

Dear Friends,

In this Methodist Year of Prayer, I wonder how our Advent will be influenced by this call to pray. We are called to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out our discipleship in worship and mission. The Methodist Way of Life cards remind us that personal prayer is an integral part of our worship. So, what will this look like in Advent 2020?

One thing we can do at this time of the year is to take special notice of the collects or theme prayers. These can be found online and from page 523 of the Methodist Worship Book. On Advent Sunday and throughout Advent we are encouraged to pray that God may give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light. We are reminded by the collect that we live out our faith in this mortal life and that Jesus shared this life, 'in great humility'. The collect looks forward to the last day, 'when He shall come in glorious majesty to judge...' Now, I don't know about you, but I think that in this brief prayer (just 13 short lines) there is a wealth of material for reflection and prayer which could feed our spirits throughout Advent.

And yet there are also other collects suggested for this season. The second collect for Advent Sunday calls us to be 'vigilant in prayer'. On the Second Sunday of Advent, the first collect addresses the 'God of all holiness' who lifts up all who are burdened and brought low and asks God to 'renew our hope'. You may feel that this has special relevance this year. The second collect asks God to 'make our hearts leap for joy at the sound of your word and move us by your Spirit...' to which most of us would say, "Amen!".

This last petition stands out for me because someone has commented to me recently that in all he has read about our Methodist Way of Life and Our Calling there is one member of the Holy Trinity who seldom, if ever, gets a mention. The Holy Spirit enables us to be disciples for it is the Holy Spirit whose effectual call leads us into saving grace and gives us a desire to be holy. The Holy Spirit convinces us that our sins (even ours) are forgiven and warms our hearts with faith, hope and love.

In this lectionary year, which began on Advent Sunday, our gospel readings will largely be taken from Mark's Gospel, in which John the Baptist proclaims that the coming one (Jesus) will baptise not with water alone but with the Holy Spirit (1:8). The Holy Spirit is active at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:10) and during

Lent we will be reminded that it is the Spirit who drives Jesus out into the wilderness to be tested.

However, it is the Gospel of Luke that gives greater prominence to the Holy Spirit, with no less than 15 mentions. Indeed, several characters who are often thought or spoken about in Advent and Christmas are in some way associated with the Holy Spirit in Luke's Gospel. These include John the Baptist, but also Mary who conceived by the Spirit, Elizabeth who through the Spirit announces the Messiah in Mary's womb, Zechariah who was inspired to prophesy regarding John, and Simeon who was granted insight to recognise Jesus' coming. Advent and Christmas is truly a spirit-filled season.

It was Shakespeare who said that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. Although in the collect for Advent Sunday there is no explicit mention of the Holy Spirit the opening of the prayer certainly implies our dependence on the Spirit. The context of the prayer is defined by the opening petition, "give us grace..." Grace is the unmerited favour of God active in our hearts and lives. I believe that God's grace is mediated to us primarily by the Holy Spirit, though often God chooses to use other people to bless us.

If our only prayer this Advent was to be that fragment of the collect, it would probably be enough! '*Give us grace*'. In dealing with the challenges of these times – give us grace. In wrestling with the ethical dilemmas which the church cannot avoid – give us grace. In working out our policies, strategies, and budgets – give us grace. In being good neighbours to those in need – give us grace.

For myself, in the first week of Advent 2020 I find this a most reassuring prayer. For, if we mere creatures are able to ask for God's grace, surely our Creator is willing and able to grant our prayer.

God bless you,

Keith

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