

Statement of Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Curry regarding prayers for the President

January 12, 2017

The following is a statement from Presiding Bishop and Primate Michael B. Curry.

This past week, Barack H. Obama, the 44th President of the United States, in the tradition of Presidents dating back to George Washington, gave his farewell address to the nation. Next week Donald J. Trump, in the same tradition of this country, will take the oath of office and be inaugurated as the 45th President.

We recognize that this election has been contentious, and the Episcopal Church, like our nation, has expressed a diversity of views, some of which have been born in deep pain.

There has been much discussion, and some controversy, about the appropriateness of the Washington National Cathedral hosting the Inaugural Prayer Service this year, and of church choirs singing at inaugural events.

Underneath the variety of questions and concerns are some basic Christian questions about prayer: when I pray for our leaders, why am I doing so? Should I pray for a leader I disagree with? When I pray what do I think I am accomplishing?

On one level these questions seem inconsequential and innocuous. But real prayer is not innocuous. It is powerful. That question can become poignant and even painful as it is for many in this moment, given that some of the values that many of us heard expressed over the past year have seemed to be in contradiction to deeply-held Christian convictions of love, compassion, and human dignity.

So, should we pray for the President?

We can and, indeed, I believe we must pray for all who lead in our civic order, nationally and internationally. I pray for the President in part because Jesus Christ is my Savior and Lord. If Jesus is my Lord and the model and guide for my life, his way must be my way, however difficult. And the way prayer for others is a part of how I follow the way of Jesus.

This practice of praying for leaders is deep in our biblical and Anglican/Episcopalian traditions. Psalm 72 prays that the ancient Israelite king might rule in the ways of God's justice, defending "the cause of the poor," bringing "deliverance to the needy." 1 Timothy 2:1-2 encourages followers of Jesus to pray earnestly for those in leadership, that they may lead in ways that serve the common good. Even in the most extreme case, Jesus himself said, while dying on the cross, "Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing," was praying for Pontius Pilate, the Governor of Rome who ordered his execution, and for all who were complicit in it.

In this spirit, the Prayer Books of the Anglican/Episcopal way have always included prayer for those "who bear the authority of government," praying in a variety of ways that they may lead in the ways of God's wisdom, justice and truth. When we pray for Donald, Barack, George, Bill, George, or Jimmy, Presidents of the United States, we pray for their well-being, for they too are children of God, but we also pray for their leadership in our society and world. We pray that they will lead in the ways of justice and truth. We pray that their leadership will truly serve not partisan interest but the common good. When we pray for them, we are actually praying for our nation, for our world, indeed we are praying for ourselves.

Prayer is not a simplistic cheer or declaration of support. Prayers of lament cry out in pain and cry for justice. Prayer can celebrate. Prayer can also ask God to intervene and change the course of history, to change someone's mind, or his or her heart. When we pray for our enemies, we may find that we are simultaneously emboldened to stand for justice while we are also less able to demonize another human being.

Real prayer is both contemplative and active. It involves a contemplative conversation with and listening to God, and an active following of the way of Jesus, serving and witnessing in the world in his Name. For those who follow the way of Jesus, the active side of our life of prayer seeks to live out and help our society live out what it means to "love your neighbor as yourself." So we work for a good and just, humane and loving society. We participate as followers of Jesus in the life of our government and society, caring for each other and others, and working for policies and laws that reflect the values and teachings of Jesus to "love your neighbor," to "do unto others as you who have them do unto you," to fashion a civic order that reflects the goodness, the justice, the compassion that we see in the face of Jesus, that we know to reflect the very heart and dream of God for all of God's children and God's creation.

I grew up in a historically black congregation in the Episcopal Church. We prayed for leaders who were often lukewarm or even opposed to our very civil rights. We got on our knees in church and prayed for them, and then we got up off our knees and we Marched on Washington. Following the way of Jesus, we prayed and protested at the same time. We prayed for our leaders who were fighting for our civil rights, we prayed for those with whom we disagreed, and we even prayed for those who hated us. And we did so following the Jesus, whose way is the way of unselfish, sacrificial love. And that way is the way that can set us all free.

As we celebrate the birth of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we may find guidance in his words, spoken during one of the most painful and difficult struggles in the Civil Rights Movement. He asked that all participants live by a set of principles. The first principle read: “As you prepare to march, meditate on the life and teachings of Jesus.”

Should we pray for the President?

Yes!

The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry

Presiding Bishop and Primate

The Episcopal Church