

‘Rector, I don’t know what I believe anymore.’ I was in a sitting room on the Hill of Howth one sunny afternoon, visiting a lady in the Parish. She had just received news that the tumour that doctors had initially thought to be benign was in fact malignant and the prognosis was not good.

She was a faithful member of the Church, a member of the choir, generous in spirit. This news had knocked her sideways, leaving her not knowing what to think, what to believe, what to pray.

For people like her, the words of Jesus in our Gospel reading:

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

All this can leave them asking; ‘What about me? I’ve asked, I’ve sought, I’ve knocked Does God not care?’

This problem of unanswered prayer is one that has faced us or ones we love. It can leave us thinking, ‘What’s the point of prayer?’ What are we doing when we pray? - particularly when we pray for someone who is sick.

Last Sunday we were thinking about faith. I began with that definition of faith that we find in the letter to the Hebrews:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. *Heb 11:1*

I offered that rendering that we find in the Message translation of this verse:

Faith is ‘our handle on what we can’t see.’

As we reflected last Sunday, when I think along these lines, I come to see faith in terms of relationship with God; a relationship built upon what God has done in Christ.

So where does prayer fit into that relationship? Do we see prayer in terms of a shopping list that I bring to God – or is it more of a dialogue?

I think of the character Topol in the film ‘Fiddler on the Roof’. Topol, if you remember, was a poor Jewish farmer living on the outskirts of a small village in 19th century Russia, doing his best for his wife and daughters, coming to terms with the rapidly changing social and political changes in the world about him. He has this ongoing dialogue with God. ‘Why am I so poor? I could do so much good if I was rich. If I was rich I could devote much more time to study and prayer, asking questions that would cross a rabbi’s eyes.’ Finally, he asks of God, ‘Would it spoil some vast eternal plan, if I were a wealthy man?’

I have come more and more to value the Psalms. As we read them, we see this same honest dialogue with God. When things are going well, the Psalms overflow with exuberant praise. When things go badly, when the wicked seem to prosper, when the righteous suffer, we hear an agonising why. I think of Psalm 22, beginning with that cry of despair, ‘My God, my God; why have you forsaken me?’ Then, as we read on, he recalls God’s faithfulness to his forbears. Then there is a cry of despair as he realises his own weakness, ‘I am a worm and no man.’ Then, after he has rehearsed his pain before God, he is able to hear God’s promises and the Psalm ends in words of praise.

I find in the Psalms an honesty before God in which all feelings – feelings of exhilaration, feelings of deep despair, even feelings of anger and vengeance – are brought openly and honestly before God in confidence that God hears.

So we move away from prayer as a shopping list of demands to one of an open dialogue with God. OK so far, but didn't Jesus say to his disciples in the Upper Room on the night before he died:

Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. *John 16:23*

I recall a group of very perceptive P7's picking me up on that one. 'Doesn't always work does it, Sir.'

I began by thinking with them about what it didn't mean. It is not a means of twisting God's arm to give me something I want by simply tacking 'in Jesus' name I pray' on the end of a selfish demand. I might, I suggested, rather like a Rolls Royce. They agreed that a prayer along the lines 'Lord grant your servant a gleaming Rolls Royce that your name might be glorified; in Jesus' name I pray.' was just not going to work – though 3 years later one young lad, who had been in the class, did come up to me with a broad grin in a supermarket and ask had I got my Rolls Royce yet.

So, what are we doing when we pray 'in the name of Jesus'? The best answer I've got over the years is that it is to pray as Jesus would have prayed in that situation. It is trying to see things through his eyes and not mine. It is to pray as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, as he brought his own anguish at

what lay ahead for him, praying, ‘Father let this cup pass from me – yet not my will but yours be done.’

This brings me back to what we were thinking about last Sunday, as we thought of faith as our ‘handle on what we cannot see’. Prayer then is part and parcel of getting ‘our handle on what we cannot see’.

Now let us go back to our Gospel reading:

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

Asking, searching, knocking become less words of demand, less a shopping list of what I require from God and more words of enquiry. There is a deep spiritual wisdom in some of the Collects of the Book of Common Prayer, that are a sort of prayer for the week. There is one that would have come up a few weeks back, the Collect of the 10th Sunday after Trinity:

Let your merciful ears, O Lord,
be open to the prayers of your humble servants;
and that they may obtain their petitions,
make them to ask such things as shall please you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Prayer is fundamentally a meeting with God. As we thought last Sunday, the God we seek is already seeking us. He meets us in our asking, seeking, knocking. He hears, he listens, he understands. Even when things don’t work out the way we would like, he stays with us holding us in the arms of his love, listening to our hurts, our pain, our disappointment, leading us into a deeper understanding of his will for us.

O God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray and to give more than we desire or deserve. Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid and giving us those good things for which we dare not ask; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive with you in the unity of the Holy, one God, now and forever.