

I wonder are you the same as me and get really frustrated with all that seems to be going on in our country at present. If we just consider the issues around Stormont and our public services – we have no MLAs sitting in Stormont, no decisions being made by ministers, delays occurring across our many public services, it might feel at times that everything around us is imploding. What is it that's going to change, or are things just going to get worse? It's actually really depressing when you listen to the news or pick up a newspaper, because all you seem to read are the bad news stories, the injustices, the economic and moral collapse of society, the rise of food banks – the list goes on. And so where do we as God's people fit into all of this. What can we do at a local level within our Borough? The real truth today that I want us to consider is that whilst the rest of the world out there might see no end to the madness or any solution for it, we have a God who can change everything if we only turn from our ways and acknowledge him.

You see the reality folks is that our culture is pushing God and His righteous ways out of our government, our classrooms and our culture. When problems occur, and they occur regularly, where do we hear anyone declaring a need to come before God in prayer? The reason why society is in the mess that it is in, is because society has abandoned God. Many would think I'm mad to suggest that there's a connection between the state of our nation and our exclusion of God. And yet I believe there is.

Today I want to talk about a reawakening of God's people in our communities, and the greater need for coming before God humbly to ask for transformation in our streets and towns, and how we need to be people who pray for God to step in.

You might think it's gone past that stage and there's no hope. And yet, it's not as hopeless as you might think. Only 10 miles from here is a townland called Tannybrake. It's really not the centre of anyone's attention, and yet 160 years ago an incredible thing would be birthed in a community school house there. I came across a wonderful book this week called Memories of '59 or the Revival Movement. It was written in 1908 by Revd D McMeekin from Ballymena. And in this account he recalls how a man called James McQuicken gave his life to Jesus in 1857. He returned back to his neighbours telling them the good news and invited them to give their lives to Christ. Soon after he and other men commenced a prayer meeting in the Schoolroom in Tannybrake. Over time people's spiritual interest deepened and widened. Gatherings of people grew in the greater Kells area, and the Revd McMeekin in his book remarked, "Many of these religious gatherings were all-night meetings. So mightily grew the word that in the districts lying between Glenarm and Portglenone and Clough and Glenwherry, all creeds were enquiring about the Revival.'

We may think things are hopeless and beyond repair as we look at our society with all its need, but there's something very encouraging when you read this account that it all started with prayer. Prayer, calling out to God for ourselves, for our communities, for transformation, must be at the centre or the DNA of our Church community. Every time we meet, whether for meetings, or in our various organisations, prayer must have a central part.

So if we consider our reading today from 2 Chronicles 7, we read about the dedication of the new temple Solomon had built in Jerusalem. But, it follows chapter 6, which includes a

lengthy prayer by Solomon beseeching God to hear the nation when they sin if they turn back to God and repent. After all the ceremony, which took place over several days, God appeared to Solomon at night (7: 12) and responded to his prayer (which is our reading for today).

If we are people who declare Jesus as Lord, then we have a hope to declare through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that nothing is impossible. God is always faithful, and so we should never give up hope. We must believe that through our requests to God we will see change take place in our streets, in our communities and in our land. So how do we begin prayers that will change the course of this town?

First, we must come in purity. God declared to Solomon that he would respond when people humbled themselves and turned from their wicked ways. Folks, we must not pray with hidden sin, we must come with a desire to be pure. 2 Timothy 2: 22 says to "flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart".

You may know about the Greek myth when sirens inhabited certain Mediterranean coastal areas. As ships passed by, the sirens sang such enchanting songs that the sailors, drawn by the music, would jump overboard and drown. Odysseus was on a ship that had to pass that way. Knowing the huge temptation that their songs brought, he ordered to be bound with ropes to the mast and that the crewmen's ears be sealed with wax to block out the tantalizing music of the sirens. Having taken such precautions, and yet recognising the incredible temptation, Odysseus and the rest of the crew were able to sail past without yielding to the lure of the sea nymphs.

So consider that when we come as a church community, seeking God to break in to the issues affecting our community, are we coming prepared to resist any temptations, or are we trying to come still carrying those sins. Because if we are, then drastic measures must be taken. At a national level we really cannot expect to see God truly break in, if we as a nation continue to disobey and exclude God from the equation. We must be repentant.

Next we must come before God with a deep passion for prayer. I love the way in which the Amplified Bible translates James 5:16. It says that "The heartfelt and persistent prayer of a righteous believer can accomplish much when put into action and made effective by God—it is dynamic and can have tremendous power".

James makes it clear that our prayer needs to be "HEARTFELT" and "PERSISTENT" (5: 16). God is not into ritual but God is into reality, so let's be people who pray what's on our hearts. He wants us to avoid formulaic prayers in exchange for a persistent passion.

I wonder at times whenever the issues of this world don't directly affect us, do we realise that God can see right into our heart when we pray? He knows whether we are earnestly coming to him seeking for real change in the circumstances of our land. He can see right into our hearts. He knows when we listen to our radios and hear the madness of what's going on in Stormont, whether it then truly is transformed into heartfelt and persistent prayers for transformation to take place. His desire is that we come with a passion to have him step

into the mess. He can still do things without us folks, but in His plan the wonderful thing is that He gives us the privilege of being involved with Him through prayer.

So how much do we really want to see God move in our communities? Where's the passion? To what degree do we desire to see a move by God? Let's not leave the prayers up to others. Let's not think that the 20 odd people who gathered each night in this past week to pray together for our church and our community is enough. God wants to know if we really care.

Finally, we must be persistent in our prayers for others, and our community. Now that we have just finished a week of prayer within the parish, that doesn't mean that the job is done. No, that's only the first layer. We've got to keep building on it. We've got to be willing to keep praying and not give up until we see God fulfil his plans through our requests. Are you determined and persistent to keep calling on God through prayer? Elijah was a man of complete persistence. During a period of drought in the land, which in many ways reflected the spiritual drought that had occurred in people who were now worshipping idols, it was Elijah that kept persisting on God. He kept standing up for God when the people wouldn't even declare the Lord as God. And even at the point when the people realised their wrong, and repented falling prostrate before God, crying "The LORD – he is God", it was Elijah who kept persisting that God would bring rain to the land. And he kept praying until he saw it begin (see 1 Kings 18: 41-44). Can you see what I'm getting at? When the burden of God's people agonises for the needs of the community and for our country in persistent prayer, then God will respond. Do we honestly think God is like some kind of heavenly McDonalds drive-through where he delivers very quickly after we place a request to him? Folks, God knows our hearts. How persistent are we going to be folks in our prayers? Will we be like the prophet Isaiah who declared over Jerusalem these words, "I have posted watchmen on your walls, Jerusalem, they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the LORD, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem, and makes her the praise of the earth" (Isaiah 62:6-7)

Are we going to be people who give God no rest until we see the Spirit flowing through our streets of this parish? If we will pray this way, God will change by the power of His Spirit the things that our nation, our politicians, our laws have never been able to do. Remember that it was when a small group of people 10 miles away were determined and persistent in prayer, even through the night hours, that revival began and spread.

I remember when I was living in Coleraine, a friend of mine was a real woman of prayer. She called upon God, and she had a dream book in which God spoke regularly to her through the night. But there were the occasions in her and her husband's life where they became disheartened at areas where it appeared that their prayers remained unanswered. And yet she kept and keeps on praying, driven by the parable in Luke 18. I'm sure you remember the story which features a widow who badgered a heartless judge for help and finally got it. Jesus ended His parable with a question: If an unrighteous and disrespectful judge finally answers a pestering widow's pleas for help, shall not God answer His own children who cry to Him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?(vv.7-8). Let's be confident that if we come persistently before God in purity and from our hearts, we will see him act.

Conclusion: Folks, I truly believe that there is not a more important time in history for God's people to come before him to bring about change, to bring his kingdom rule on our streets and communities. It's absolutely clear that the tough times we are going through these days is as a result of our waywardness – not because of a vengeful God, but rather because we are giving Satan a free card to do whatever he wants in us.

If we truly wish to see God at work transforming lives, then it is time that we seek God's healing upon our own lives. What areas of our lives do we need God's forgiveness? So we start with our own lives and then seek His grace to affect more and more hearts. That's what James McQuicken did in 1857 just 10 miles from here. He started with himself before he then went back into his community to tell others. God wants to know how much we really care for the needs of those we pray for. Are we willing to go back into our communities to tell them how much we care? Are we truly determined, and by that I mean night and day, to persist on God to do an incredible thing in the lives of others we know and the communities we live in.

Frankly, our communities and our country has nothing else to give anymore. The newspapers and TV screens cry out with stories of desperation of how messed up everything really is. And so now is the time for God's people to truly, humbly, honestly, and persistently step in and call for God's Kingdom to come and his will to be done here on earth as it is in heaven. May that truly be our heart's amen.