

Reflecting on Prayer Flags and our Prayer

We live in a time where many faiths exist side-by-side in the same place where once each faith tradition belonged to a specific geographic region until its own missionary endeavours. For many faithful people this has challenged assumptions that the faith of their ancestors is the only faith. Even before this, Christian missionaries were faced with the question of how much of the “Christian Faith” they were spreading was actually about following Jesus or about a socio/political culture. Thus in Japan the Jesuit missionaries petitioned to use rice wafers instead of wheat – and were turned down. In Africa some indigenous clergy raised up in the Anglican tradition believed they could only use English brocades and fabrics for their vestments; to use the beautiful textiles of Africa would be “unchristian.”



We also live in a time where recognition of the presumptions and abuses of the past are front and centre, and have become ‘our own’ even if it was the action of our grandparents and great-grandparents and before. We are in a time when we need to exercise caution when appropriating practices of other cultures and faiths.

So how do we respectfully use prayer flags which come to us largely from Tibetan Buddhism?

The first thing I think of in terms of prayer flags is that they are material, tangible and visible. Western culture the past 70 years or so has made use of coloured ribbons in a similar way to indicate support and often prayers, for specific people and concerns. My first memory of these was in the United States during the Viet Nam War when the yellow ribbon was tied on trees in front yards with the plea to bring the troops home. Then came the pink ribbon for breast cancer, the blue ribbon for prostate cancer, and then many more.

In pre-literate times the stained glass windows in churches were both teaching tools – pictures from biblical stories – and prayer tools, reminding the worshipper of the character of Gd and the ministry of the saints to the poor and marginalized who are always in need of our prayer. Icons in the Orthodox tradition serve as ‘windows to heaven’ as the observer is invited to move through the image to the Divine. Again, something visible, engaging the senses.

Tibetan prayer flags were accompanied by desires for qualities Christians value as gifts of the Holy Spirit: peace, compassion, strength, and wisdom. So we might include other gifts of the Spirit such as gentleness, self-control, humility, and generosity; Faith, Hope and Love (“and the greatest of these is Love”). Forgiveness, Reconciliation, would go on my list. We should always remember the lists in the Bible are not definitive and limiting, but help us to gain a perspective to see the Spirit at work among us.

(See Galatians 5:22 ff and 1 Cor 12:4 ff and 1 Cor 13.)

If indeed the Holy Spirit is the energy of Gd surrounding and inhabiting us, then our prayers, too, might be carried into the world and beyond as well as to the ‘heart of Gd.’ I think that aspect of Tibetan prayer is quite insightful and lovely.

Prayer flags represent our prayers, and they are a constant reminder to us to pray. It is our intentions, our care and love that are carried to Gd, our words are simply vehicles to express them. So too, prayer flags are vehicles, not the prayer itself. But words have power, and the words and images on a prayer flag have that same kind of power, to do good or to do harm.

Whatever we do, we must do it with respect and with a heart that is open and curious. We invite the Holy Spirit to take what we offer and make it something with which Gd can do “infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.”

June 2021, The Rev'd Paula Porter Leggett

while we are remembering the 215 bodies of children found in unmarked graves at the residential school in Kelowna B.C., and the murder of four members of the Alfaaz family in London, Ontario, and coming out of 18 months of pandemic restrictions due to COVID 19.