

Sermon preached at King's College Cambridge
May 6, 2018 Easter 5

On Prayer

James 1.22-end; John 16.23-end

In the midst of today's readings one line may have stood out for you:

Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.

It is a version of a line we hear several times from Jesus, and if you're familiar with the Bible it may have just slipped past you this morning. Familiarity can reduce the friction of these texts: they can glide by. On the other hand you might have thought, *but that's not true, is it? I've asked for things in prayer countless times, and God hasn't given them me.* Even if you didn't think that just now, it may have occurred to you before. And of course it is true. True, I should think, for anyone who asks God for things in prayer.

As I reflect on this I remember the young man I once spent some time talking to in Belmarsh Prison. I was on placement there for a week when I was training for the priesthood. It was an incredibly powerful and formative few days. This guy was telling me that he had found Christian faith there: that he knew he had done terrible things, but that God forgave him, and that God would give him what he asked for in prayer. I knew I had to tread very carefully in response to this (and I was just an ordinand, not an experienced priest). Here were the awakenings of a beautiful, new, simple faith. I don't mean that patronisingly. Some of the most moving and indeed sobering examples of faith that I have met have had this quality of simplicity and gratitude. But I was worried that he might at some point be discouraged by his prayers seeming to go unanswered. It was not impossible that he had come through a discipleship programme which erred in the direction of the simplistic rather than simple. For many folk, alpha won't cut it when beta shows up.

What I said in the moment was that God does indeed answer our prayers, always answers: but that the answer may not be quite *what* we were expecting, or *when* we were hoping for it. They are two of the classic ways in which we can faithfully finesse Jesus' promise, of always getting what we pray for. They are long established in Christian understanding. But this does sidestep the challenge a bit. An *answer to prayer* is not the same as *getting what you've prayed for*, if we take the words at face value. *Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.* If I pray passionately for the guy I'm in love with to love me back, or for my kidney stone to go away painlessly, the answer to my prayer might well be for neither of those things to happen. What I've prayed for hasn't

happened, and may never. And yet the Christian belief is that any and every prayer is heard and answered.

Sometimes people add riders to the promise. One of these makes good sense, which is *as long as you're praying for the right thing*. Well, it makes good sense sometimes. If I pray for someone I heartily dislike to fall down the stairs, that's hardly praying for the right thing. But what if I pray for the carnage to stop in Syria? That it's not stopping can't be because it's the wrong thing to pray for. And given how catastrophically awful that carnage is, the idea that it will be 'in God's good time' is a bit hard to stomach.

There are no simple answers to that, only tentative ones – or, at best, faithfully provisional ones. It's a bit like the bigger issue of how we reconcile our idea of God with the suffering in the world. Maybe one element of such a provisional, hesitant response is to say that it's actually *people* who have to stop the carnage, the violence. Maybe here our version of praying for the right thing is more like *please may your Spirit of peace-making love find her way into the hearts and minds of those who can make a difference*. That might sound a bit twee or trite, but it does try to get towards the paradoxical complexity of how human life is made better by the conjunction of God's gracious action and our response; to use theological language, made better by our co-operation with grace (knowingly or even unknowingly). Such head-spinning stuff is, I'm afraid, worth the struggle. At the same time, we should never forget our licence to shout out in simple words too, the licence that comes from the psalms. *Make it stop! Now!!*

Another rider people are tempted to add to the promise (that God will give us whatever we ask for), is this: *as long as you pray well enough*. This is spiritual abuse, plain and simple. Prayer is prayer: it can't be done well or badly. As we've seen, we might not pray for the right thing, but it's still prayer. There is no place in Christianity for a hierarchy of praying.

So we're finding some useful distinctions, some useful caveats. But I think we can come back to Jesus' original line and mine another truth, perhaps a more significant one than the things I've mentioned already. *Whatever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you*. One thing we learn from both literature and psychology, if not just from daily life, is that what we say and what we mean are not always the same. Knowing this is fundamental to understanding ourselves and understanding other people. Discovering what we really mean, what our deepest beliefs and desires are, 'what's really going on', is absolutely vital to mental and spiritual health. This lies behind both the classic schools of spiritual discipline and the best of contemporary talk-based psychotherapies.

So when Jesus says *whatever ye shall ask the Father*, I strongly suspect that he is actually saying *whatever you really mean when you ask the Father*. *Whatever you really mean when you ask the Father, he will give it you*. God, being God, knows what we really mean, even if we don't. Indeed, God knows us better than we can ever know ourselves, however deep our

self-understanding might reach. A crucial way we let God's light in, to illuminate that self-understanding, is to dare to believe that he loves us more than we can possibly imagine. Even just daring to act *as though we believed it* is a good way to start. That illumination brings to light our deepest desires, hopes, loves and beliefs, where our desires and needs begin to converge. They are there already, and they are vital traces of the divine in whose image we are made; or, at least, bearers of those traces. (This is the territory St Paul is in when he talks of the Holy Spirit crying in our hearts, crying Abba, Father). But whether we have discerned them yet or not, there they are: and they are our ultimate meaning in prayer, they are the meaning of our every prayer. They are where we really mean it because our meaning is real, which is to say shot through with the divine. And what we really mean to ask for, God will surely give.

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