

If My People . . ?

In 2001, as the country was gripped by the Foot and Mouth crisis which affected so many farms and rural communities, I received this email, which seemed to reflect a view being taken across Britain at that moment:-

“Dear Friends,

“As we watch our televisions, listen to our radios and read our newspapers, we are filled with a growing horror at the ravages of Foot and Mouth disease that is spreading like a destructive fire through our land.

“But there is one thing that can spread faster and bring healing to our country and that is prayer. During the last war the nation would hold special days of prayer – which saw communities gathered as never before in living memories – to beseech God to protect and deliver us from evil. They say there are no atheists in the trenches.

“In the midst of this daily worsening crisis many believers have said (and written in the Christian press) that we need to pray for this nation, but a group of us feel very strongly that we need to petition the government urgently, to declare a National Day of Prayer for God to deliver Britain (and Europe) from this disaster.

“We take as our promise from the Lord 2 Chronicles 7 vs 14; *“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land”* (N.I.V.)

“This country, which once called itself Christian, has turned from the Almighty, scorning His commandments and ignoring the love He showed in sending His Son, Jesus Christ to save all who would accept Him. But God is just longing for us to turn to Him in communal prayer, to help us, rescue us and heal our land.

“If you feel that this is a good and Godly initiative, then please pass this message on to as many believers as you can and ask them to write to the Prime Minister asking him if he will declare a National Day of Prayer for Britain.

“Yours in Christ . . .”

I believe that this is a very misleading approach to take, as I wrote in my reply to the friend who forwarded it to us:-

Dear . . . ,

. . . Whilst I believe that it is good to pray for this (or any other) nation, I suspect that part of this call to prayer is really a call to try to get Britain to think of itself as a ‘Christian country’ again. It never has been nor can be!

Quite a bit of muddled thinking has gone into the ‘Christian country’ idea, including the misapplication of 2 Chronicles 7. That was specifically applied to the Jews as a nation, and cannot be applied to any other nation, nor even to the Jews themselves now that they have rejected the Messiah. It can be applied to the Church (i.e. all believers, not a denominational grouping), as we are now the only ones who are ‘his people’ in the fullest sense. We do not have a physical land (as the Jews did), nor do we have a physical temple (as they did). This passage is part of the LORD’s response to Solomon’s prayer of dedication of the temple, where he asked the LORD to treat the temple he had just completed as a sort of ‘local headquarters’. (See 2 Chronicles 6: 12-42)

I believe that there is as much point in asking Britain to think of itself as a Christian country as there would have been in asking the Roman Empire to think of itself as a Christian empire! The emperor Constantine tried that and invented

nominal Christianity, with church allied to state, which has been the bane of the Church ever since!

Sorry if this may have come a bit 'heavy' when you were not expecting it; it is something that I have heard quite a lot recently (perhaps especially here in F&M-ridden Devon) and so have begun to think a little more about in recent days, though it has certainly been 'with me' for several years!

What I **do** think is that this Foot & Mouth outbreak, like other natural disasters such as the India earthquake and the Mozambique floods, are not so much judgement as a 'wake-up call' to everyone to see how God-less their lives have become. The Church can certainly be praying that the crisis will be the cause of many individuals turning to Christ in repentance and faith, even to the extent that it has a noticeable national impact. But that is rather different to 'calling the nation to prayer', which would really be asking non-Christians to start asking God to answer their prayers even though they have not put their trust in him. Better perhaps to take a parallel line to some of the OT prophets and call the people to repentance in the face of crisis, making no promises about 'healing the land' or suchlike, but using the crisis as a reminder of the need to be part of 'a kingdom that cannot be shaken'.

Spreading the idea that prayer can 'spread faster and bring healing to our country' is dangerous. If we believe that, why have we not seen the effects of the Gujarat earthquake reversed and Mozambique un-flooded as a result of prayer? Is it because we believe that Britain and the British are 'God's people' in a way that India and Mozambique are not? For prayer to be effective, it needs to be in line with the will of God, and so we need to see what his will is in these circumstances. I have no conviction that he specifically wants to see Britain rid of F&M (if Britain, why not Argentina, where it is endemic?).

But we know that he **does** want to bring as many as possible to repentance. Perhaps the F&M outbreak is something he wants to use? How dare we then ask for it to be halted? We have prayed often enough for people to be stopped in their tracks and see the futility of life without Jesus. Now that F&M may be something that the Lord is using for just that purpose, what do we do? Ask for it to stop???

Yes, we (the Church, not the country) need to pray. Not for the healing of the nation Britain but for the healing of the Church itself, the healing of divisions between brothers and sisters which are such a reproach and hindrance to the good news of Jesus. And not just praying, either, but taking real action to eliminate disunity between believers – not an easy task, but essential. Then we also need to ask the Lord to bring us into contact with people whom this crisis has touched, people who are beginning to see their need of Christ, and help them to put their trust in him.

The results? A newly-invigorated Church, more clearly focused on eternal goals, working towards total abolition of divisions (at least on a local scale), and with its numbers being swelled by those whom the Holy Spirit has touched through this crisis. This is more like the 'healed land' which the Lord has in mind at this time! Can we pray for this instead, please?

Dave Taylor

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