth are reunited, we remain in an 'in-between' world in which, when we pray, there is more in play than just God's will. God is all-powerful, yet He has created a world in which several factors, most of which are unseen to us, can affect what happens when we pray. In a real way, these factors can restrict (at least temporarily) God's perfect will and have an impact on our intercessions.

The laws of nature.

God's ability to answer intercessory prayer may be affected by the need for a stable and predictable natural world. God made us to learn how to love and make morally responsible decisions, but for that to be possible we need to live in a world which we can influence, but not control.

The laws of nature need to be reliable enough to be predictable. If, through prayer, we could see God regularly change the laws of nature, responsible and loving decisions would be impossible.

Miracles are (by definition) therefore possible, but exceptional. God has the power to do anything, but He has created a universe which needs to work in certain ways for loving and moral relationships to exist.

Human freedom.

Out of love, God has also chosen to limit Himself by respecting human freedom. For example, Luke makes the comment that it was possible for the Pharisees and the experts in the law to "reject God's purpose for themselves," (Luke 7:30) while through Isaiah God speaks of "those who carry out plans that are not mine." (Isaiah 30:1)

This means that the people we pray for do not lose their free will. We can interfere (at least temporarily) with what God wants. Theoretically, God could choose to override the freedom of human beings, but by taking it away it would mean we never had it in the first place. Thus, while God's love can influence us, He never controls us.

The spiritual battle we cannot see.

The Bible lifts the veil on a spiritual landscape which both helps but also can hinder God's mission. Early Christians understood most of suffering to be the result of this hidden conflict.

As we have seen, just as Jesus taught us to pray, "Deliver us from evil", so Paul describes us as being in a struggle against "the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms....With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people." (Ephesians 6: 12,18)

The book of Daniel tells a story about how, even though his prayer had been heard by God straight away, an angel had been delayed for twenty-one days in answering because of resistance from opposing forces. (Daniel 10:4-14)

However literally or not we might take this particular story, it is consistent with a view throughout the Bible that God's purposes can to a certain extent be interfered with in ways we cannot see.

Can faith affect prayer?



According to Jesus, faith can, to a certain extent, also be a factor involved in prayer. Yet misunderstanding the role of faith can lead to at best misleading and at worst destructive views of God.

This is particularly true in the ministry of healing – whether of body, mind or spirit. Just as Jesus demonstrated the rule of God breaking into the world by consistently healing people, so disciples have continued in His name to pray for healing as a normal part of Christian experience, whether by using a more sacramental approach with anointing with oil, or through direct and simple praying through the laying on of hands (or commonly, both).

The healing God brings is better understood as wholeness – a foretaste of the wholeness we will experience ultimately when heaven and earth are reunited. Most Christians would see God's gifts of medicine and prayer not as opposites, but as working together.

While being aware of all the factors we have mentioned so far which might have an impact on our prayer for healing, to join in with God' mission includes sharing in the ongoing healing ministry of Jesus.

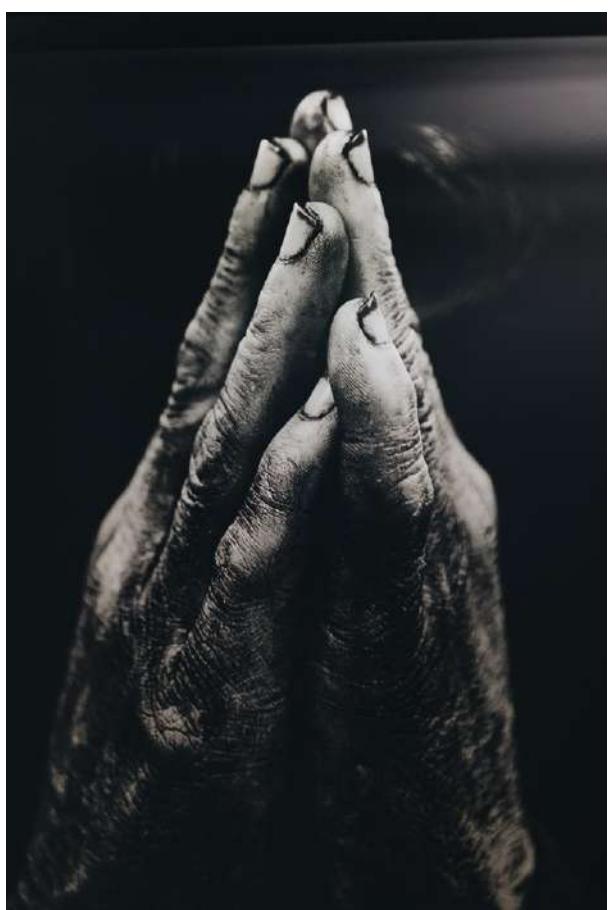
In terms of grappling with questions around praying for others, it is often in the area of healing that the struggle can feel sharpest. Uncertainty about the role of faith in healing prayer in particular can challenge our picture of God, and our understanding of how to pray for others.

We can find ourselves in a dilemma if we pray for someone and they don't get better. If we see their continuing illness as 'God's will', we can be effectively blaming God, or seeing Him as somehow wanting suffering. However, if, to avoid saying this, we say, "It must be to do with a lack of faith" we can end up making the victim feel blamed (even though we may not intend to).

As we have seen, there are more factors at play than God's will when we pray. Yet Christ consistently tells His disciples that their faith is a significant factor in praying for others.

In the same chapter in Matthew Jesus heals a woman of bleeding, saying, "Take heart, daughter...your faith has healed you." He then heals two blind men: "Then he touched their eyes and said, 'According to your faith let it be done to you.'" (Matthew 9: 22 and 29)

Again, in Matthew Jesus' disciples fail to heal a boy who is possessed. When they ask Jesus why this is He replies, "Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." (Matthew 17:20)





We can perhaps wrestle with this by acknowledging that while faith is important in prayer, as we have seen, it is one of many factors involved. We could also point to the way that Jesus, like other rabbis of His time, used the teaching technique of sometimes speaking exaggerated terms to make a point – moving mountains camels through the eye of a needle, for example.

There are other examples of times when it is clear that Jesus can only be speaking of faith as being an important principle, but not a formula. Even Jesus, who presumably had perfect faith, was sometimes unable to heal because of factors beyond His control – He was unable to do many miracles in His own hometown because of the lack of faith of others. (Mark 6:5)

At the heart of this is knowing that when we pray for others, having faith cannot mean that we need to generate absolute certainty in our minds about the prayer being answered. Neither does it mean pretending that our prayer has been answered by 'claiming it in faith'.

Jesus prayed for a blind man who at first receives his sight back only partially. Jesus' response isn't to blame the man or tell him to act as if he has been healed, but instead to continue praying until he is fully healed. (Mark 8)

When we pray for people or situations to be healed, because there are many variables we cannot be aware of, perhaps praying in faith is not about believing that the prayer will be answered in that moment.

Rather praying in faith can be more about how we set our hope in God and His promise to ultimately heal all things, and to trust that in that hope in our minds and hearts as fully as we are able.

The key passage about the meaning of 'faith' in the Bible is in Hebrews which talks about faith as "the substance/solidity of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

All the heroes of faith listed in the passage had a conviction that they were moving towards a future promise, even though they did not see them come to pass. (Hebrews 11:13)

Praying in faith not certainty that they would see their prayer answered in that moment, but it was focussing their minds on what they hoped for as a solid reality. This created a conviction inside them that pulled them towards it.

As Greg Boyd says, "If I pray for a person in a wheelchair with faith it doesn't mean I know they will get out, it means I have a picture and a hope that this will happen. I can see them concretely being healed and I know it's God's will. This creates a desire, a conviction, which I press towards. But I know that that person will eventually get it – there are no wheelchairs in God's future. But it will not necessarily happen now."





When we pray for others what do we need to know?

Praying for others is joining in a battle and affected by many things we cannot fully see – laws of nature, human and spiritual free will, and faith.

While it is true that God always wants our healing there may be one further factor of which we might not be fully aware - our understanding of what God wants.

Whatever our prayer for others and the world, seeking God's will is at the heart of it. Our central purpose is to see God's will on earth as it is in heaven. As John writes, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him." (1 John 5: 14-15)

While we can have confidence that God hears us praying, no one can claim to have complete understanding of what God wants or see every aspect of the universe in the way God does. All these factors mean that when we pray, we see "through a glass darkly" and cannot see intercession as a formula (the book of Job has this as its central idea).

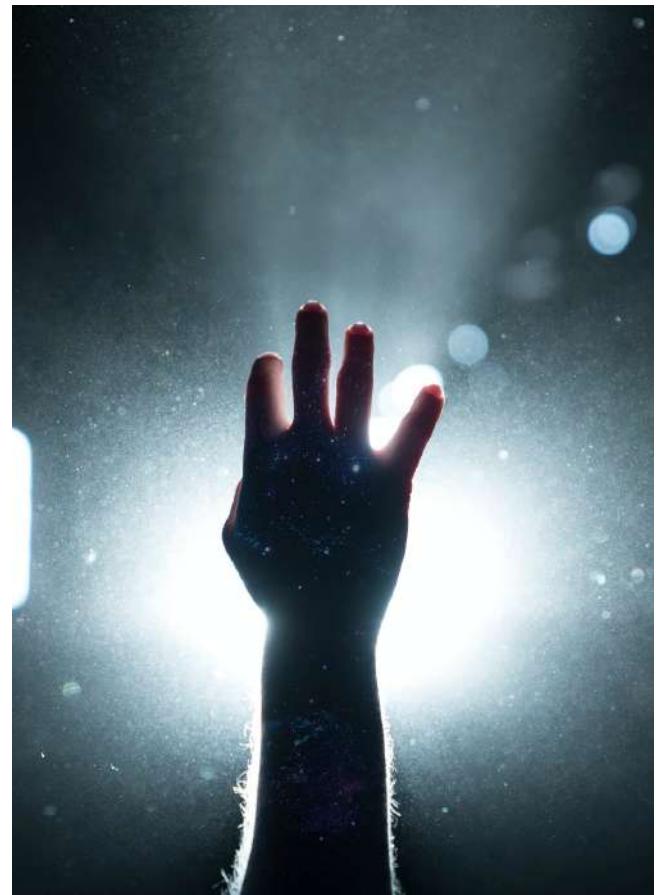
Rather than undermining our trust in prayer, understanding these factors will help us to avoid becoming discouraged in the midst of the battle, and help us to persevere.

As we pray Jesus reassures us that God's goodness cannot be outdone – He gives fish, not stones and eggs, not scorpions and Scripture encourages us that prayer is powerful and effective.

In the light of this complex picture, the Bible gives us several principles to help us pray:

Being persistent and expectant.

When we pray it is not just about God saying yes or no, but we might be coming up against the will of people or forces that have genuine freedom and impact.



So it is not surprising that Jesus spoke of the need for persistent prayer. Having driven out a demon the disciples asked Him why they had been unable to do it. He replied, "This only comes out through prayer and fasting."(Matthew 17: 19-21)

The disciples may well have said, "Well, what do you think we were doing?" Jesus was demonstrating that sometimes there is a necessity for persistent, repeated prayer in seeing change happen.

In Luke 11, having taught the Lord's Prayer, He then tells another story to show the attitude needed in prayer in which a friend wakes up another friend late at night for bread with "shameless audacity". (Luke 11:8) He also tells His disciples the parable of the persistent widow, who won't stop petitioning a corrupt judge "to show them that they should always pray and not give up". (Luke 18)

In these two stories the encouragement is to know that God wants to answer our prayers and that we should pray expecting to be answered.

Praying with others.

Early Christians were acutely aware that, although it is impossible to see the full picture when we pray, the strength and number of people praying together is also an important factor.

In Acts we read, "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken." (Acts 4:31) Asking others to pray with us is an instinct, but also rooted in Jesus' words, "Where two or three are gathered I am there with you." (Matthew 18:20)

Being specific and general.

We can be hesitant to ask for specific things for individuals, yet Jesus prayed particularly for Simon, "that your faith may not fail". (Luke 22:32)

On the other hand, Paul wrote to Timothy, encouraging him to continue in general intercession: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions..." (1 Timothy 2: 1-2)

To pray for others is to join with God in taking responsibility and to use what God has given you.



How can using the Scriptures, the gift of tongues or the practice of fasting help me to intercede?



When interceding for others we might find our words feel inadequate because the situation feels too big or distressing, it might be hard to know how to continue to pray over a long period, or we might want to intensify our praying.

Praying with the Scriptures as a framework, using the gift of tongues or fasting can help us engage well in intercession.

Praying with the Scriptures

Using prayers or psalms directly from the Bible can help us pray for others. Or we might take passages and adapt them into our own words, or context by reading them out phrase by phrase and writing or speaking our own prayers in between.

(These offer a good resource. 1 Thessalonians 3: 12-13 to pray for a local church; Ephesians 6: 18-20 to pray for someone's mission; Psalm 20 to pray for politicians; Psalm 63 to pray for someone in need).

The gift of tongues

There are two ways the New Testament describes the gift of tongues. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit gives the disciples the ability to speak in different tongues, which means in different human languages, and everyone in the crowd can hear and understand their own.

The other way in which the gift is described is as a non-human language, not directed to people but to God. Paul describes this as a way of praying, not with your mind, but with your spirit - the deepest part of who we are - apart from your mind.

The language can sometimes be interpreted in the context of worship to bring a message. Although Paul prays in tongues, in the context of worship he says he would rather speak in normal words so that others can understand.

However, generally speaking, it is a private prayer language which enables a disciple to talk to God purely on an emotional level - you speak what you feel but without understanding the words. It is a way of inviting God's Spirit to pray through us.

Tongues is not a requirement for a disciple, nor a sign of special favour, but it can be a gift to be used when our own human words feel they have run their course, we don't know what to say, or we want to persist in prayer.

There is a surrendering of control to God in asking for and using the gift, but we are never out of control. We can choose to use it or not.



The practice of fasting

Fasting is the practice of going without something, normally food, for a period to focus on God. It helps us to do this because when we fast, we not only free up time we would otherwise have spent eating, but we are quickly made aware by our hunger of the things which can control us, and of how we are dependent on Him.

Fasting is a common practice throughout the Bible, from Moses to Jesus. While most of the time it is personal, sometimes it is done together. In the Old Testament God's people came together to fast and pray at times of national crisis, and over time developed regular fasts. The early Christians fasted and prayed at a crucial moment of change (Acts 13)

Fasting is not commanded, but in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus assumes that fasting will be a normal practice for the disciple and not as a burden so that people should look miserable while they are doing it: "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6:16-18)



In the context of joining in with the Spirit, fasting is a way we can intensify our sense of interceding. For example, in 1756 Britain was facing invasion and the king called Britain to a day of prayer and fasting. Jesus' conflict in the desert with temptation was fought in the context of fasting.

When we are weak in body, we are more likely to depend on God and become spiritually alert. While our love and devotion to God is always at the heart of fasting, growing in this seems to lend power to our joining in with prayer battles on behalf of others.

We need to be wise about starting to fast, and how regularly we can do it. But fasting gives us an opportunity to both allow God more space in our lives (the aim of all practices), and to bring focus to our praying.



What right do we have to act on God's behalf, and where do we get any power to do it?



In the light of some of the complex issues we face, it is not surprising if, like Jesus' disciples, sometimes we might lack confidence in seeking God's kingdom and feel confused or powerless.

Yet Jesus gave Peter and the church (us) "the keys of the kingdom". (Matthew 16:19) Later, He tells all His disciples, "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 18:18) He gave His disciples extraordinary responsibility, but not without entrusting them with the power and authority to act in His name in the world.

It might be easy for us to assume that because He was fully human and fully God, Jesus had a particular power and ministry while He was on earth, which was for that time, and only through Him. Yet Jesus assumed the opposite, sending His disciples to do the very same things He did, in the way He did them.

If, as disciples, we are to join in with His work, being able to grasp the meaning of the authority and power in which He expects us to live will be vital in helping us to confidently join in with God in transforming the world.

In fact, to attempt to do God's work without first relying on the resource and authority God has given us would be to try and do it in our own strength or on our own merits. God's Kingdom can never truly grow through those who act as though the authority comes from themselves. What makes all the difference in our confidence is knowing who we are before God, and the authority He gives us, before we act. In this respect, we are in exactly the same position as Christ.

Jesus performed miracles not because He was God, but because He had deep confidence in who He was before God. He got the authority to do God's work from knowing He was His Father's child. "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does." (John 5: 19-20)

He gained the power to do God's work (whether that was simple inner confidence or the power to heal) by knowing the reality of the position God had given Him. It flowed from knowing He was God's Son, and that He had the authority to represent His Father.

In the same way, as disciples, joining in with God's work, the only place we can find the confidence to live, act and pray for God's kingdom is in first knowing who we are before Him. Any sense of authority, right or power we have to act in God's name comes not from what we do for God, but from who He says we are as His children.

Paul is overwhelmed by the sense of this inheritance disciples are given, telling them that God "has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ (and that) he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ." Not only does this give us deep security in our relationship with Him, but he also wants them to see God's "incomparably great power for us who believe." (Ephesians 1: 3,4,19)

The source of our confidence and authority to join in with the Spirit is not only that we are never alone, "Jesus is the great high priest who intercedes with us." (Hebrews 7:25)

But it is found in resting in the knowledge of who God has called us to be, and the authority we have already inherited.

How do we seek peace and justice in a Christlike way?



God's mission touches every part of life – we are called to join in with Him to see His rule on earth, restoring everything that is broken until heaven and earth are reunited again.

The fourth mark of mission frames this as, "To seek to transform unjust structures of society...to challenge violence of every kind...and to pursue peace and reconciliation."

This is a call that begins in the Old Testament with the first people being given the task of protecting and developing God's world, and which continues with the people of Israel being called to be a blessing to the nations, pursuing two things - righteousness and justice. A world which looks like this results in peace or "shalom" for everybody, and everything. Shalom is more than the absence of conflict – it is a word that speaks of complete wholeness.

God's heart is for justice. Through Amos He tells His people, "Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your instruments! But let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5.23-24) Seeking justice for all was to be a defining feature of God's people, which set them apart.

Because they had received God's righteousness, the only reasonable response was to seek justice for other people – to love their neighbour as they loved themselves. "With what shall I come before the Lord? He has shown you, oh people, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:6,8)

Where there is righteousness, people are in right relationships with God, each other, and the world. Ethical goodness comes from right relationships.

When there is justice, as the statue on top of the Old Bailey shows, there is impartial fairness (shown by the blindfold), truth (shown by the scales), and order in which everyone is protected (shown by the sword). Things are tied together well (the root meaning of the word). People and things can get what they deserve.

The Bible often uses the words justice and righteousness interchangeably, because the two help create each other. If, for example, people live in right relationship with the land, they will not exploit it in an unjust way.

Or the more politicians treat people in an economically just way, ensuring they get what they deserve financially, the more relationships in society are put right.



If we are to live into the fourth mark of mission in a Christlike way which brings transformation focussing on these principles might help:



Justice, as well as charity.

As disciples we may well be used to supporting charities to help those in need or to care for the earth. But this story illustrates the difference between acting with charity (or mercy) and ensuring there is justice.

A village was overtaken by enemy forces. All the warriors who inhabited the village were gathered together and imprisoned by the conquerors. Amidst the villagers were four philanthropists who became aware of the prison conditions that their compatriots were enduring.

The first philanthropist went to the prison and said to the captors, "I understand that my brothers are without clean water. I want to take all my riches, and use them to purify the water, so that my brothers will have clean water, that they will not get sick." The captors agreed and granted the man this right. He walked away, glad that he had been able to show this act of charity for his brothers.

The second philanthropist went to the prison, and approached the captors, saying, "I understand my brothers are sleeping on rocks. I want to take all my riches, and provide bedding for the men, so they may rest comfortably in prison." The captors agreed, and the man left, feeling that he had fulfilled his purpose in aiding his brothers' plight.

The third philanthropist went to the prison, and spoke to the captors, saying "I have heard that my brothers have no food. They have only bread and water. I have a large farm, and want to harvest all my crops to see that the men have good food to eat while they are in prison." The captors agreed, and the philanthropist left, knowing he had done much good in helping his brothers in prison.

The fourth philanthropist though heartened by the acts of the other three, was disturbed that his brothers remained unfairly imprisoned. So he found the keys to the prison, and one night, he slipped into the prison and freed all his brothers from their captivity.

The four philanthropists show us the difference between mercy and justice. The first three engaged in acts of mercy. They certainly came to the aid of their brothers and made their difficult circumstances more comfortable, but they did nothing to change the unjust situation.



The fourth philanthropist acted to change the unjust situation, not just the circumstances. He acted to pursue justice and not simply mercy.

Structures and institutions, as well as people.

While I can live justly and in right relationship with my neighbour on a day-to-day basis, the fourth mark addresses 'unjust structures of society'.

The calling on God's people was wider than individual justice, and their own community. God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah saying, "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (Jeremiah 29.7)

There is a sense in which justice and peace for some can only be found when there is justice for all. Failure to seek justice in the wider structures or policies of society can also have catastrophic results.

For example, in July 1938 Franklin Roosevelt called a conference at Evian in Switzerland to respond to the increasing numbers of Jewish refugees fleeing persecution by the Nazis in Europe. It gathered representatives from 32 countries, 39 private organisations and 24 voluntary organisations and 200 international journalists observed the conversations.

Hitler responded by agreeing that if other nations would agree to take the Jews, he would help them leave, saying, "I can only hope and expect that the other world, which has such deep sympathy for these criminals [Jews], will at least be generous enough to convert this sympathy into practical aid. We, on our part, are ready to put all these criminals at the disposal of these countries, for all I care, even on luxury ships."

However, at the conference both the United States and Britain refused to accept any more refugees, and most of the other countries at the conference followed suit. Not only did this fail to offer refuge to Jewish people, but the message given to Hitler reinforced his view that no one would help the Jews and persecution could continue.

As complex as some of the bigger issues of our day can be, the more we are able to engage in seeking justice at a structural level through campaigning or political involvement the more likely we will be able to influence change which reflects God's kingdom.

We have seen this in recent times both in the challenges we face in climate change, and also the way that discrimination against different races or differently-abled people requires change at a structural level to begin to see deep justice.



Anger, as well as peace.

The fourth mark calls us to challenge all forms of violence. Jesus called disciples to be peacemakers and lived non-violently, meeting violence not with further violence but by absorbing it into Himself – most obviously on the cross.

While Christians still debate over whether war can be just, when we seek to challenge injustice or violence, we are called to break its cycle as much as we can.

In the Beatitudes which describe the heart of a disciple, when Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9) the phrase combines the manner in which we seek peace as well as what we do. A good translation might be, "Blessed are those who seek peace in a peaceful way."

Nevertheless, genuine change can be fuelled by the right kind of anger. St Augustine even argued that it is necessary. "Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are."



Jesus famously demonstrated this 'righteous anger' by turning over the tables in the temple. He was acting out a 'parable' about God's judgment on the way people used religious rituals to exploit others. He echoed God's anger at injustice which is frequently expressed through the prophets.

While such "holy" anger may be part of our discipleship, as people who are still being made holy it might help our anger to be directed well if we can focus it on institutions, and not people, and if we can ensure our anger is always on behalf of others, or the planet, rather than about defending our own rights.

Peace and justice making, as well as keeping.

Edmund Burke famously said, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good people do nothing." Peace and justice require initiative.

This is captured in the Hebrew word for justice (*mishpat*) which can refer to two things. The first is dealing with what has gone wrong with just punishment (retributive justice).

But the second is a much more active meaning – working to restore what has been broken (restorative justice). This second meaning is the most common – God's people are called to speak up for those who have no voice and rescue the disadvantaged. "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow." (Isaiah 1:17)



A great example of this restorative justice, with the right kind of anger, is found in Nehemiah, when he realises many of his people are being kept in poverty, oppressed by excessive borrowing and having to sell their own children into slavery. We read Nehemiah say,

"When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry." He challenges his fellow Jews saying, 'Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.'... 'We will give it back,' they said. 'And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.'" (Nehemiah 5: 1-12)

Yet speaking up for others can feel complicated – particularly when we feel we might be part of the problem. This can be acute in issues of discrimination. How might we speak up, for example, for the rights of black people, if we are white, and enjoy the privileges of that position?



Professor Anthony Reddie describes a balance between letting black people speak for themselves, but also being prepared to take responsibility in seeking change:

"What we don't need is people to speak for us. We are quite eloquent enough. What you can do is be an advocate when we are not in the room. I am curious about what my white friends say when I am not in the room. It is easy to let things pass or slide if it does not have an impact on you personally.

It is not black people's problem to solve racism. White people need to challenge one another and attitudes and their sense of agency. I have lost count of the number of times people have asked me to help them. Take responsibility for your own agency and challenge racism when your black friends are not there."

Actively seeking justice and peace, as we saw in the case of Catherine Booth, is not just about putting what is wrong right, but often about establishing new ways of living and working.

Robert Lavelle was an estate agent who wanted to help his customers to secure mortgages, so he took over a Pittsburgh bank in 1957. It had assets of \$67,000. Lavelle was determined to lend money in a Christian way. He wanted the bank to be a blessing to the poorest people in the neighbourhood.

To start with, he refused to join in with common banking practices of lending money to people who are 'high risk' at the lowest practical rate of interest, to draw them in to a commitment they may easily fail to keep.

The mission of his merciful bank is to approach people respectfully and through warm encouragement and patient financial counselling, to help them become good risks. Lavelle's mission is to help poor and needy people to own their own homes, believing that this will change whole neighbourhoods.

Since its inception the bank has seen its working capital increase from \$67,000 in 1957 to almost \$21 million in 2004. Curiously he started this unusual bank many years before he became a Christian. He says that he only really became a Christian at the age of 47.

As well as refusing to privatise his faith, Lavelle challenged unjust structures by establishing ones which reflected the shalom of God's kingdom.



Why is caring for the environment a mark of mission and why is it a battle?

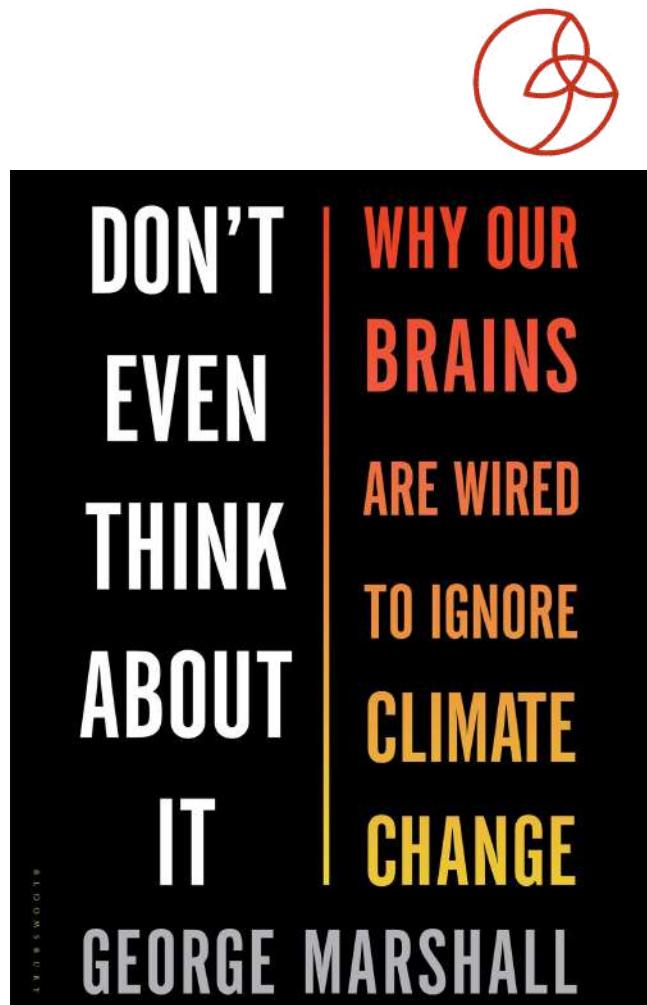
The fifth mark of mission is, "To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth."

In 2008 the global Anglican church said in a statement called 'This is God's World', "We believe this is God's world and we need to walk lightly and humbly within and upon it. We are stewards of that which comes from and returns to God. We believe that all of life is precious and indeed that God has so designed creation that for one part to flourish all must flourish."

Over the last decade we have become increasingly aware of the climate crisis – an overwhelming series of challenges including the warming of the earth and rising sea levels, migration, species extinction, habitat destruction, loss of biodiversity, increasing waste/pollution, degrading of the land through deforestation, soil erosion, and bigger cities, population growth and increasing shortage of food, energy, land, or water.

The sense of battle in this area of mission is vast. While taking responsibility for our own lifestyles and consumption is part of the solution (scientists have mapped out that if everyone achieved every possible environmentally-friendly behaviour change it would deal with 30-40% of the emissions causing global warming), change that will make a lasting difference will only be achieved by actively engaging in, or campaigning about, the global political decisions needed.

However, as we look at the ways in which we can get involved, the main battle might not be that we don't know what to do about making lifestyle changes or joining in with campaigns, but that, despite the warnings we know about, we still lack the motivation to want to engage in the fifth mark of mission.



Why should there still be such an internal battle within so many of us to care for the earth, and actively seek change?

There are several things that have come together in our time which perhaps make it difficult to know what to believe about world issues. Some point to the phenomenon of facts becoming 'post-truth' as every claim is disputed through social media.

Others have pointed to the fact that as a society we live in a state of permanent crisis, meaning that where we might once have been able to have good conversations in society about issues, we are now constantly facing emergencies, making in-depth responses difficult.

When it comes to caring for the earth, one writer recently explored why it is that it seems that our brains are almost hard-wired not to accept climate change. In the book "Don't Even Think About It" George Marshall says that the main reason it might be a battle for us to take creation-care seriously is because virtually every one of climate change's attributes goes against our psychology. He outlines why.



We only become truly aware of a threat posed to us when there is an external enemy involved. So, if, for example, world leaders at the United Nations discover that an aggressive enemy had been secretly pumping climate-altering chemicals into the atmosphere in an attempt to destroy agricultural production across the US we could be confident that the international community would act.

Marshall says that even though this kind of damage is occurring regularly, “because there is no outsider to blame, with climate change being an undetectable crime everyone contributes to but for which no one has a motive” vast swaths of the public seem to find it less interesting than watching paint dry, and so the politicians don’t have to worry too much about being held to account.”

Issues that grab our attention involve pain, and in the present moment. Climate change is both gradual and we always talk about it as a future thing. Threats which are more immediate, for example, from terrorism, grab our attention more easily.

Climate change requires immediate personal sacrifices now to avoid uncertain collective losses far in the future.

Real changes need us to agree with different countries on a distribution of losses and how to allocate the earth’s resources. We don’t like to jump first.

We have a finite pool of worry, and so will focus on what is immediately in front of us.

We have what he calls an “optimism bias”, meaning we tend to think it’s going to happen to other people first - we face lower risks than others.

We have a tendency to cherrypick evidence that confirm our beliefs that others are more threatened, and as a species we don’t want to rock the boat and be outsiders.



If our attitude to looking after the environment can face these difficulties, how might we start to think as disciples in a way that will motivate us to act? Some of these principles may help.

Remembering our first call.

God made the creation as good, and the purpose we were given as human beings is to protect and develop it.

Looking after the world because God thinks it is worth saving.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus tell us how God loves, not just people, but the whole created world. God loved the world (cosmos) so much that He sent His only Son (John 3:16). Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach good news to all creation.” (Mark 16:15) By becoming human in Christ, God shows how the material world is valued and holy.

Living in anticipation of God’s future.

In a short-term sense it is about being mindful of our future generations, 100 years from now, who will be living with the consequences of our decisions today.

In the longer-term, big picture sense, God’s plan is not ultimately to destroy the earth, but to “bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.” (Ephesians 1:10) Our future destiny involves a “renewed earth”. How we care for God’s world now is an expression of our anticipating that future.





Justice and right relationships.

The way we care for the earth expresses the relationship we have with it. But God's call is not only to treat the land, sea and sky with justice, but to ensure that those who cause the least environmental damage do not suffer most from its consequences. Living simply is about letting others simply live.

We know God through His creation and caring for it is an expression of love and worship.

A sacramental approach reminds us of how God sustains His creation, reveals Himself to us through it, and calls us to celebrate its goodness, beauty and diversity. To care for creation is worship.

Focussing on these truths is a way to move from paralysing fear to action, from apathy to worship. We can care for the creation in small ways – every act of recycling can be an expression of worship and a sign of God's future, every prayer is part of the battle. We can campaign, lobby, write, or protest to give momentum to the decisions that must be made by governments.

And we can join in the battle with the Holy Spirit by making sure our churches have a plan of action. One diocese (Truro) is committed to:

Cherish Creation: by working at every level to care for those parts of God's good creation for which we have responsibility, stewarding them for the benefit of plants, animals and biodiversity.

Cut Carbon: We will cut our carbon footprint year on year and to net zero by 2030.

Speak Up: At every level of the diocese, we will speak and act boldly to promote the enjoyment, cherishing and sharing of God's good creation and, where possible and resources allow, we will work in partnership with others who share the same aims.

