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The Laws of Spiritual Motion: Part 5

‘Our Father’ – ‘Our’ being plural and ‘Father’ being singular.

Let’s get this absolutely clear, the Lord’s Prayer is not about ‘me’ and ‘my needs’ but is about ‘us’ and ‘our needs’, and that matters.

It is our collective prayer, the one given to us by Jesus in answer to the disciples’ request, ‘Lord, teach us how to pray’. Those words teach us to look beyond ourselves and consider how we put into practice the two Great Commandments, to love God and to love our neighbour as we ourselves would like to be loved. It also covers the basics of life, acknowledging the authority and power of God, the need for Godly order in the world, food (spiritual and temporal), forgiveness, and the constant need to be delivered from the power of the evil and temptation which would take us from God.

It also should be clear that the words of the Lord’s Prayer direct us to God the Father, not to Jesus Himself. Whilst He can legitimately claim oneness with God the Father, He chooses not to. Maybe something we should remember when we pray – we ask in Jesus name but our prayer should always be directed to God the Father.

The Lord's Prayer reminds us that we are creatures of a much bigger and greater community than we could ever imagine, but also that we each have a unique and special part to play, one without which the whole would suffer.

All well in practice but we have a tendency to think of ourselves far more readily than we should, and put our own perceived needs above the needs of others. So what happens in the Lord's Prayer when we say 'us' and 'our' just as we are taught to say but our hearts are really thinking 'me' and 'my'?

So 'Our Father' becomes 'My Father'. Is that so bad?

'My Father' claims a singular connection rather than a communal one. So how might this translate into action and belief?

We all love to think we (as in 'me, myself') know God so well and far better than anyone else. We (I) know exactly what He means when He says something in Holy Scripture, that no one else has that closeness or experience of God that we (I) have. How could anyone else experience and know God the way we (I) do?

So, 'I' will always be 'right' when it comes to any discussion about God, and at best you will always be 'nearly right' even if you fully agree with me....

And if you don't, you will always be a Godless heretic planted by the Devil to bring deceit and disruption to the Godly and faithful – in fact how could you even claim to be 'a Christian' at all? Excommunicate, excommunicate!

We may find this kind of behaviour quite laughable because we can see the folly of such misguided thinking, but it becomes much more serious when Christian churches and organizations put this principle into practice with absolute belief in their actions. It is suddenly all about sole ownership of God and being the sole and only spokesperson God speaks through. Sometimes even God can't get a word in edgeways or make Himself heard....

Churches and Christian communities are not above thinking that only they know God and what He wants and that they alone speak for Him. That implies everyone else is just plain wrong, not good enough, not up to standard, their Holy Orders are flawed, etc., you name it as any excuse will do.

You might take a little time to consider how many churches or Christian organizations play word games. Take the claim to be 'first amongst equals' for example - it is an indicator of unrequited spiritual pride and judgemental superiority clearly implied and hidden behind pseudo humility.

'First and definitely superior' is nearer the truth. Words can be very tricky.

I am reminded of George Orwell's book, 'Animal Farm', and 'all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.' The outcome of this story is something the church might learn from. This kind of stuff ends in tears.

The same is true of those supposedly Christian organizations who promote supposed 'Christian unity'. The elitist truth behind their claim is plain to see when you look at the list of Christian organizations and smaller churches they exclude.

So where does Christian Unity start? It starts with the recognition that we are all loved equally by God and there are no favourites, no special cases, and we are all in it together. No 'me' or 'I', just 'us'.

Christian Unity is based on the simple principle that there is only one Church in the end and it has Christ at its head, no one else.

Christian unity is built on the rationale that we all have something particular and unique to give to the whole Christian community it needs and without which the whole body is impoverished and stunted. We all have our place and we are all needed, and we all come under the same rules without exception.

This means there is no room for exclusivity or prejudice of any kind.

In the end it comes down to a simple fact:- to deny any Christian their ministry is in effect to deny Christ Himself.

The massive irony is that if Jesus wanted to minister in any of today's churches he would most likely be told that He wasn't 'qualified' and be refused, but he could, if he was lucky and his face fit, do a three year training course providing he'd not been in trouble with the law and providing he gave up any involvement with all other churches and organizations. Commitment needed to be evidenced, but only in one direction. No promises.

On that kind of basis alone it is hardly surprising that many churches can't find people willing or committed enough to fill vacant roles, and as a direct consequence the pews they hoped would fill are instead emptying.

Fortunately, the strength and durability of the Christian faith doesn't depend solely on 'church' or church attendance but on a sound relationship with God.

So let's see this in context.

'Church' is a couple of hours a week and you unquestioningly play by 'the club rules' whilst you are 'on site'. It is where the 'club rules' are reinforced, where the familiar rituals are played out and observed reinforcing the authority of its leaders, and where there hopefully may be usefully beneficial elements of teaching, prayer and worship, and even a sharing of the sacraments.

It will often be a largely 'passive' involvement on your part, and apart from attending the church building ('the club house') and adding to the collection plate, there will probably not be many more demands made upon you. It is where you find protective familiarity and where you feel both comfortable and safe providing you don't rock the boat or question its authority.

You might also drop lucky as one of the better parts of attending 'church' is fellowship, meeting other Christians and being able to share faith matters.

So outside of the confines of 'church', what of the rest of the week?

This is the time when one's Christian faith is put to work and tested. This is reality and you have to stand up on your own two feet.

This is putting Christian teaching into practice by reaching out to others and responding to their needs. It will test your patience and your love.

This where the Christian faith is most active and dynamic, where it gives testimony to the power and love of God, and is most demanding.

It's where you put time, love and effort, onto God's collection plate each and every day. This is real ministry. Unlike being 'in church', there is no safety net, it's not predictable and there are no set times or hours. You may even have to deal with people you don't know and you may not be prepared with what you have to face.

However we are called to minister to others, we should remain confident we can be faithful to God and do His work. We have been chosen by Him and we are not unprepared in reality. He has given us a unique set of gifts, talents and skills, in preparation, and He has authorized us to be His hands, eyes, mouth, beating heart, in this situation.

He, God, is our authority, not 'the church' although they may try to claim jurisdiction.

Our response in ministering is not in 'the church's name' but in God's Name, and it open to all of God's creation, not just the members of 'the church' we attend.

Since our ministerial and spiritual gifts, talents and skills come from God and we are the good stewards of those, then we can apply them without asking human permissions. Those gifts of forgiveness and compassionate healing are held in stewardship for all of God's children and are given to build up the Christian Community.

And they are just small part of the greater Gospel, not the rather bland 'Jesus died for us that we might live' one but the rather more blunt God's love for us is so strong that He will do just about anything to try to stop us committing eternal spiritual suicide by falling for the temporal deceptions of unprecedented evil. That includes taking on human form and being subject to the worst excesses of unspeakable suffering that one human can inflict on another, and literally rise above it. Even death could not defeat Him.

That is leadership from the front big time.

God can say 'Been there. Suffered it. Survived it. Defeated it. Now I have shown you the way, you can do it too. And I am right behind you, at your side, and have shown you the way. Make any mistake, ask and be forgiven, slate wiped clean. Your choice, it's up to you, but think hard about the consequences.'

It's not a game. It's for real. It is for eternity. God will respect your choice but there may not be a way back if you make the wrong decision.

So coming back to 'church', stop playing games and get serious about the ministry God has given you the stewardship of. There are souls at stake and your politicking counts for nothing.

Coming back to us as individuals, the world is bigger than 'me' and 'my needs'. It's all about 'us' and always has been. We live in a world that teaches us I can be anything I want, do anything I want and the world starts with me – it's a lie.

The rules or principles, if you want to call them that, are simple.

1. Love God as best as you can, however you can, whenever you can. Do it whole heartedly and with commitment. God has your best interests at heart and does what He promises.

2. Love your neighbour in the same way you would like to be loved. Your neighbour is the person who most needs your help. Model how God treats you, and be God's hands, ears, words, heart, wisdom, to anyone who needs you.

3. Live your faith out, however small you feel it might be, 24/7.

4. And when it comes to ministry, don't take 'no' for an answer. If you are called of God then that is all the authority you need.

5. 'Church' can be beneficial but it is subject to the same authority as you yourself are subject to. When in doubt, follow God, not the 'church', for it is God that will ultimately judge us, not 'the church'.

6. Beware of those who tell God what He is thinking.

The Laws of Spiritual Motion: Part 6

God is not a democracy

God is not a democracy, nor is the faith we profess a democratic one.

God has set us parameters of belief which are the foundation of our daily faith and these are fixed as non-debatable. The rules still stand whatever we or society thinks. They are there for good reason and purpose.

The fact that society may have different thoughts about the exercise and interpretation of (for example) sexuality, marriage, gender and same sex relationships, the focus on self and 'my rights', victim and woke/cancel culture, (and other matters that divide society) does not mean that these concerns are a matter of popular consensus when it comes to implementing God's Will.

We should remember that He is the ultimate creative power in all things infinite and eternal, even if we address Him as 'Father'. God is not someone who is going to be ignored without consequence.

We are called to serve God, not to tell Him how to do his job or tell Him he has got things wrong or has been outvoted. It doesn't work like that.

It is primarily a matter of love and trust (faith) that drives our obedience, not fear of the consequences or a mindless sense of duty. His law, guidance as wisdom are there for a reason and can be trusted, even if we do not understand why these things are in place. They may test our faith, belief and patience, but we tell God He has 'got it wrong' at our peril.

It is also our adherence to the Word of God that defines who we say we are. That will always make our faith unpopular because it challenges many of the moral and social behaviours of society.

We can either stand firm with God or 'go with the flow', but at what point do we have to admit to ourselves and the greater community that we have watered down the Word of God so much that we can no longer truly call ourselves 'Christian'? Not so much a question of how high we nail our flag to the mast but whether we have the right to fly the flag at all.....

In the end, we should remember that society offers us nothing beyond death. God on the other hand does. We are in God's hands alone and whilst His great love is extended towards us, we stand or fall by our own choices.

The Laws of Spiritual Motion: Part 7

Resilient, unselfish and uncompromising love.

Imagine you are a parent and looking into the eyes of your small child, the one who has just asked you one of the world's most difficult questions to answer, 'What is love?' This might be the kind of answer you give. It doesn't include anything to do with 'being in love' which is a very different thing altogether.

Love has all the time in the world to give to someone and nothing is too difficult to ask it. There is no bad time to ask and nothing is more important or special than that moment. It will put whatever it is doing down, even if it is busy, and will make time. It never complains or grumbles.

Love is also very kind and always thinks and wants the very best for whoever it is talking to or spending time with. It likes to be supportive and encouraging.

It is not afraid of telling the truth as it is but it is always thoughtful and considerate in the way it puts things. It never tells lies. It makes time to listen and it will do its very best to make people feel important and cared for.

Love does not get upset when other people have good things that it doesn't have. Instead it is always happy that other people have good things that happen to them and never gets jealous or says unkind things. It never seeks to hurt people, takes advantage of them, make them feel bad or hold grudges.

Love never brags about what it has or what it can do, or makes people feel as if they aren't good enough or that they don't deserve the good things they may be fortunate enough to enjoy or have.

Neither will love speak or behave in such a way as to make someone feel hurt or embarrassed in front of others.

Love doesn't think about itself but thinks about others instead. It always wants what is good for people and is very generous and very forgiving.

Love doesn't get cross when it is interrupted or disturbed when it is busy and it understands that people do make mistakes and cause problems.

It doesn't hold onto hurts or constantly brings them up but is instead lets them go rather than let them get in the way of rebuilding friendships/relationships. It builds up relationships and friendships instead of pushing people away. It doesn't use or abuse them either, or expect reward or pay-back of any kind.

Neither does it take advantage of people or make them do things they know are wrong

Love is never happy when bad things happen to people even if people say or think that they deserve these things to happen to them. Instead it is happy when good things happen to people and is not afraid to show this. Love thinks of others more than it does of itself and always puts others first, itself second.

The thing about love is it always protects other people, and always trusts in its ability to get through life's disappointments when people let it down.

Love always hopes for the very best and just never gives up on people no matter how hard it is or how upset it may feel inside. It is very forgiving. It sets those hurts and disappointments aside and looks to making those friendships and relationships stronger rather than finding excuses for ending them.

Genuine and real love takes all of life's knocks and disappointments and somehow manages to keep on going. It is reliable and trustworthy.

Nothing will keep it from loving other people no matter what they do or what happens to them.

This is the basis of God's love for us and should be our example in our dealings with others and our relationships, especially with God Himself. This kind of love is above the law and in it there is no evil, selfishness or malice.

+ Ian

Based on 1 Corinthians, verses 4 – 8 NIV

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

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The General Synod Church of England: an explanation.

Fr Ed Elsey, OSJ

The General Synod comprises **clergy and lay delegates, elected at diocesan 'synods' throughout Britain**, divided into three orders: the Order of Laity, the Order of Clergy and the Order of Bishops.

The General Synod is the CofE's 'tripartite elected governing body'. Its members of lay Anglicans, clergy and bishops meet two or three times a year to try to decide current doctrine and policy for the Church and any necessary 'national changes' which might be necessary or desirable. . In February, the forthcoming Synod promises to be as challenging, if not more so, than previous assemblies.

Derived from the Greek '*synodos*' [assembly], it is a council of church leaders. Most denominations hold them.

For the RC they are *occasional* councils of bishops who gather to discuss specific issues, but in the Church of England they are formal governing institutions which meet every year.

At a lower level, deanery synods, with limited powers, control small church areas with elected representatives from each parish church. Diocesan ones help to govern each of the 42 dioceses.

The General Synod is the most senior body, representing the entire CofE, with a week's session in February, another in July and In some years a third session in November.

Formerly under national government, in 1919 self-government was granted to the church to control its own affairs/Measures, but still to be approved by Parliament.

Further reform in 1970 incorporated powers previously held by the Convocations of Canterbury and York.

The synod comprises three 'Houses' - a total of 483 members.

The House of Bishops - the 42 diocesan and suffragan bishops - meets separately throughout the year to discuss strategy and high-level national issues facing the Church.

The House of Clergy, 200 mostly ordinary parish priests elected from each diocese, with a few cathedral deans, prison or army chaplains, and monks or nuns.

The House of Laity, roughly 200-strong, made up of lay delegates from each diocese, with a sprinkling of ex officio members from CofE bureaucracy and legal establishment. Allegations of 'nepotism' and privilege often hover in this department.

There are a small number of non-voting members who come to observe each synod, with representatives from other Christian denominations.

Fresh elections are held every five years: anyone on an electoral roll of a parish church can vote for the lay and clerical representatives. Elections were due in 2020 but had to be postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The synod is a law-making body which initiates, scrutinises, debates and then passes legislation to do with almost any aspect of the Church of England: ranging from changing key doctrines to creating new guidance for Sunday worship to tweaking the rules on when clergy retire, and everything in between. Annual budgets are also scrutinised. As a deliberative body it can hold debates and offer comment on issues such as climate change or knife crime which go beyond the internal workings of the Church.

Legalising women bishops in 2014 was the culmination of a protracted row between traditionalists and reformers, stretching all the way back to when women were first allowed to become priests in the early 1990s [I was there that memorable day in Bristol Cathedral. Fr Ed] After much debate on Synod, a Measure to permit women to become bishops made its way through to a final debate in 2012 but was defeated, as some thought the proposals did not create sufficient conscience protections but legislation was quickly reworked and fast-tracked through Synod and passed in 2014. There are 25 women bishops out of a total of approximately 110.

The Synod has been involved in a major programme since 2015 called Renewal and Reform, a strategy to turn around decades of decline, releasing extra money from historic endowment to spend on training more clergy and strengthening the national HQ, a simplification of bureaucracy, plans to close church buildings and re-organise parishes and dioceses, caused anger and resistance.

Same gender marriage issue has been a worrying current stalemate. Bishops, apart from a few declaring support, have refused to back a change in teaching to allow priests to marry same-sex couples. They met in late January to finalise their recommendations after five years of consultation and debate. The Archbishops have (*as is their right - editor*) refused even to allow it onto Synod agenda, thus denying all delegates the chance to show their views and standpoint.

This is likely to be controversial when Synod opens.

The Church confirmed 'prayers of dedication, thanksgiving or for God's blessing' [such wording is severely offensive to gays] on same-sex couples will be offered, to follow a civil marriage or partnership and produced 'an apology' for years of demonstrating rejection to the LGBTQ community. For some of us that is too little too late, especially as same-gender (*civil - editor*) marriage has been legal in England and Wales since 2013. But when the law changed, the Church did not change its teaching. Thus there could be further legal challenge.

As the old saying goes: watch this space!

Fr Ed Elsey

Epiphany:

‘Epiphany’ season is all about Jesus revealing His divinity through the veil of His human nature. He did that at times by means of miracles. We have two miracles in the Gospel reading. Jesus cleanses a Leper, and He heals the servant of this centurion from a distance simply by willing it to be so. Our focus is what preceded both healings, a stark and powerful confession of faith. In both confessions, the authority of Jesus to do what was desired was also clearly confessed. So, we will consider our text under the theme “True Faith and True Authority”.

The first healing in our text is the healing of the Leper. Leprosy was, in those days, a frightening disease. Lepers were forced to keep their distance from regular people and to call out a warning of “Unclean!” to anyone who might appear to approach them. When the Jews called it uncleanness, they did not mean untidy, but some form of corruption or decay - and a contagious form at that.

Today, Leprosy is contagious only prior to treatment. In Biblical times, however, they had no effective treatment.

“Leprosy” was the name applied in the Bible to a variety of diseases. It could also infect fabrics and even the walls of buildings. The disease among humans started as a skin condition that caused disfigurement, nerve damage, and deterioration of the infected body parts even to the point of destroying them. The only effective way to limit their spread was to isolate the victims of the disease, and destroy fabrics and materials – even buildings at times – infected with it.

Leviticus 13 and 14 deal with the treatment of leprosy. The leper in our Gospel broke the rules of isolation and approached Jesus. He stated simply that if Jesus desired to, He could cleanse the man of his leprosy. That was a bold confession, for in those days everyone would have told you that only God could cleanse a leper.

No one else would even touch one for fear of being infected. But Jesus touched the man and, contrary to everyone's expectation, instead of being made unclean by the disease, Jesus made the man clean by His touch. He said, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately the man was cleansed of his leprosy.

Jesus then told the man to tell no one. Perhaps his leprosy was not so advanced that everyone could see it, and even though the multitude followed Jesus, Jesus did not want the man to make a public issue of his healing. He told the man to go to the temple, show himself for examination to the priests, as prescribed by Law, and make the sacrifices prescribed in Scripture for one who was cleansed of leprosy. In short, Jesus wants the man to give thanks to God and give the glory for his healing to God, and recognise where his blessings had come from. The man showed his faith, and Jesus demonstrated His authority to command a disease and heal.

The second healing involved the Centurion. This Centurion is a rare man. You can see that in what he does. First, he demonstrates such concern about his servant who is paralysed and in pain. Secondly, he is a Roman who comes to a Jew for help. Clearly, he must have heard about Jesus somewhere. It is also evident that this Roman believes a great deal about Jesus! He tells Jesus about his slave. Jesus says that He will come and heal the man. The Centurion declines. He doesn't want to trouble Jesus unnecessarily. He also seems to know what ritual offence it would be for a good Jew to enter the home of a Gentile. But mostly, the Centurion understands the authority of Jesus.

He tells Jesus that he knows that Jesus does not need to come to his home to accomplish the healing. The Centurion this knows because he believes that Jesus has authority, and being a man under authority himself, he understands how authority works. He tells Jesus that Jesus needs only to say the word, and the servant will be healed. He compares the authority of Jesus over the paralysis and troubles of his servant to the military authority over him, and the authority which he exercises over the soldiers under his command.

He sees the issue not so much as an issue of illness and healing, but of true authority over things and issues, an authority which he believes Jesus possesses. And He is right!

Jesus marvelled at the faith of this Gentile. He proclaims that He hasn't found such faith in Israel - which prompts Him to speak about the future, of the kingdom of God. He tells the Jews that many will come from the East and from the West to recline with Abraham - that is, will go to heaven - but the sons of the Kingdom, the Jews, will be rejected, cast out into the outer darkness, and that there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Here Jesus is describing the bitter sorrow and deep regret of eternal damnation. Many Jews will be on the outside, but many Gentiles from all over the world will enter in.

Such a thing was inconceivable for most people - most Jews - at the time of Jesus. It certainly contradicted their popular theology and because of their popular religion, as opposed to what was carefully taught in the Scriptures, this may well have been beyond their ability to imagine. They had their popular religion just like we here in the UK. But what Jesus said was true. We see the reality that Jesus was describing today in the fact that the Christian Church is primarily Gentile, and the Jews are still implacably hostile toward Christ and Christians.

Our Gospel lesson speaks about the power of Jesus to intervene in our troubles and our illnesses. It is what the Centurion refers to as authority. Same word. Our text also shows us how willing Jesus is to heal and bless us. It pictures for us graphically how bold and unexpected His help may be – after all, He even touched a Leper!

There is nothing that God will not do, if it is His will to do it at the moment. And, when God speaks, the creatures of this world obey. The word “creatures”, in this case, means “created things.”

Jesus has that authority. We, sinful men and women, often do not listen, and we wilfully ignore Him.

He could force us to obey by His power, as He does the Leprosy of the Leper and the paralysis and pain of the servant of the Centurion, but He does not. Not yet. Not in this world, When God speaks the troubles of life, illnesses and obstacles listen and obey as if they were living men under the command of their commanding officer.

That is true authority. The Centurion understood that, and believed Jesus to be in charge, and to be compassionate. That suggests that he understood who Jesus really was, and sin as the source of his servant's troubles. He knew that it was in the hands of the Saviour to rescue, and that it was in the nature of the Saviour to heal and save. That is true faith, a faith that says that when Jesus commands, it cannot fail to be accomplished.

His nature and power are the same today.

In all of your troubles, our Lord can help. James tells us that we do not have, often, because we do not ask. He goes on to say that even when we ask, we often do not receive because we ask from the wrong motives. We ask just for ourselves, our own comfort or our own pleasure. That is the analysis of God as to why we fail to pray, and why our prayers seem to fail when we do pray. Your sin and unbelief stand in your way. The Centurion came fully confident of the nature of Jesus and the authority of Jesus.

When we cry out to God, we also need to do so knowing who Jesus is - and who we are before Him. We need to come with the right motives: submitting ourselves humbly to the will of God and to the plan God has for us. We need to acknowledge His authority and believe in Him, and trust His will for us. And what is His will for us? [Our Salvation.]

When we pray in accord with the will of God, God answers every prayer with a resounding, "Yes!" If we call upon Him from faith, and not with a timid and doubting heart, God gives us what we need, and what will serve to accomplish His good will and bring His plan for us to fruition.

We need faith like that of the Centurion, that if Jesus wants to do it, nothing – not distance, not size, not our opinion of how difficult it might be – can stand in His way. He will speak, and it will be done. What a wonderful comfort! What a wonderful hope!

If you want an example, look at the Gospel! You sinned. You continue to sin. You do not trust God and you do not call upon Him as you should. But He loves you, and He died for you. He paid for your sins, and He purchased and won you from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil. Your sins are forgiven! He exercised His true authority over sin and death, and He has called you to true faith!

He has called you by name in Baptism and has appointed you to be among those He spoke of in our text - from among the many who come from east and west, and recline with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. Here on the altar He sets His table before you, for you to partake in things the patriarchs could only dream about.

The readings today have each spoken to us about God's good will for us. It is a will for life. It is a will for life that is given freely as the gift of God through the Means of Grace. God would have all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth. He cleansed the leper, He healed the servant of the Centurion, and He has called you to everlasting life in His glory with Him because that is what His will is like. Our God is the source of Life and the issues of life and death belong in His hands. That is why we are profoundly Pro-Life.

Jesus said "I am the Way, the Truth, and the LIFE." We have the media's attention more these days. But then we see indiscriminate abortion which is not the only life issue before our world today. We also increasingly face the questions of euthanasia, mercy killing, assisted suicide, and now death panels in our health care system and other health-care driven issues that set death and a will to cause death before us instead of life. Like the centurion, we, too, are men and women under authority. We are under the authority of our Lord first, and of the government second. We ought to obey God rather than men.

We don't need to be manning a picket line. We certainly don't want to become one of those infamous "climate protestors" who break the law and make the news giving all a bad name. We want to be citizens who avail themselves of the rights and authority we do possess, however.

We can write letters, lots of letters. We can make calls. And we can give – our money and our time – to those who need the help: to the Blind, Deaf and Cancer charities. The world needs help to understand the issues of life, and we need to stand clearly upon them ourselves.

Most of all, we need to pray. God will hear, and God will answer, and God will bless if we simply trust Him and call upon Him. Jesus cares. His response to the leper tells us that. And Jesus can help. The Centurion and his talk about authority teach us that. This problem is just like any other – it is under the authority of Jesus to fix.

Back in Bible times, Leprosy seemed too big and too hard. Paralysis seemed too big and too hard. But Jesus was able to handle both of them. The troubles of our lives are like the problems addressed in our Gospel today. When our Lord speaks, they will obey. All you need is to know that God can, and trust that He wants to bless and to help, and call upon Him to do so.

It is our turn to exercise true faith, and our Lord will exercise His true authority.
In the Name of the Father, and of the Son **✝** and of the Holy Ghost.

Amen

Prayers:

Merciful Father

Accept these prayers for the sake of your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ.

THE LORDS PRAYER

PRAYERS

Let us pause for a short silence, and collect our thoughts together.

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Saviour Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvellous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Lord hear our prayer.

God our Father, you reveal that those who work for peace will be called your children. Through the prayers of St Andrew Corsini, who excelled as a peacemaker, help us to work without ceasing for that justice which brings true and lasting peace. We ask this through our Lord. Lord hear our prayer.

Father, you have promised your kingdom to those who are willing to become like little children. Help us to follow the way of Your Son Jesus Christ with confidence so that by our prayers we may come to know your eternal glory. Grant this through our Lord. Amen.

Lord, Help us to be understanding and forgiving of all those we encounter. Show us how to serve one another, to offer love, care and support.

Lord in your mercy.

Lord hear our prayer.

Guide all those who are called to lead and advocate in the world, may they carry love with them always. Inspire our leaders, military and emergency services personnel, teachers, doctors, social workers to be bringers of hope in all situations. Protect all those who carry peace to other nations. Bless the food, care and shelters they provide.

Lord in your mercy.

Hear our prayer.


Lead us to be generous with our time, possessions and money.

For those who have lost loved ones recently, comfort them in their grief and heal the broken-hearted. Finally, we bring to mind any in our community that we know to be in need. (pause for a few seconds) May love and goodness fill their lives.

Lord in your mercy.

Hear our prayer.

THE BLESSING

May the grace and the peace of Christ give us the eyes of faith to reach out more urgently to those in need around us; and may the Blessing of God the Father, God the Son  and God the Holy Spirit, be with us as we follow Him. Amen

FURTHER ARTICLES AND PRAYERS FOR MEDITATION

Anne and I visited Saffron Walden recently to meet our daughter and grand daughter Gracie. For me an opportunity to drive around local villages bringing back many happy memories whilst stationed there.

Many villages and hamlets had lovely names such as Elmdon, Chrishall, Arkesden, Clavering, Catmere End and Littlebury.

The village of Chrishall, and the towns of Saffron Walden, Bishops Stortford were especially memorable simply because I used to take the Sunday services in the Churches there.

On this occasion I visited early January. I look forward to February it reminds me of the wonderful array of snowdrops, bluebells and primroses visible in the woods alongside the road connecting Littlebury and Elmdon. Each morning and early evening in the open fields could be seen Partridges and Pheasants feeding from feeders placed there by Gamekeepers. Both these birds are creatures of habit. Yet having a most brilliant plumage with gleaming shiny feathers.

Whenever I see the February snowdrops I call to mind the legend which says that when Adam and Eve had been sent from the Garden of Eden they entered the world of winter. Adam tried in vain to re-enter the Garden to bring out something of beauty to comfort Eve, but the entrance was guarded by an angel. At last the angel, seeing Eve's distress, took pity. Putting out his hand he caught a snowflake and breathed gently on it. The snowflake blossomed into a flower. So every snowflake is a promise that in Spring and Summer, flowers will come again to beautify the world. Amen.

DYLAN THOMES WELSH POET.

Dylan Thomas, the famous Welsh poet, was certainly a most unusual character. Since his death in 1953 many books and radio scripts have been written about his odd wandering life, but Dylan, as one who knew him well has declared, was not altogether as black as he has been painted. The following story of this gifted, unfortunate man deserves to be more widely known.

One afternoon in his native Swansea, Dylan was walking along the main street when he noticed an old lady weeping quietly outside a florist's shop. Genuinely concerned, Dylan asked her what was wrong. The lady explained that she had come into town that day to buy some flowers to place on her husband's grave, but she had lost her handbag, Dylan thought hard. He was down to his last two pounds. Then suddenly he dashed into the shop and a few minutes later came out carrying a bunch of red roses which he handed to the elderly lady. This erratic genius, whatever his faults, never lacked human compassion.

THE MP AND HIS SEAT!

After losing his seat at an election a Member of Parliament was asked if he was disappointed. "Well, yes, but not too much," he replied. "You see it's nice to be important, but much more important to be nice." Oh Yes! pull the other one!

DOOM AND GLOOM

Have you noticed how "down" you feel after a long faced acquaintance has burdened you with all the latest gloom and doom? Contrast this with the person who greets you with a friendly smile and cheery word. You go on your way lighter of step and the chances are that you pass the smile onto someone else.

It is a sobering thought, but you and I influence everyone we meet for better or for worse. St. Paul put it in a nutshell when he wrote: "None of us lives to himself".

The story is told that the Scottish preacher and hymn writer, George Matheson, once had a poor, shabby woman in his congregation who lived in a slum basement. Her neighbours were astonished one day to find her moving to a sunny garret. In answer to their questions she replied: "Ye canna hear George Matheson preach, and live in a cellar."

So my question is do you and I depress or uplift? Deflate or inspire?

Time is such a precious thing,
It's more than wealth untold!
It's something that we cannot store
And nobody can hold.
Life goes by so speedily,
Before we scarce can taste it,
And time can never be regained -
So why do people waste it?

Seek After Justice; Always Do Good. (Isaiah 1:17)

On 22 April 1993 a teenager was murdered on the streets of London while waiting for a bus. Stephen Lawrence was a promising young man looking forward to fulfilling his dream of becoming an architect. He was murdered simply because he was black. The murder was to have a seismic effect on society and its reverberations were felt across the four nations of Britain and Ireland. It revealed the ugliness of racism, and this was compounded by the systemic failures of the police to bring Stephen's murderers to justice. Following a public inquiry, the Macpherson Report of 1999 brought to wider attention the concept of "Institutional Racism", the racism that is deeply embedded in society or in institutions.

This year we mark the 30th Anniversary of Stephen Lawrence's murder and this will be a major focus for many who work for a society that is free from racism. As long as racism exists, we live in a divided society and a divided world, so during this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we reflect upon how these divisions impact our shared life as we pray together for the unity for which Christ prayed. But we also acknowledge how much churches have contributed to division and prejudice within our institutions and also society.

As long as there is racism for sure there will be no Christian unity! Many may not like that last statement I make, however that is fact, that is the real world of the church today, and the world we live in.

This year's resources are inspired by the experience of our Christian brothers and sisters in another part of the world who are wrestling with this very issue. They have reflected on how we pray for Christian unity when Christians are part of unjust and racist structures.

The murder of George Floyd and the institutional racism it embodied provide the focus for prayer for unity and justice. The churches place before us the prophet Isaiah's challenge to do good and seek justice (Isaiah 1:17).

The prophet is writing to the people of Judah at a time when formal religion is thriving, in a culture which understands wealth as blessing from God and poverty as punishment. Seeking justice and doing good is not on the agenda of either the priests in the Temple or the ruling authorities in the neighbouring palace.

Isaiah seeks to awaken the conscience of the people to the reality of their situation. Instead of honouring their religious expression as a blessing, he sees it as a sacrilege. Isaiah denounces the political, social and religious structures which encourage the hypocrisy of offering sacrifices whilst oppressing the poor.

He speaks out vigorously against corrupt leaders and in favour of the disadvantaged. And aren't we discovering so many corrupt leaders these days! Isaiah teaches that God requires righteousness and justice from all people, all the time, in all spheres of life.

Our world today mirrors the challenges that Isaiah confronted. Justice, righteousness and unity originate from God's profound love for each of us. They are at the heart of who God is and how God expects us to be with one another.

Yet injustice and oppression continue. The sin of racism is evident in practices that set one racial group over and against another. When accompanied or sustained by imbalances of power, racial prejudice moves beyond the individual to take up residence in the structures of society.

Like the religious people so fiercely denounced by the biblical prophets, some Christian believers are complicit in supporting and perpetuating prejudice and oppression, thereby fostering division.

Christians involve themselves in structures of sin that strip others of their dignity; structures that enable and promote slavery, colonisation, segregation, apartheid. Sometimes within the Church, we fail to welcome racial difference; when we fail to recognise the dignity of any, we trample on the dignity of all.

The prophet Isaiah calls us to learn to do good and requires us to decide to engage with the issues.

We are challenged to engage in self-reflection.

Praying together during this week allows us to reflect on what unites us and enables us to commit ourselves to confront all instances of oppression and injustice.

Undertaking this commitment requires churches to acknowledge their own complicity in racial injustice.

We must confess how our silence has allowed other voices to sound out without challenge. As Christians we must be willing to disrupt systems of oppression and advocate for justice.

Our commitment to each other requires us to engage in restorative justice. We must speak out, dismantle unjust structures and create a society in which people can live with freedom and dignity.

We must engage in dialogue and so increase awareness and insight about the lived experience of all people.

Together, we must engage in the struggle for justice in society.

WHY? — because we all belong to Christ. Amen

The people versus God.

+Ian

The demands of God on our lives are quite simple. To love Him as best as we understand and can, and to love our neighbour as we ourselves would like to be loved are sufficient.

God has given us both the choice and responsibility of deciding just how we implement these demands, and even whether we comply with His requests, through His gift to us of free will.

Some will try their level best and often face great hardship from those who take the easy option of serving their own needs and pleasures first. Their motto is often little more than 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die (oblivion)'. Such is their insecurity they will often mock and ridicule those with higher moral and spiritual outlooks, and make the life of others as difficult as they can in an attempt to find comfort in such a desperate view of life.

Our faith and Holy Scripture have made it plain that life continues beyond death.

These people, by their own actions, deny themselves of something that is freely offered to them, and they face an eternity of immense regret instead.

So it comes as no surprise that these same people bend and corrupt the word of God and Holy Scripture in an attempt to give reason and justification for their behaviours, and to get as many people to support/agree with them as possible. I suspect they think that there will be safety and comfort in numbers and that God will eventually come to agree with them and let them off the hook.....

Well surprise, surprise people, this is not the case.

You can have whatever opinions you like on the Word of God but in the end what we think counts for nothing. There are things in Holy Scripture that are not up for discussion and whether we agree with them or not, they stand immutably. Let's look at a few examples.

Gender is binary and has been since creation. It is a gift expressed in physical form and nature, not a matter of personal choice or whim. To deny it is in effect to deny God.

Marriage as defined by the bible is between a man and woman (as defined physically at birth) for mutual comfort, for life and for the procreation of children.

Biblically based marriage is contract involving the community at large, the families involved, the couple themselves and the God. It is a foundational building block of a stable society whilst also being self-contained and has all it needs to be found within itself.

Anything other than this is not Christian marriage whatever society says.

What I find interesting is that society aspires to all the good qualities Christian marriage promotes, and that many couples though not religious in any (admitted) way want to get married in Church. Ask yourself why?

Same sex marriage is off-limits because it requires the human body to be used in ways not intended by God and requires medical interventions and the use of third party donors in the procreation of children. It has to look outside of itself to find completeness and therefore cannot fulfil the requirements of its biblical definition. It will always be incomplete and be found both lacking and wanting.

The NOS census figures are already revealing the truth of that in hard fact.

Society is served by religion and faith, not the other way around. God is not the servant of society, nor is His will dictated by it. Just as well otherwise society would be reduced to the lowest common denominator of social, moral, ethical, sexual, emotional and spiritual behaviour very quickly.

Whilst this may be appealing to some, it is hardly ideal and certainly not desirable when it comes to the greater good of society. Such a place would be no safe place to bring up children nor provide stability for the community at large. The weak and needy would suffer greatly.

So there have to be some laws, rules, limitations on behaviour in order to make society work. The irony is that even total anarchy and chaos needs rules. It seems that society doesn't want rules but can't survive without them.

It doesn't want 'God' either, but still hankers after that security and love God offers.

It wants easy 'love', mistaking sexual intercourse for long term commitment.

It also wants freedom without responsibility and wants other people to pick up the pieces when it all goes wrong. When this happens, it sees itself as the victim rather than the cause of the often self-inflicted problem, and seeks compensation.

It denies culpability but blames others for its own failure.

It silences criticism because it cannot bear the truth.

And it wants to be loved as God loves, but without the need to honour, respect and obey Him.

All the perks but none of the problems and none of the effort.....

But what should we expect as Christians/people of faith from a society that says it has the right to have whatever it wants, be whoever it wants, and do whatever it wants regardless of the consequences, the need for conscience or the cost to others?

Nothing has changed since the early days of creation, since mankind was evicted from Paradise by his own actions. The bible is full of accounts that make this plain.

And yet God continues to love us and want the very best for us and not lose a single sheep from the flock. But there are limits. The freely made choices we make in this life affect the next..... and we have only ourselves to blame.

As Christians we are called to 'love the sinner, hate the sin', and firmly uphold God's laws/truth without pretending that 'love', as society would have us believe, makes all things allowable. It doesn't. Real love comes with responsibilities that extend beyond self-expression and personal 'rights' and freedoms, and puts both God and others first.