

5th July 2020 Philippians 2: 3-11, Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

Once a year there is an event in Westminster Hall in the Palace of Westminster. It's called the National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast. Usually about 700 folk are squeezed into the Hall. They are welcomed by the Speaker of the House of Commons and the prayers, readings and sometimes the music is offered by Members of Parliament. The convener of the meeting invites a guest speaker and members of the public can attend if their MP is present at the meeting.

I became aware of it as our local MP Tim Farron has chaired it and this year – due to the Pandemic – it was possible for many more people to join in by viewing it on YouTube. It is reckoned that some 3,200 people watched as it was first screened and can be viewed via the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJZGdTxD9Ko>

The terrific thing about it is that people in Parliament come together, across parties, to pray together for our Nations. To put God in the centre of power in our country. It includes members of the devolved Parliaments and the Assembly of Northern Ireland. MPs meet together when Parliament is in session in the sister organization 'Christians in Parliament' to pray and support each other.

This year the Rt. Rev. Graham Tomlin gave the address. He had a great message based on our Philippians reading for this week. He spoke about the way that when we came into lockdown there had to be a big shift in the way that we thought.

Where in the past, as members of a liberal democracy, we valued the rights of the individual to live our lives in freedom - as long as they did not infringe the freedom of others – things had had to change. Although our freedom was very precious to us it had had to be sacrificed.

As Lockdown came there was a need to curtail our personal freedom to care for our neighbours and to protect the most vulnerable. That the attention of many was to concentrate on the needs of others did not come naturally but that was what we did. He made special reference to the thousands of people who volunteered to help in their local community.

Bishop Graham also drew our attention to how the great outpouring of generosity was mirrored by the response of so many after the terrible fire at Grenfell Towers in 2017. The tower is a prominent land mark in his area of Kensington.

Now as lockdown is easing there is a return to more individual freedom. However he urges us to not go back completely to the pre-Covid days. He suggests that there needs to be a rebalancing of the scales between individual freedoms and the Common Good.

He used the Parish of Hounslow and the wonderful way that, like the Ambleside Parish Centre, when the lockdown came, because it was already a trusted partner, other organisations were happy to support the work that was quickly expanded to address the local needs.

However Bishop Graham was keen to make it clear that the motivation behind what Christians do is more than the general desire to do good, to care for those around... Specifically, it is deeply rooted in the desire to be like Jesus.

To emulate he,

'who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God

something to be grasped,

but made himself nothing,

taking on the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.’

(Philippians 2: 6-7)

Our God is not a God who stays in heaven and waits for us to serve him. Instead he is one who comes to earth to serve us. That our motivation is that we are followers of this Jesus Christ.

I have spent some time reflecting on this message. It does seem that it is crucial to the next step along this long journey.

That we, like Jesus, curb our freedoms, in order that the other can thrive. Whether they be those who need PPE or those whose lives and homes are endangered by the global rise in temperature.

Is it that we have more to learn from this pandemic?

If, as some have suggested, we face three crises in this time

The Crisis of **coronavirus**

The Crisis of **inequality,**

The Crisis of **Climate change**

Then coming out of lockdown is only the start.

These other challenges must be faced simultaneously. We can't ignore them and we can't leave it to others to do the work for us; we each have our part to play.

It is with a chill in my heart that we reflect that this week the lockdown has had to be tightened in Leicester. We don't have detailed reasons for the rise in the 'R' rate but it's not just Leicester's problem – we have come to **see it is now a problem for us all**. If there is one thing we now know it is 'no man is an island' and worldwide problems need worldwide solutions. Coronavirus has acted like a **litmus paper** showing the **inequalities** in our world.

Changing our culturally arrogant attitudes, making opportunities more available to everybody, being aware of our prejudices against people who are different whether that is skin colour, disability, gender or culture – it is something **we all** have to contribute toward. We have had our **freedoms** but we now see it was a price to others; now we have to **face up to our responsibilities**.

We see this in that as the pandemic has got easier in some parts of UK corona is running rife in the most **disadvantaged places** across the globe. The very people who are most vulnerable to Climate Change. Again – we have our freedoms but with it comes the responsibility.

The best thing ever though is that **there are personal responsibilities** and there is also a **power** that we can harness that **makes the difference**.

Those at the prayer breakfast were doing it.

The power of prayer. When we add our prayers to the power of other praying Christians then we see change. **When we use our freedom to pray it matters.** This is a set of crises that we face together alongside our God. It is a partnership. He is delighted when his people pray. In Parliament, in our homes, on zoom and one day, back in church buildings.

Let us pray....