

○ Lord, we beseech you mercifully to hear the prayers
of your people who call upon you;
and grant that they may both perceive and know
what things they ought to do,
and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil them;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

All

Amen.

Proverbs 31.10-31

- ¹⁰A capable wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.
¹¹The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
¹²She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.
¹³She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.
¹⁴She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.
¹⁵She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls.
¹⁶She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
¹⁷She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong.
¹⁸She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.
¹⁹She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.

- ²⁰She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.
²¹She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.
²²She makes herself coverings;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
²³Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.
²⁴She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes.
²⁵Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.
²⁶She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
²⁷She looks well to the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
²⁸Her children rise up and call her happy;
her husband too, and he praises her:
²⁹'Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.'
³⁰Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
³¹Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the city gates.

James 3.13-4.3,7-8a

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of

mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

¹Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ²You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Mark 9.30-37

After leaving the mountain ³⁰Jesus and his disciples went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

Sermon preached at Old Alresford & Bighton: Trinity 16 2021

Mark 9: ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'

I have been wondering about the future role of the church – things have changed so much since I first became part of church life, consciously, back in 1952. Throughout history the church has, in the words of one historian, “re-invented” itself. What will it look like in future?

*The world needs a church that is prophetic – needs, not wants. By prophetic I mean, not a blaring of horns and loud-speakers, but a community that challenges the world about it. It will challenge through a number of approaches. The church community may offer an acted out parable, as Jesus so often did. We did this in Gateshead back in about 1970: we set up a booth in the High Street saying “I want to shake your hand” and people fled across 3 lines of fast moving traffic rather than come near – very revealing. It might equally be through service: a streetkitchen or streetpastors. A prophetic role is about revealing truth.

*I believe that a prophetic role is desperately needed in view of climate change. This week there have been a large number of vapour trails back in the sky. Already people are forgetting Covid, and they are forgetting climate change – who wants to remember bad news? COP 26 is only weeks away. But can it lead anywhere?

*There are those who want their civil liberties even when they threaten the lives of others. There are nations who are a major source of carbon pollution who will do their own thing because they have a government that is autocratic. Can we really do anything in the face of this? Perhaps before long we will have a new church rota – for those who are going to address the United Nations on our behalf?

I have just spent six months working with a study group and grappling with climate change. It has all sorts of angles. So the first thing for all of us is this: we must know what people are talking about when they mention climate change. We need to know the sources of pollution, any possible remedies and the consequences of losing this battle.

*Secondly, we need to know why people are doing the things that lead to climate change. We need to tackle the root cause. This is a spiritual or moral matter, which is why it is so important that the church takes this to its heart. It is primarily greed that drives the processes that lead to the sort of carbon pollution that is killing our world. And the sad thing is that greed is not satisfied at all by the activities in which we indulge.

*Then, we must encourage those who respond. This is a long process and much of the time it is lonely. Those who decide to change their lifestyle, giving up their cars for instance, are not going to find that easy. So we must offer help and encouragement. It is not easy to sustain change over a long time. One of the stalls at Alresford Market clearly regard Liz and I as cranks because we decline a plastic bag with every purchase. "Oh, you are the people who don't like plastic bags". Actually, some of my best friends are plastic bags – its just that they are bad for the planet!

*And, as a Christian community, we must set an imaginative example. We must find new ways to do things, to save energy or pollution by sharing more. We need to be savvy in the field of fruit and veg production. Every church should have solar panels because not only do their rooves face in the right direction, but many would be hidden altogether. We must set an imaginative example.

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So, where is church? One of the reasons that younger people do not come to church today is that they don't want to belong to organisations – except Premier league football clubs. So, as we think about these things we have to remember that we are not an organisation – we are an organism. Much of the unhappiness in the Diocese in the last few years is down to confusion in that area. I will return to this.

*Secondly, we need to remember the Church of England tagline "A Christian presence in every community". We potentially have an amazing network of communities with whom we can correspond. In many ways we are another expression of this village community as much as the annual Fete or the village school. There is plenty of encouraging material out there on how to be the local church.

*Then, it is true, we are also members of a national community. The exact nature of the church varies within the UK countries because denominations vary. But we are part of a church which should be able to see a different picture, a national picture. A Scotsman was saying on tv the other day "I think that independence would be good for Scotland". We need to be able to stand up as members of a national church and say "that any fragmentation at this time is not good for anyone". Only by standing together can we hope to defeat Covid or really tackle climate change.

*It is also true, of course, that the Church of England is part of a world-wide church. On our last visit to St Barnabas church in Limassol in Cyprus, we were in a congregation that had members from up to 14 different nations. Being a port city the church there is also firmly linked into the world of international shipping and the needs of sailors who only get ashore rarely and need help to keep in touch with their families. The church is a community that has resources and facilities.

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And now, if I can purloin the title of a book by Sam Wells, Vicar of St Martin's-in-the-fields, "And now, how shall we live?" I want to return to the picture I mentioned earlier when I said that the church is not an organisation but an organism. It has life, room for local variations, parts of it can move at different speeds, it is relational.

*I want to take St Paul's model of "The Body of Christ" as he explains it in Romans Chapter 12. I hear that passage most commonly read at Confirmation services. It is certainly true that St Paul draws the attention of the local church to this model. But I believe that, as God's way of living the church, there is room for this model in our everyday world as well. The Body of Christ allows us to bring people together, but to honour the variations between us. This is a way of making the best of individuals while still completing a corporate life.

*So St Paul sees that every individual has God-given gifts. Each of those gifts is needed if the whole enterprise is to succeed. So, in the first instance, we have to discover what gift each person has. We have to notice or discern them. How often do we reflect on the gifts that the other people in this place have? In discerning the gifts of people we can ask appropriate action of them and value them more. Everyone will have a part if their gifts are properly recognised.

*But that could lead to a shambles in which every single person was struggling to be heard. It does not because this whole operation is, in fact, the Body of Christ. We are about God's work, in God's way and that is his pleasure. The balance of diversity (which is all about us and our gifts) and community (which is about God and the Holy Spirit) is found and can be held on this basis.

Martyn Percy, Dean of Christchurch Oxford, has recently written a book called "The humble church". If the church is to have a future, and to have a prophetic future at that, it has to be noted for its humility, for its willingness to serve rather than seek superiority, for its washing the feet of the nation rather than asking for money. This is why it must not continue to be in broadcast mode. The church is most noticed when it is there to serve: as in the great depression of the 1930s in the North east when it stood alongside out of work miners or shipyard workers. Even 30 years later that was not forgotten.

*Secondly, as "those who serve" Christians should not be threatening figures. We are not there to shout "from afar" but to be alongside those who struggle and those who succeed. We do not speak for ourselves – we speak for the future of our world and we seek to serve all our fellow creatures. We can point to the urgency but we cannot commandeer the project nor can we get it done by bullying.

*People expect Christians to be judgemental. This is not about judgement so much as about salvation – literally saving the world. It will require judgements to be made – what is wrong, how can it be put right and so on. But blame judgements are probably not going to help. We need to focus on the future and not on the past. That is an area where we need to encourage the right focus.

*This whole exercise of confronting climate change is going to take many of us into unknown territory, with lobbying, writing to our MP and so on. Would we not be wiser to leave it to the people who are good at that sort of thing? Ultimately, as children of the God of creation, we have a particular responsibility to fight for the future of the whole of creation. Creation was given to us to caretake, so Genesis tells us. We have failed in that, but it is not yet too late to redeem the situation.