

FOCUS ON FAITH

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SURPRISE, SURPRISE

Life never ceases to surprise me. Back in September when I sat down to write my Focus on Faith article on where our security lies I never expected that our world would be turned upside down by the turmoil in the financial sectors. My old firm Halifax/Bank of Scotland has been one of the major casualties so obviously I have been watching the situation unfold with much interest (no, that wasn't intended as a pun!)

I was also interested to read Mick Lane's letter to the editor questioning why I should write about such matters and I am indebted (again no pun intended) to him for raising some important questions. I realise I have an incredible privilege to have this space in the Journal every 6 weeks or so and I take it very seriously indeed.

"Faith means believing in something (or someone) without having all the evidence to convince our minds"

When I first floated the idea of both "Prayer for the Week" (PFTW) and what has become "Focus on Faith" with the then editor of the Journal, Colin Northway, I was surprised by his overwhelming enthusiasm. In fact at our very first meeting, Colin admitted to me that he was "a confirmed atheist" (his exact words) but he felt sure that having a Christian viewpoint in the paper would be beneficial. Naturally I agreed with him and so for over 5 years I've been able to 'pontificate' (Colin's description!) on a regular basis. I'm also grateful that after Colin's retirement, the present editor – John Griffiths – has allowed me to continue.

To date around 50 different people have contributed to PFTW in the Journal and apart from only two occasions, there has been a prayer published each week since April 2003. The themes have varied but each contributor is asked to be positive in their approach and not be critical, but to ask God's blessing on our community.

I'm a firm believer that prayer for the people and activities of our community is essential. I know some people may think it's a waste of time; that Christians are just speaking into thin air or that it's a crutch to lean on in times of trouble. But I could relate to you many examples of times when I and others who take this seriously have seen answers to our prayers. To some these answers may seem like co-incidences but personally I believe there is a God who wants to be involved in our lives and who is active in our world.

This raises some questions of course. Is He an 'interventionist' God? In my opinion, yes and no. Yes from the point of view that He has already intervened. We're coming up to Christmas and whilst in many senses we have lost much of the real meaning of this wonderful Festival, it was instituted to remind us that God – in the form of His Son, Jesus – came to us. That's what's so wonderful about the Christian faith – God took the initiative. Instead of us having to jump through hoops and

live by impossibly strict rules and regulations to try and win His approval, Jesus (Emmanuel – which translated means "God with us") provided a way for us to enter into a relationship with Him.

So why on the other hand do I think God isn't 'interventionist'? Because not every prayer gets answered the way I would like it to be answered. Some of us may think it would be wonderful if we could twist God's arm to do the things we want Him to do but I think it would be a recipe for disaster. We already have the freewill to choose our own way in life – and we've seen what kind of damage that does when people act irresponsibly and unjustly. Imagine what would happen if we had the power to make God do our bidding.

Which leads me on to another question – who is prayer for? If God is supreme (and I believe He is) He already knows what we're thinking and what we're going to ask for before we pray, so really prayer is primarily for our benefit. Jesus told us in the Lord's Prayer that we need to be asking for God's **"will be done on earth"**, i.e. what God wants to happen rather than what we want.

The famous evangelist Billy Graham once said, "Heaven is full of answers to prayers for which no-one ever bothered to ask." It is essential that we get onto God's agenda rather than giving Him a long list of our wants and needs. Prayer is as much (if not more) about listening rather than asking. In fact before we open our mouths in prayer we need to know what God's will is. Maybe knowing the will of God is a theme that I'll come back to in a future Focus on Faith article.

The Bible tells us that **"without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him"** (Hebrews 11: 6).

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That means I not only have to believe there is a God and that He wants the best for me but it also involves letting go and placing my trust in a God who is outside of my control.

I'm so grateful though that, despite what appears to be the evidence sometimes, God is in control. Life may throw up surprises for us from time to time but thankfully nothing surprises God.

If you would like to find out more about what Christians believe, log on to www.lifting-jesus-higher.org.uk where you'll find information on local Churches together with contact details, plus information on activities and other resources.