

Pray For Victory?

By 1917, there was a strong feeling in some quarters that there ought to be some official sponsorship for a Day of Prayer and Thanksgiving to Almighty God to invoke His aid in bringing the Great War to a victorious end. This eventually took place on the fourth anniversary of the outbreak of the war – 4th August 2018. Archbishop Davidson spoke of how never before “in the history of the country have the King and Queen and the two Houses of Parliament joined officially, as we join today, in one solemn act of prayer and confession, thanksgiving, commemoration, and resolve.” The day was observed in churches throughout the land with special provision both at Morning and Evening Prayer and at Holy Communion.

A few days after this, the British Army and our allies began their march to final victory in November with tremendous successes in the Battle of Amiens. Much of the first three years of the war had been a terrible stalemate in which hundreds of thousands on both sides sacrificed their lives for small advances only to be forced to retreat a short while later. The beginning of 1918 had seen alarming German successes. After the Day of Prayer, the tide turned. But what are we to make of that? The whole subject raises questions for me which I cannot satisfactorily answer completely. What do you think?

Some people would say that it was just coincidence. There is no God or, if there is a God, He doesn't interfere in human affairs. That certainly gets round the other awkward questions I'm about to raise, but it's a chilling thought. We're on our own. There is no help for us beyond what we can achieve ourselves. This life is all we get – even if our lives are cruelly cut off on the battlefield. There is no ultimate meaning or purpose in who we are or what we do. Surely that cannot be so!

You could say that God does exist and does hold the whole world in His hands, but that our prayers make no difference. His plans are inscrutable to us and why would He change them because we asked Him to? Such an attitude seems to make nonsense of one of the most basic things we do as human beings. Prayer comes naturally to us, as naturally as breathing. All kinds of people pray, great men and women. Jesus prays. Prayer can't be pointless. It means something to pray – though obviously not bending God's Will to ours.

But is it right to pray for victory in battle? War is surely evil. How can we ask God to bless us when we go to war? A substantial number of Christians are pacifists. They believe that it is always wrong to fight and would never go to war. Most of us, however, believe that there are circumstances in which it is our duty to fight for what is right, to defend the weak, to protect the poor, to safeguard our own homes and families, our country from the ravages of an invader. You should never pray for success if you're doing wrong, but, when you believe you're doing right, it is natural to ask God to help you. So, if you believe that it is right to fight, it is natural to pray that you will win. How else could you, as a Christian, go to war?

But surely the enemy also were praying for victory. Didn't they believe that they were fighting for the right? Yes, many of them were and did so believe. When we pray, we leave it up to God to decide how to answer our prayers. We don't tell Him what to do. We pray for grace for ourselves to do what He wants us to do. There's a lot of soul-searching to do before we sign up for a fight, but we're also citizens of the country we live in. We have a loyalty to our sovereign and to our fellow countrymen. If our country is fighting in a cause which we are not convinced is just, we may experience divided loyalties, not sure whether to fight alongside our compatriots, to be a conscientious objector or even (in extreme cases) to fight for the other side, like Bonhoeffer and those other patriotic Germans who plotted to assassinate Hitler.

Does God take sides? There are plenty of instances in the Bible where He certainly does. God is on the side of His own people. He is on the side of the righteous. He is on the side of the poor. So can we assume that God will always support the good guys in any war and that the victors must therefore be the righteous? It's much more complicated than that. No-one is righteous (except Jesus). It's hard to believe that any country involved in a war has nothing to be ashamed about. We were certainly guilty of actions which would be very hard to justify in both world wars – including the use of poison gas and the deliberate bombing of civilians. It is highly significant that the service used on 4th August 1918 included confession. Neither side deserved to win. All of us are entirely dependent on God's mercy.

And finally, in those last few months of the Great War, there was still tremendous suffering on both sides and huge loss of life. If God had decided to intervene on our side after our Day of Prayer, couldn't He have given us the victory quicker and with no more pain or death? First of all, I don't believe that our day of prayer would have changed God's mind. God's plans are eternal, rooted in His own nature, not susceptible to alteration in response to human please. What the Day of Prayer could achieve was to align our wills with God's Will. God respects human free will and that's one explanation of why there is so much evil in the world. He doesn't overrule us even when we go wrong. Yet God's plans are accomplished despite our freedom to attempt to thwart Him. This is another mystery I can't understand, but it lies behind the answer to all these questions – that God allows humanity the freedom to indulge in atrocities such as the two world wars and yet His purposes are love and love does therefore ultimately triumph, even if we have to wait for the next world to see it. Roger.

Almighty God, from whom all thoughts of truth and peace proceed; kindle, we pray thee, in the hearts of all men, the true love of peace, and guide with thy pure and peaceable wisdom those who take counsel for the nations of the earth: that in tranquillity thy Kingdom may go forward, till the whole earth be filled with the knowledge of thy love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.