

Last week we had our Harvest Services and if you get out into the countryside you will know that the ground in many places has been ploughed ready for crops to grow and the harvest to happen for next year. So perhaps now is a fitting time to think about sharing our faith in agricultural terms. So this week in our series on prayer we look at prayer and the ploughing of mission as we think about how God opens up the ground of people's hearts in response to our prayer. Through this I hope we will be reminded of the importance of prayer in the work of evangelism.

The agricultural metaphor is one that comes from Scripture. In that second passage we had read from Romans 1.13 we read "I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you." However, I think the metaphor begins with Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel as he was preaching the gospel in many villages he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matt 9:37-38).

But it is another part of his teaching I want to start with and that is the parable of the sower. There we read of the sower sowing the seed and how some fell on the path where it couldn't get into the soil. Other seed fell amongst rock where there was insufficient soil for it to take root properly. Other fell on ground that had not been properly prepared and so it got choked by the weeds that grew up with it. But some fell on the good soil, that is presumably on soil that had been prepared. It had been ploughed and opened up to receive the seed, which is the word of God. I want to suggest this morning that it is prayer which is the plough in terms of opening up the hearts of men and women to receive the word of God and bring salvation.

I think we see the principle there in Jesus not just in these words but also in his action. In the first of this series I pointed us to Mark 1:35 where we read that, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed". While praying the disciples came to saying people were looking for him. Jesus reply was "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." (Mark 1:39) Jesus presumably was praying that morning in preparation to preach the gospel. However, today I want to focus on Paul's example in this and these verses in Romans 1.8-17.

1. Moving forward v11-13

The reason Paul wrote this letter was that he felt his work in the regions around Asia was over, whether because he had visited the major towns or because Jewish opposition was forcing him on is hard to say. Now as he wrote he was about to go to Jerusalem with some aid for the poor Christians there from the churches of Greece and then he hoped to head to Spain but on the way he wanted to stop off in Rome. So Paul wrote to a church he had never visited introducing himself and making his Gospel clear in order to gain support from the Christians there. He hoped that these words might

open a door there for him to preach the gospel to the gentiles in Rome. This letter he hoped would provide access.

I remember in 1984 going to Ipswich to take photos of the Billy Graham rally. I had been told I would be let in with the press but as I went I was a bit apprehensive. Then as I arrived at the ground I saw a man I knew who was head of the Billy Graham organisation in this country and I had a word with him and he gave me a special pass. In one sense Paul's letter was like seeking a special pass.

However Paul did not just send a letter. As we see here he was in prayer for the Christians in Rome and in that we see the first point about prayer and ploughing in that in praying for mission we should

2. Pray for the church v8-10

Paul was praying for these Christians even though he didn't know them. I am sure that Nick Tucker from Oak Hill who will lead the Discover weekend is praying for us but we should also be praying for each other. Now Paul doesn't say what he is praying for. Clearly he didn't know the Christians in Rome. Someone did put a note in the box at the back asking how we can pray for people we don't know. Perhaps we can learn from Paul and from his prayer say for the church in Ephesus. He knew some but not all the Christians there and his prayer for them was that through God's wisdom and revelation they might know God better.

I think that is a good prayer that we can pray for other people be they Christians or not that God would help them to know him better.

Now in the analogy of ploughing you might say this doesn't sound like ploughing at all but sharpening the plough. Prayer being used to prepare us so that we might pray that others might come to a knowledge of God's love. Call it what you will I think it is an important point. We should be in prayer for each other that our faith might be deepened. Because when we know God better I think we share God's mind and heart.

As we were seeing right back in January in our series 'Why share the gospel' that God's heart is for those who are lost, "This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." (1 Tim 2:3-4)

Part of our praying for each other should be that we will have a heart like God's that is concerned for the lost and another part of our prayer for each other is that we should have boldness to tell our story to share our faith. Let's be praying for each other that we will know God better and this will lead to a heart for lost people and a willingness to tell our story. But don't forget that little word at the end of v9 CONSTANTLY.

I groan.... how can I pray constantly? But don't let the word be a huge burden to us instead let it encourage us to take seriously the idea of praying regularly for the members of the church. You might like to get a copy of the church directory and split it up and pray for a few people each day. Prayer and the ploughing of mission must have in it prayer for the church.

3. Pray for the Evangelist

While he doesn't mention it here prayer and the ploughing of mission means we should also pray for the evangelist that is for Nick Tucker and the team he will bring with him from Oak Hill.

Paul never saw prayer as one way. So at the end of the letter in Romans 15.30, "I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me."

Paul was a man who, having been called and set apart by God for the work of the gospel, was a willing servant of the gospel, v9 he served God with his whole heart.

I am sure we have all been in a restaurant or cafe where the person serving us is having a bad day and is very grumpy. They clearly don't want to serve you. Well not so with Paul. Despite all the troubles and pains Paul was a wholehearted and willing servant of the gospel. But if he was to stay that way then the prayers of others were important. He referred to the Philippian Christians as 'partners in the gospel' and much of that partnership was their prayer. When Nick Tucker comes next year he will come part as the sower and part, we trust under God, as the harvester. Now I trust that over those days we will see some who receive the seed, that is who hear the word of God, for the first time. But they will surely only be receptive to the seed that Nick will sow if we have been ploughing through prayer. Also at that time I trust we shall see some come to faith but that will only happen if we have been ploughing through prayer, planting the seed as we share our story and watering the seed with our prayer and love. And Nick himself needs our prayers that he will be kept close to God, that he will be filled with the spirit and that God will open the doors of opportunity for him to preach. What I am saying is that no matter how gifted the evangelist he needs the support of prayer for himself for his own spiritual state and for the ground to be prepared.

4. Prayer for people v14-15

In vs 14-15 we see the depth of Paul's passion for the gospel and for people.

Remembering that his aim was to go onto Spain you might imagine that he would see Rome as something of a stopover. Time to put up his feet, meet up with some friends, have a bit of a holiday see the sights, a trip to the Coliseum for the greyhound racing or to St Peter's square to see the Pope. But for Paul there are no holidays from the gospel. His passion is there and, although it is not stated, his prayer as well. Praying especially for the gentiles in Rome that he might share the gospel with them, v13. His mission began many months before he got to Rome. And it began with his prayers. The spread of the gospel has to begin with prayer for people. For people we know well and for those we have never met. Now we will I hope see more of this over the next couple of weeks as we look at praying for others and prayer and the gospel but let me encourage you to
a. be praying for the people of Chineham and b. be praying for our person of peace, the person or persons we would like to see come to faith.

Whether we know people by name or not we have both the privilege and the opportunity of bringing them to God in prayer. We can pray that God will open them to hear and receive the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. In other words through our prayers we can open up the ground of their heart to receive the seed of God's word. We know that ploughing is vital work and so is prayer as preparation for mission.

The greatest thing that has happened to me in my whole life barring nothing is to come to faith in Christ Jesus. And I sincerely want my family and friends to know what God can do for them. They are my family my friends and God has got such good things for them and I want them to know. Praying for people was always a vital part of the mission of Paul and it continues to be vital in sharing the mission of Jesus Christ.

Paul is setting out on a new mission to Rome and he prays for the church, asks prayer for himself and prays for the people who don't know Christ. That is our task as through prayer we plough the ground ready for the seed of the gospel.

Towards the bottom of our garden we have a kind of hedge of trees and just beyond that a patch of ground that is usually a tangle of grass and weeds. A couple of years ago I decided to do something with it. I got out my spade and began to dig it over. I dug quite a bit of it but not all because I grew weary. Afterwards I ached for days. Then I thought I would plant something and so I put some potatoes in. I only put them in part of the ground I had dug. Then I waited. I watched. I watered. Eventually the potatoes began to shoot up at least some of them did but one or two didn't.

Meanwhile the part of the ground where I hadn't put potatoes began to get weedy and grassy again and the part I hadn't dug remained as it always had been. I hope you can see the parallel between that and what I have been saying. Through our prayers for people we open up the ground into which we and others can plant the seed. Then we continue praying that the seed might grow. Some will some won't the parable of the sower shows that. Some people we have to keep praying and praying for until the right time to sow comes and some people we may never even get round to praying for because there is a limit to our time and energy. Let's take seriously prayer as the ploughing of mission for unless we do the ploughing we can't expect the seed to have the opportunity to take root and then we can't expect the harvest.