

The Power of Prayer

This year is the 222nd anniversary of the publication of a book called 'An Essay on the Principles of Population'. Hardly a title that leaps off the shelves, even in these Covid-19 days and there is a desperate search for things to fill our time while we are locked away in our homes. Nevertheless, the book, written by an English cleric in 1798, has had a huge impact on social welfare and world economics ever since.

The main theme of the book is that any attempt to combat hunger by increasing food production only solves the problem temporarily because it results in an increased population; which, in turn, brings the amount of food available per person back to its original level; i.e. back to square one in terms of health and well-being. In other words, the human race uses resource abundance for population growth rather than for creating a higher standard of living. This, somewhat depressing, cycle is called the Malthusian Trap, after the author of that book, Thomas Malthus.

The first UK census in 1801 gave the population at about 9million; by 1851 it had doubled to 18million and by 1901 doubled again to 36million. The great prosperity of the Victorian British Empire led to a dramatic increase of the population; however, the appalling living conditions of the poor at the beginning of the century were still the same in the slums in Dicken's time.

As an Anglican cleric, Thomas Malthus saw this situation as divinely imposed to teach virtuous behaviour. He went on to write that "Populations had a tendency to grow until the lower class suffered hardship, want and greater susceptibility to famine and disease".

This is still certainly the case today as we look at the breakdown of the deaths resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. It is the poorer and most disadvantaged in our society who consistently figure more highly in the proportions of deaths from Covid-19.

Is Malthus right? Is this pandemic a divine judgement on our modern society? Have we been plundering the world's resources rather than using them wisely? What should we do now?

Our Gospel reading from John finished with Jesus saying "You may ask me for anything in my name. I will do it." WOW! In times of trouble we couldn't ask for a better friend. In the previous verse Jesus said "And I will do anything you ask in my name." Perhaps this should be our first response.

Stephen gave his life as the first Christian martyr, while witnessing to the power of Jesus' name and he died with the name of Jesus on his lips as he prayed for others.

We need not suffer the same fate as Stephen, but we can still pray in Jesus' name for the world in which we live and for guidance and help in the troubles we share in this and every generation.

Praying in Jesus' name is to bring our prayers into accord with his character and of shaping our lives and actions into accord with his will, to work not just for our own selves, but for all mankind.

Praying in Jesus' name is praying for those things that Jesus can gladly bless in asking for the benefit of others and working for justice and a fair society. That we love one another as he has loved us.

Praying in Jesus' name is praying with our hearts and lives, and not just with our words.

Amen.