

EASTER 7
June 5th, 2011

A sermon preached by John Course
at S. Andrew's Church, Romford

I have to confess to being more than a little disappointed, I was all afire and keen to preach and then I saw what was in the lectionary, with the three readings we've heard today and a little note by the side saying prayer. The connection between these three readings at least according to the writers of the lectionary is prayer. So why the disappointment? Simply because prayer is a subject that I find very confusing, and I'm not sure these passages help me very much. For me the central question is what do I think I am doing when I pray, and indeed does it make any sense to pray?

Often for me and I'm sure for others I feel perhaps like the disciples might have done in the reading from Acts "and Jesus was hid from their sight" not gone, not disappeared still present somehow but hidden. I imagine the disciples were somewhat confused and bewildered first their friend Jesus was on top of the world welcomed as a king, then dead, then alive again and appearing in sorts of enigmatic ways, not your average forty days. Some of that stuff I find it difficult to identify with I have no experience of the miraculous. On the other hand doubt confusion, and a lack of clarity about what God might be saying that the disciples might feel in this period between Ascension and Pentecost that I understand completely.

One of the ways that doubt and uncertainty manifests itself, one of the ways in which God remains present but perhaps hidden is in prayer. In my time I have encountered many verities of Christian and other faiths. I have always been at the same time jealous and sceptical of those evangelical Christians who have a problem they pray about it and they have their problem solved. You know the sort of thing should I change my job and move to the other end of the country or not. They appear to go way pray about it and know with absolute certainty what God wants them to do. I'm jealous of their certainty and perhaps the option to deflect responsibility onto God rather than accept responsibility for their own decisions and sceptical since God always seems to tell these people what you suspect they wanted to hear. Prayer has never been like that for me, instead I often find myself confronted by what Archbishop Rowan Williams describes as a silence of prayer. God is there but remains hidden from my sight or is certainly missing clarity and detail.

I was having dinner at a friend's house on Wednesday night and at one point he (who to the best of my knowledge is not a religious man) said "for those of you that believe in the power of prayer, pray for my son he is taking his finals". I was about launch into a conversation about what exactly this might mean, when I got a look from my wife which said "neither the time nor the place". Well she can't keep me quiet now!!

This innocent throw away comment is an example of many problems thrown up by this subject of prayer; it is an attitude to be found amongst atheists and religious people alike. Whilst of course prayer takes many forms the church has traditionally including thanksgiving, confession and so on it is intercessory prayer that most people think of when they hear the term prayer. By intercessory prayer we mean asking God to do something to intervene. For them praying means asking God to do something or not do something. It was certainly this that my friend had in mind when asking however flippantly that his son be prayed for. In this view God becomes a bit like Santa Claus rather than writing a letter we say a pray to God asking for all the stuff we want and if we are really,

really good and behave ourselves then maybe we might get what we ask for. It is of course possible to find church that subscribe to this view. That if you ask God for something in prayer, if you follow God's commandments, if you have enough faith it will happen, God will cure your sickness, or get you the good job or the big house or whatever it happens to be. If such a prayer is not successful then that is due to a lack of faith in the person praying, or some lack of morality. For many though including myself I don't think if I pray hard enough I can move mountains. Nor do I think my inability to call on God to perform what is essentially a magic trick demonstrates a lack of faith

For some the fact they ask God for things and he doesn't deliver is proof enough that God like Santa Claus is an imaginary figure who exists to bring comfort to those of weak will or intellect. So we need a different way to think about prayer, whilst I wouldn't want to say that God doesn't answer prayer in extraordinary miraculous ways, I would want to say this is not the norm. Indeed if we look at Jesus prayer it doesn't to me seem that successful judged in these terms. Jesus asks God to protect the disciples I did a quick Google search and as best as anyone can tell six of the apostles were killed. Peter was crucified and James was thrown off a building and our own St Andrew was also crucified. In light of this information Jesus prayer to the Father to protect his disciples doesn't look very successful.

This leads me to wonder what this prayer is doing in the Bible, by the time the Gospel of John is written the deaths of these disciples are known about. If John were trying to cast the best possible light on Jesus surely he would include a bit of editing and eliminate a prayer that had been so manifestly unsuccessful. It is of course possible to argue along the lines that Jesus was referring to a short period of time between his death and resurrection (this passage appears just before his arrest on Maundy Thursday) and there may be some truth in this but perhaps it also challenges us to think about prayer differently.

My friend who asked for prayers for his son, what was he actually asking for, whilst I wasn't allowed to pursue the question at the time I suspect the answer is that his son pass his exams gaining him his medical qualifications and a good job with all the benefits that leads to for him. What could be wrong with that, why would God not do that? Well it seems to me that often we (and I include myself) do not really think about what we are asking of God. In the case of this medical student there are basically two outcomes to this man's final exams, he could have worked hard and have sufficient understanding to become a junior doctor and pass his exams, in which case he has no need of God's help or my prayers. Alternatively he could not have sufficient understanding either due to a lack of work or ability in which case he will not pass his exams. Here perhaps we think he may need God's help to pass. But if we are honest with ourselves we want the best doctor's, nurses and teachers. In this hypothetical situation do we want someone who is not strictly speaking good enough to be a doctor treating us or our families? Of course we wouldn't, so can I in all good conscience ask God to help someone pass a medical exam which they would otherwise fail, so that they can treat others? Clearly if a person is not good enough to treat me they are not good enough to treat others. For me there is always a risk of this kind of nimbyism in prayer. I almost feel like it's not a sermon in this church without a West Ham reference so let's think of a second example. Doubtless prayers were said by some that West Ham not be relegated, in order to avoid the pain distress and upset that some fans may feel. But the reality is someone is going to get relegated so if this prayer is answered the pain and distress is simply being moved to a different set of fans and a different club. In this same way the person who prays for an organ to be made available for transplant is some ways praying for another's death.

It seems clear that from what we've heard today's reading that prayer isn't about alleviating suffering the early Christians are exhorted to "rejoice in there sufferings for Christ". So how should

we understand this Christian tradition of intercessory prayer? Although I confess I remained confused about the subject the clue for me perhaps lies in the manner in which Jesus prays in this passage. The first thing that strikes me is how little of Jesus prayer consists of asking God to do anything. Instead much of it is statements of praise or thanks giving. The most consistent idea running through the whole thing is of knowing God and knowing God through Jesus. Prayer here seems to be not about asking God to do something but instead about knowing God, understanding the divine as revealed through Jesus.

To know someone to really know someone is to what makes them tick, to know their likes and dislikes, to be able to read their mood in short to be in relationship to them. Whilst relationships of young children may function as a series of requests and demands which are either met or not this is not the experience of an adult. Relationships when they function at their best put the needs of the other ahead of the needs of ourselves. When I express frustration or upset to a friend or a partner is not necessarily that I want them to do something about it but instead that sharing that frustration and upset allows me to feel better in my self and perhaps even give me a new perspective, a different approach a better understanding.

Likewise in a loving relationship we see or at least try to see the person in the best possible light we accept there faults or apparent faults since they are part of what makes them, them. I love an argument, a debate so I'll make ludicrous statements and defend them just to for the fun of the argument and whilst it is not always my best traits but it is in a real sense part of what makes me, me

So in a relationship we care or at least try to care about the other before ourselves, and we seek to see and to understand the other in the best possible light, can we say the same about our relationship with God. I know I haven't, as many of you know I was once very close to be accepted for ordination training, and at the last hurdle rejected. The anger, the frustration and pain I felt was immense. I remained angry with God for a long time, yet I am forced to admit I didn't consider the wants and desires of God or anyone else for that matter instead it was all about me and my needs and desires. Like the football fan and those other examples not considering the needs of others. Like the small child who takes for granted the things it has, and has tantrums and rages when its demands are not met.

So it seems to me the challenge of Jesus prayer is to spend less time demanding things from God and more time being thankful. Thankful for our homes families and happiness, thankful for those things in which we find joy, from the most important things to the smallest they all have their origin in God and through them we gain a greater understanding of a God that although hidden remains present to us.

Of course from time to time we will ask God for things, but I at least will try to think of this as an expression of a desire. A desire to see something made better or some evil stopped and at its best this will involve little or no self interest on our part. In asking God to do something, this in bringing a problem to the one who knows us best we may find ourselves reflecting on things in a different way. In short intercessory prayer my asking God to do something will bring about a change in me. Perhaps in some small an incremental way bring me closer to the image of God; to the person I was intended to be. Having been changed in this way, I have the determination and the desire to do something about it. In expressing that desire I may be changed and having been changed I may change others. In this way we can move mountains through prayer. God ended segregation in America he just used Martin Luther King and millions of others to do it. God ended Apartheid in

South Africa he used amongst other Desmond Tutu and millions of others to do it. That for me is moving a mountain, and not a magic trick but a mountain worth moving.

I can't believe in a God who will cure me of a terrible disease if I ask him to do so. It would simply be unfair on others in a similar predicament. But I can absolutely believe in a God who shares my pain and seeing others suffer and helps me to become a better person in order to do something about it. Not necessarily big over blown gestures we are not all Desmond Tutu etc. but to do my little bit of good where I find myself. I genuinely believe God has answered our prayers and given us the gifts to solve our problems. The tools he has provided us with are you and me and all the other human beings he has created.

So I will pray for my friend's son, to share my concerns with God. In the hope that if he is successful I may share in his joy, and in some small way this communicates God's joy in all we do well, and that should he fail I can share his sadness and provide comfort, and through this in some small way he might know the love and comfort of God. As to whether he passes or fails that I'm afraid is down to him.