

## Prayer

We call on You this day, Almighty God, to hear the plight of people in this world who are prevented from hearing Your Good News by lack of resources or initiative from the Church, or from prejudice, racial tensions, or bigotry. Confront those evils which keep even people within Your Church from doing Your will, Lord God, and set them free! We ask this in Your Name, and we trust You will hear our call today. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: World Politics

*We will pray each day for an issue essential to the political stability of the world. Today, pray for the relationship of Iran and the USA. Pray for goodness and truth to confront evil.*

### On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for parents
- Pray for Afghanistan; its peoples and government
- Pray for those whose jobs are under threat at this time

## Meditation

Think of the people with whom you have worshipped today,  
The people you meet Sunday by Sunday; your fellow disciples:

How many do you know really well?  
Or do you hardly know any at all?  
Are there some people you do not wish to know?  
Why should this be so and what has gone wrong?

Who is it that makes worship difficult?  
The children, the musicians, the preacher ...?  
Who is it that makes your worship a great blessing?  
The children, the musicians, the preacher ...?

Which people make it a real joy to be at church?  
Who shows the Spirit's fruit in all they do and say?  
Can you help make worship a blessing for all?  
Does your worship encourage everyone else?

All of us who worship the Lord are united in Him who saved us;  
So let us know and love one another, and inspire one another, in Christ!

## Bible Study - 1 Samuel 21:1-6

<sup>1</sup> David came to Nob to the priest Ahimelech. Ahimelech came trembling to meet David, and said to him, 'Why are you alone, and no one with you?' <sup>2</sup> David said to the priest Ahimelech, 'The king has charged me with something, and said to me, "No one must know anything of the matter about which I send you, and with which I have charged you." I have made an appointment with the young men for a certain place. <sup>3</sup> Now then, what have you at hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here.'

*<sup>4</sup> The priest answered David, 'I have no ordinary bread at hand, only holy bread; that is, providing the young men have kept themselves from women.'<sup>5</sup> David answered the priest, 'Indeed women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition; the vessels of the young men are holy even when it is a common journey; how much more today will their vessels be holy?' <sup>6</sup> So the priest gave him the holy bread; for there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the LORD, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away.*

## Review

David has made his escape from the court of Saul, and the first place he came to was a shrine at Nob where the Tabernacle was kept on a temporary basis, along with the Ark of the Covenant. It was there because after the defeat of the Israelites by the Philistines and the capture of the Ark (1 Samuel 4), the shrine at Shiloh had been destroyed, and when the Ark was recaptured it was left at Kiriath-Jearim (1 Sam 6:19ff). After that battle Eli the priest died, and authority over the affairs of Israel had passed to Samuel. However, some of Eli's sons had survived and continued in priesthood, and they were now based at Nob. They had set up a shrine to the Lord there and installed Ahimelech, one of their number, as High Priest; he was a great grandson of Eli.

Nob was a little to the East of Jerusalem, on a route that would have carried David south towards his home territory of Bethlehem. From there he could move on at will into territory he knew well, and avoid the attempts of Saul to capture him. David travelled with a band of young men, possibly supporters from the army who were prepared to risk all for their leader. They had left in haste and as they came to Nob, were hungry after the effort and the emotions of the day; but it was clear that Ahimelech was disturbed at David's arrival. Did he know what had happened at court?

Ahimelech's first question, 'why are you alone with no-one with you?' seems odd to us because supporters were with David. However, Ahimelech was really enquiring as to why a man of his standing was not accompanied by other court officials who could verify his credentials and mission. David had to lie to cover himself (20:2) and deceived Ahimelech that he was on a secret royal mission to meet with others.

When asked for bread, Ahimelech was only able to offer David the holy 'bread of the presence'. In most pagan temples food was left for the god worshipped there to eat; but in the worship of Yahweh, this 'bread of the Presence' as it was called, represented not human provision for the gods, but God's provision for people. It called to remembrance God's provision of manna in the wilderness which enabled the people to eat in the desert. On this principle, providing David's men were ritually clean, the priest was entitled to give it to them in an emergency, and this is what happened. When, in later years, Jesus was challenged by the Pharisees about why the disciples were eating grain from a cornfield on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23f.) Jesus commended the priests at Nob for recognising that David needed to eat and that this was more important than ritual law. He made his point to the Pharisees using the now famous words 'the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath!'

If David and Jesus found it necessary to be flexible with religious ritual, how much more should we? I do not mean that we should abandon religious ritual whether high or low in churchmanship, but whatever rituals we keep whether spoken or unspoken, written or unwritten; they need to be put into place as means of serving God, not used as a form of religious bondage. I have found that wherever I have travelled and ministered within the Church, whether new congregations or traditional, there are things that people either say that must be done, or must not be done. Few of them have anything to do with the Gospel

of Jesus Christ; whether matters of music, seating, psalms, songs, practices of communion or the colour of vestments. Every church congregation has the habit of doing certain things certain ways, and some are just not willing to alter these rituals. Metaphorically speaking, they put the bread on the table and refuse to give it to David, or they stand with the Pharisees and look accusingly at the disciples in a cornfield.

This is tragic and it does not help the church. I do not suggest that we should not have ritual norms of behaviour or practice, or that we should not attempt to do all things decently and well. But in making gods out of religious practices we contravene God's law, giving honour to things of this world rather than to God Himself. This is idolatry and it should have no place amongst the people of God. It is good to know that this principle is clear within the Old as well as the New Testament.

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. David's men were required to abstain from being with women to be 'clean' in order to eat. What might this mean, and how can we make sense of this today?
2. David may have been putting the priest's life at risk; what do you think Saul would do when he found out?
3. Discuss in your group what you mean by religious ritual, and what you can do to ensure it is used properly.

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*It is very difficult to write about religious ritual without irritating people's feelings about the issue. It is impossible for any church community not to have its 'rituals', its ways of doing things which it regards as 'right' before God. Whatever they are, these rituals need careful and regular scrutiny.*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Work with others to identify those things in your church which have become totally inflexible. Make suggestions to your leadership about how things can be done more flexibly.*
- *Spend a day in fasting and take the opportunity to pray for people who are in danger because of being obedient to the Lord.*

## Final Prayer

Your grace is sufficient for me, Lord.  
Let me live by Your grace each day,  
Being generous in spirit to others  
As You have been to me.  
Thank You, Lord,  
AMEN