

Sunday 21st January 2024 - Sunday Service

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Date: 21 January 2024

Preacher: Paul Lintott

[0 : 00] That really makes a whole lot more sense. Thank you. Can I pray? Father, we're in your hands, and we're glad to be there, and we want to hear from you.

We're hungry, we want to be fed, so we ask that you send your spirit so that we would be fed and we would hear words that bring us life, and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, in the section previous to this one, I haven't listened to Johan's sermon, so sorry, Johan, wherever you are, if I butcher stuff for you, I'm not intending to, but in the previous sections, what's happened is we've had the last public words of the Lord Jesus and a promise that he will send the Holy Spirit to them in Jerusalem if they wait.

So this middle section really is that time between the promise being given from Jesus and the fulfillment of the Spirit coming, and we're getting a snapshot of what it looks like for church behavior here in the world.

There's lots of snapshots in the Book of Acts of what church life looks like, and this is what does it mean to go about the normal business of church while you're waiting for the Holy Spirit to come. Praise God, we're not waiting for the Holy Spirit to come.

He's been given. That's part of the joy of being together in God's presence. He's here with us, and we rejoice in that. But the things that they were doing are surprisingly normal, and that's great, and that should be a great encouragement to us this morning.

[1 : 23] I have picked up from Paula's notices that you've got some important stuff to do. I think you've got an AGM this week. We've got our AGM as well this week. All pastors look forward to them with such excitement, really.

But sarcasm aside, it's an important thing to be making decisions together as God's people, and this passage is really helpful. I often marvel at how God puts...

Like you, I preach through books, and it's so often the very thing that we need to hear is the next section of the Bible. I haven't worked it out. It's not that, well, I don't suppose Johan had a plan and think, well, you'll be at this point, this time, and this is the passage that needs to be preached on. This is what needs to be heard. I know that because God gave this passage to us together to study. But it seems very appropriate to be talking about decisions and how you approach decisions and how you behave normally as a church, so I'm praying that this will be really useful to you this morning.

Two things to say, really simple things. The two things that mark the church as they wait for the coming of the Spirit, they wait for fulfillment of promise, the first one is they pray together.

[2 : 33] It's the first thing that they do that's marked out here. Now, it must have been with a sense of joy and bewilderment, I would think, that the apostles returned to the upper room.

They had thought that it was the end, and now it seems that it's only just the beginning, Jesus has said as much. Christ had died, but now he's alive again. It was a tremendous reversal, the exact opposite of what they thought was going on.

Their master had conquered death and now had commissioned them to take the gospel to the whole world. That was the job. Take this good news everywhere and tell everyone.

He was a risen saviour and lord, and that certainly was a message that was worth telling to the world. They had to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came, and so what would they do in that time?

Well, pray. That's what they do. They'd pray. Jesus had gone back to the Father, but that didn't mean that they were cut off from him. He was still accessible through prayer, so prayer is what they did.

[3 : 36] And the way that these people pray is what interests me. There's a particular word that is used here, a couple of words that are used that are really important, I think, in understanding the manner in which they pray, the way that they do their praying.

Persistence and unity. They're not the words in the text, but that's the issue here. Persistence and unity. Verse 14. All these, with one accord, were devoting themselves to prayer.

These people didn't get tired of praying and give up after a few days. Prayer is something that is referred to throughout the book of Acts. It comes again and again. And while it's one of the most difficult things for us to stick at, it is also, according to James, Jesus' brother, powerful and effective. Prayer is not simply a psychological exercise. I'm very glad to be able to tell you that. Not because I've worked out what prayer is, but because the Bible tells me that prayer is powerful and effective. That's why you should keep praying. It does stuff in simple terms. Pray because it works. Prayer can be challenging. I'm sure if you've been a Christian for any length of time, you'll know that it's very challenging to pray.

[4 : 50] There are times when we don't feel like praying, but we are encouraged in the New Testament to devote ourselves to prayer. That's the translation I'm using. Devote yourself to prayer.

Once every three weeks, I have the privilege of going into lots of schools in my area, up in Haworth and surrounding towns. And I was on assemblies this week, this last week, and we were doing the parable of the persistent widow.

It's great. I really enjoyed doing it. The kids were involved. We did various things together. And at the end, one of the girls, this was in Haworth Main School, she put her hand up partway through the assembly.

Well, that's not unusual because I like questions during assembly. But I said to her, just hang on to the end and we'll deal with some questions. And I got to the end of the assembly and I said, so what was your question?

She said, oh, it's not a question. And I thought, oh, okay. And she said, well, I just wanted to say that every weekend, me and my brother, we go to my grandparents' house and they make us get down on our knees and all four of us pray together.

[5 : 53] And I thought, isn't that amazing? Not only to admit that in front of the whole school, that's pretty brave, but the actual fact of it. I go to my grandparents' house and they teach us how to pray.

I thought, that's good. That's really good. What an encouraging thing. And I think we probably need to do that for each other a bit more, teach each other how to pray because it is hard to pray.

We do need to learn. Jesus' disciples knew it. They asked him to help them. And so parents, grandparents, grandparents, what a great joy to teach your grandchildren to pray.

These people here in Acts 1, they devoted themselves to prayer when things were tough and when things were less so. When things were good and when things were bad, they devoted themselves to prayer.

They prayed all the time. That's how they behaved. If we really do believe, as I do, that God is sovereign, and what I mean by that is he's absolutely in control of everything that goes on.

[6 : 58] He's not contingent on us. He's not waiting for us. He's not dependent on us. He is the Lord. He does as he chooses. If I really believe that, then why would I not pray about everything?

Absolutely everything. Philippians 4, famously. Don't worry about anything, but pray about everything. That's the Paul Lintock translation, but I think it's pretty close. Don't worry.

Pray about everything. There was a pastor here. Some of you remember his name, J.T. Rizbredger, and he used to pray about his parking spot when he went down into Farnham Town Centre.

What a ridiculous thing to do, pray for a parking spot. No, not a ridiculous thing to do. God is in charge of everything. We pray about everything. We've been working through judges in our morning service, a very happy book to be working through at Howarth.

It's been challenging. We've been there for about three months. Probably one of the most difficult series I've ever preached, I think. That's not a preacher's exaggeration. I think it's one of the most difficult books to preach through. It is, well, the recurrent word that I use is grim.

[8 : 08] It is grim, and then it gets grimmer, and then it gets even grimmer. So we're about, I won't even tell you what we're about to tackle next week, because it is so grim, I don't know how I'm going to preach it. It's just grim.

But I'll tell you one thing that Judges has done for me. It has reminded me that God hears the prayer of terrible people. Isn't that an encouraging thought?

You might be thinking this morning to yourself, yeah, I probably should pray more. It's a good thing to pray. Yeah, I think I do believe God is in control, and so it's worth talking to him.

But do you know, honestly, I feel so bad, I don't know how I can talk to him. You know, I'm such a mess up. I really enjoyed the third song. I don't think I'd ever sung it before. Lovely words. It can feel like that, can't it, sometimes? I'm too rubbish to pray. Why would God ever listen to me? Well, read Book of Judges, and you'll find some rubbish people who prayed a lot, and God answered. What an encouraging thing. These people here, they were like you and me, messed up in lots of ways, rejoicing in other ways, blessed, but praying.

[9 : 19] God hears, and he answers prayer. They devoted themselves to prayer. And that goes, just as an aside, for those of you who've never prayed before, I would be surprised if there's no one in this room who hasn't prayed.

I have to use a double negative terribly there. I guess there's somebody here who's never really properly prayed, and you probably think to yourself, do you know, I've never really thought about praying before.

I don't, is it, I mean, would he listen to me? Surely not. If God is real, would he listen to somebody like me? I'm, you know, I'm awful.

God wouldn't listen to somebody like me if God really knows everything about me. The other people in the room wouldn't want to talk to me if they knew what I was really like. Well, let me just dispel that notion for you.

God loves to hear and answer prayer. And the first time you pray properly from the heart begins a journey that is the most exciting journey of all of life to knowing God.

[10 : 22] It doesn't have to be anything clever to pray to God. You don't have to pray in Latin. Just say something like, God, if you're there, I really do want to know you.

That's really what started the journey for me a long time ago, 40-something years ago. God, if you're really there, I do want to know you. That's okay to pray that kind of prayer. To say, yeah, I am messed up and you probably wouldn't want to listen to me but please do listen to me.

Please hear me. Please answer me. George Muller, quite a famous Christian from a few years ago now, wrote this. This is a helpful little paragraph. It is a common temptation of Satan to make us give up on the reading of the word and prayer when our enjoyment is gone.

As if it was no use to read the scriptures when we do not enjoy them. As if it was no use to pray when we have no spirit of prayer. The truth is that in order to enjoy the word, we ought to continue to read it.

And the way to obtain a spirit of prayer is to continue praying. The less we read the word of God, the less we desire to read it. The less we pray, the less we desire to pray. So that's the first thing that sort of struck me about their praying here.

[11 : 30] There's a devotion to it. They are committed to it. They go for it. So my encouragement to you and my encouragement to myself from Acts 1 is go for it. Pray. Johan told me you've had a week of prayer together, including a late night prayer time.

I've never thought of blessing the church at Howard for that. I think I'll have to try that. Don't just stop at the week of prayer. What you've begun well this year, keep going. Pray and pray and pray alone in groups.

And that's the second thing about the prayer here that I absolutely love, find so challenging. is the togetherness of the praying. Verse 14, all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer together with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus and his brothers.

That's a lot of people praying, a lot of people together in one accord. The point here is that 120 people are meeting in this upper room and what are they doing? They are praying together.

That's what they do. It's vitally important that we pray together as Christians. Not just getting together to pray, we need to do that, but also when we are together praying, we need to be together in our praying.

[12 : 37] Do you understand the distinction there? We need to have a togetherness in our praying. We need to be praying with one heart and one mind to use New Testament language. That's how we pray.

As God's people, we're together physically, but we're together spiritually, praying together. There are certain things that God lays on the heart of his people, certain priorities that we should pray for.

The New Testament is incredibly, it's essential, it's not just incredibly helpful, it's essential to know what we're to be praying for. We have all these examples right the way through the New Testament, particularly in Paul's letters, of what things to pray for, great things to pray for.

So that really helps us in our together praying to know what we're rightly, biblically, to be praying about. What would the disciples have been praying about here?

Well, it seems certain that part of their praying would have been for the Holy Spirit to come. It would have been saying, Lord God, please fulfill your promise, keep your word, send your spirit. We need him.

[13:41] Jesus had promised it would happen, so it's a true prayer, a good prayer to be praying together. And I guess they would have also been asking for the transforming power of the Spirit so that they could speak about Jesus without looking like an idiot.

I seem to remember hearing that somewhere. What a good thing to pray for, that the Spirit would come, would equip us and enable us to speak clearly and winsomely about the Lord Jesus so that people would hear and that they would believe and be saved.

And we're praying the same things, I'm sure you're praying the same things, praying that the Spirit would fill us as a church in Haworth, as I pray for you each week, pray for this church, pray that God would work and bless and encourage you and strengthen you for the task that he's given to you here.

I've said before what an encouragement it is to see people that I have no idea who you are. I love it. I come into the building and I think, who are you? That's amazing. God has brought different people in and we're praying, aren't we, that God will keep doing that, that he will bring people in.

It's lovely to see the room full. Wouldn't it be great if you were so full that you had to actually, what would you do? What would you do? Have two or three services, knock the building down, build a bigger one?

[14:55] That'd be great, wouldn't it? Lots of things for us to pray for. To pray devotedly, consistently, persistently and together.

On that note, let me read you a true story. This is about a guy called Wilbur Chapman. He was a Presbyterian minister from America and this is what he said or what was told about him.

Dr. Chapman often told of his experience when as a younger man he became pastor of a church in Philadelphia. After his first sermon, an old gentleman said to him, you're pretty young to be the pastor of this church, but you preach the gospel and I'm going to help you all I can.

Dr. Chapman thought, well, he's a crank. That's a bit blunt, isn't it? But then the man continued, I'm going to pray for you that you may have the Holy Spirit's power upon you.

Two others have covenanted to join with me in that prayer. Dr. Chapman said, I didn't feel so bad when I learned what he was going to do for me, what he was going to pray. The three became ten and then the ten became twenty, the twenty became fifty, the fifty became two hundred who met before every service.

[16:07] This is not at the services, this is before the services, who met before the services to pray that the Holy Spirit would come upon me, he said. I always went into the pulpit feeling that I would have the anointing in answer to the prayers of those faithful people who prayed for me.

It was such a joy to preach. The result was that we received one thousand, one hundred people into membership by conversion in the first three years. It was the fruit of the Holy Spirit to answer the prayer.

Wouldn't that be amazing if there were a thousand people in this building? I don't know what health and safety would say about that, but if you had a thousand people in here because you got on your knees every Sunday together and pleaded with God to fill the building with people being saved, that would be amazing, wouldn't it?

So that's the first thing. Together in their praying. Second thing here, what time do you normally finish? Thanks, brother. Together in prayer.

Secondly, together in their decisions that they made together. That's tautology. Together in their decisions. When the church made decisions, they did it together.

[17:19] That's how they did their decisions. You, I'm sure, might remember the situation here. Judas has betrayed the Lord Jesus. His greed and sin has consumed him and caused his downfall.

The money that he's gained for the betrayal has been used in the purchase of a field, a field in which he lost his own life, but now the betrayer is gone. The position needs to be fulfilled. That's the

situation.

How do you go about making such a big decision as that? I mean, the 12 of the 12. I mean, they're exceptional, unique in many ways. How do you replace one of the 12?

How would you make that decision? And in more general terms, how do you go about, as a church, making the decision to appoint somebody to leadership? That's not an insignificant decision.

It's probably one of the most significant decisions a church has to make. How do you go about replacing pastors, appointing elders, calling, not calling, recognizing the call of God on people's lives?

[18 : 28] How do you go about that? How do you do that? Well, I want to suggest you three things here that the church did that make an excellent pattern for decisions.

It's sort of an example of how it's worked out in the life of the early church. Number one, they apply scripture. Verse 20. As it is written in the book of Psalms, may his camp become desolate and let there be no one to dwell in it and let another take his office.

So this is Peter speaking to the gathered 120. He starts by reading the Bible. Now, it's not a random selection that he chooses here, just a couple of psalms that he really likes.

It's two messianic psalms. I would actually argue, just again as an aside, that the whole of the book of Psalms is messianic. I've changed my mind on that in the last year. I think that Psalms 1 to 150 actually are somewhat of a chronological charting of the life and ministry of the Messiah.

So, but these two in particular that are quoted here, Psalm 69 and Psalm 109 are about the Messiah. So they look forward a thousand years to the coming of the Messiah. That's why Peter's quoting them.

[19 : 43] They're not random. It's not just that he likes the words. He's not playing word association. This is about the Messiah. This stuff. It's about Jesus. About the suffering of the Christ at the hand of the wicked.

And then a psalm about the destiny of those who oppose God's servant. So they're on topic.

They're not random. The scripture's read and it's applied to the current situation that they face themselves in and that's the first step in their decision-making process.

Application of scripture. What does the Bible say about this? As I often say we're just not at liberty to make it up as we go along. So many Christians today this really breaks my heart.

So many Christian donations think that it's okay just to make it up as we go along. It's not. Of all people in the world we have committed ourselves as Christians to listening to the voice of God and doing what he says.

That's how we live. In church life the way that we live is we want to hear what God says above everything else. Scripture's read it's applied it's the first step and scripture's been given Paul tells us so that God's people can be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

[20 : 56] One encouragement we have the manual the principles that underlie the decisions we make so we read the manual and we wisely apply it.

Secondly they use sanctified common sense. This is often the only criteria that people use for making decisions in church.

It's usually preceded by a comment like oh this seems like the right thing for me to do or this seems like the right thing for us to do oh we've tried this before this seems like a good idea. It's sort of sanctified common sense. And it's necessary of course it's necessary to think things through to apply our minds that God has given us to the application of principles.

There is a trap of course though two traps I guess one that we don't actually think through the decisions we're making which needs to be done or the other that we actually think it's all about us and what we think.

The simple question was who's going to replace Judas? Well someone who was qualified for the job that he was going to take up someone who would be a witness by virtue of the fact that they were there. That is a sanctified common sense decision.

[22 : 12] If it's going to be an apostle what do the apostles do? The apostles speak of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. There you go. There's the qualifications. There's the sanctified common sense.

That's the people that we need. That's the person that we need. Some decisions in church life seem to me to be made because they're the nicest thing to do.

They're the kindest thing to do. But the fact remains that looking back I would say many of those decisions that I've been part of that have been the nicest thing to do have actually not been the best thing to do.

Niceness is not the only qualification for a decision. Thirdly, what do they do? They pray. Not much of a surprise to us, is it? I mean, that's the context of the passage. They pray. They prayed and they said, you, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen.

[23 : 16] So there's two candidates that both match the criteria here. They've looked at scripture. They've worked out what needs to be done. They've thought about who this applies to. They've got to Matthias and Justice and now they pray to God.

Back to the first point again, all decisions made in church in the sight of God and it's his will that we should be appealing to. What do you want, Lord, here? What is it that you are directing us to? We've looked at your word. We're trying to apply it as wisely and as well as we can but we need you to lead us. Please, help us. God is not a spectator on the sideline watching his church muddle through the centuries.

He is the Lord of the church and as such he directs our ways. Even more important, he knows all the circumstances. He looks in the heart. He knows the best person for the job and his will, his direction is essential in the life of his church.

He appoints, he calls. So, the word of God, sanctified common sense and prayer. These three form the basis for decisions. But I can't resist just to say something about casting lots.

[24 : 25] I'm just going to have to say something about that so forgive me for that. And they cast lots for them and the lot fell on Matthias and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

In the Bible, casting lots is a bit like throwing dice. That's sort of equivalent to that. You have stones that are thrown and if they land in a certain way it gives you your yes or your no.

We get something like that with the Urim and Thummim in the Old Testament part of the high priest's garment to stones that were used to discern God's will, the yes and the no stones.

Now, in one sense, to us, it seems like a very random thing to be doing. You know, throwing dice, throwing stones, trying to work out yeses and nos in such a random way. What an odd thing for the church to be doing.

But, you need to understand a little bit of context. In the Jewish way of thinking, in the mind of God's people in the Old Testament, God was in charge of every single detail of life, including the throwing of lots.

[25 : 38] Everything was in his control. Nothing was outside of his control. It reminds me of a famous phrase by Einstein about God not playing dice. Have you heard that phrase?

He didn't like the idea there was randomness in the universe mathematically. And so he said, apparently exclaimed, God doesn't play dice. Well, that's sort of a pretty Jewish, interestingly, pretty Jewish mindset.

Everything happens according to his plan and purpose, including the randomness of dice. So that raises a question. Do you think it's okay to flip a coin if you've got two elders to choose between? That's interesting, isn't it? What would you do? Is it... I guess most of us would probably go, that doesn't seem right. No, that seems odd to me.

You might immediately want to say no to that, but then why would you want to say no to that? Is it because God is not in control of the toss of the coin?

[26 : 48] Oh, hang on a minute. No, no, that seems a bit wrong. Surely he is in control, isn't he? Does casting lots, flipping coins, throwing dice seem too random?

The issue here is fairly clear. There's two candidates that are equal, it seems, and so the decision was, well, let's leave it in God's hands because he knows out of these two we can't actually make the decision, so let's cast the lot and we'll see what God says.

Not many today would cast lots for pastors. I've been in a few churches that I've looked after. I'm so grateful they didn't throw dice for me. Or am I? I think the reason why we don't flip a coin, and this is just my guess here, the reason why we don't flip a coin is because after the Spirit God moved his people in a different way.

Actually the Spirit came and they had the mind of Christ amongst them when they made decisions together. It was different. There have been one or two prayer meetings that I've been at.

Prayer meetings are such an interesting thing, aren't they? I don't know the situation here, so this is not in any way a criticism or an approval of anything. It's just a reflection on some of the things I've seen.

[28 : 04] In some of the churches I've been in, prayer meetings have been the best meeting in the church. Really the best meeting in the church. And then I've been in other churches where it's just been terrible.

It's just been terrible. There are occasions, I love the prayer meetings at Howarth, I absolutely love them, when we're all together. I love our home groups, I love it when we're praying in smaller groups, but I love it when we're all together and we're all hearing each other's prayers.

And there are moments in some of those prayer meetings when God comes near and everybody's praying the same thing. Not all at once, it's under control, it's, you know, we pray one after each other, one after another, but everybody's praying about the same thing.

And it's not weird, it's not like somebody's, you know, a bit deaf and they haven't heard what the person said before. It really feels like the spirit comes down and the church together prays for something.

There is a common mind. The spirit comes and we pray and we pray and we really pray. It doesn't happen every week. You know, some weeks it's hard and it feels dry.

[29 : 10] But those times when he comes down, it feels amazing. Amazing. Let me just get back to the main point, though here, which is that all of these things are done together.

In those days, Peter stood up among the brothers. The scriptures were read publicly so that they could all hear and be involved.

And then verse 23, they put forward to Joseph and Barsabbas. and then they applied common sense and prayed and they prayed.

So like prayer, the decisions were taken together. The church acted as a body. So I pray that that's your experience here. That'll be your experience on Wednesday night. It's a privilege to be a church member.

There are many ways of running churches, but in most of the churches I've pastored, that's how it's done. It's a membership. It's a people who have committed themselves in a covenant to work together, to love each other.

[30 : 12] And so members meetings, you know, aside from my flippant comment at the beginning, a members meeting is an act of worship. That's what my previous, my predecessor at Howarth taught me, Mick.

He said, you know, you should encourage people to see this as an act of worship because we're in God's presence together. We're seeking his will and we're honoring him by meeting together. It's a good way to think about members meetings, isn't it?

It's not an opportunity to just speak your mind, get it off your chest. That's not what it's about. We're together in God's presence trying to make decisions. For his glory, for his kingdom.

So my prayer for you for Wednesday is it's going to be the best members meeting you've ever had. God will be really here and that you'll hear him together as each of you speak and pray and talk and that you'll know his mind.

Now, last thing. We're nearly finished. Over the last few weeks, Philippians, the letter Philippians has been in my mind a lot for lots of reasons.

[31 : 07] Partly to do with some of the challenges that we face, partly to do with some of the blessings that we've had. So I thought this would be a good thing to read just to finish with. Philippians, as a letter, has a lot about togetherness, about doing stuff together.

It's one of the great themes of this letter of joy about doing things together and not arguing. That's what the letter's about, really. Here it is. If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

And in Jesus' name, we pray that that will be our experience. Amen. Amen.