

Prayer - for the Spirit ...

...in the end, all prayer is prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 23rd June 2019 by the vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

James 5:13-15; Luke 11:5-13

The pulpit is always a good place for airing a grievance. So let me share with you one of my pet hates. I really dislike those books you sometimes see in discounted bookshops, and those lists you sometimes see on the Internet with titles like: The ultimate bucket list; a hundred things to do before you die; or a hundred books to read before you die; or a hundred places to visit before you die. In the first place I think it's just plain rude the way these titles seem so concerned to remind me of my mortality. In the second place I don't like the rather nanny-ish way these books presume to tell me what to do with my life. But most of all I dislike the combination of urgency - "You've only got a limited lifespan, so use it well," with the essentially trivial nature of most of the suggestions. There are always things like: walk the Great Wall of China; ride a motorbike; swim with dolphins. You never see on these lists more substantial things like: try to talk to my spouse at breakfast; use less plastic; join Amnesty International; try and be a better father. Things like that, that might make a lasting improvement to your life and the lives of those around you - those things never feature on these lists which urge you to live life to the full. And I wonder what these lists reveal about the kind of priorities the people who compile them might have.

Now the subject of my sermon this morning is prayer. This is the fourth in our little summer series on prayer and last week we thought about the significance of praying to God as Father: the Father is the one who rescues and redeems his children as in the Exodus story; the Father is the one who invites us into a relationship of trust and intimacy as His children and gives us the Spirit by whom we call Abba Father; and the Father is the Father of Jesus Christ who allowed his will to be shaped by that of the Father - "Not my will but Yours be done." So by praying to God as Father our prayers

will naturally take on a particular nature: there will be prayers for freedom for those who are trapped and need to change; there will be prayers leading to greater intimacy with God and the ability to trust him; and there will be prayers that change us as we learn to submit our wills to that of the Father. These are the kind of things we should be expecting in our prayers: freedom, intimacy and our own inner transformation.

Prayer is not about listing the first hundred things that come into our heads. And it's important to say that, because at first sight, Jesus's words in this morning's Gospel reading seem to suggest that God will give us whatever we ask for: "Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock on the door will be opened to you." And he goes on: "Everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; and for everyone who knocks the door will be opened." But on the face of it of course, this simply isn't true: many people's faith has been severely damaged because they've been encouraged to treat God as a kind of celestial Santa Claus, to whom they presents their bucket-lists of all the things they might want at any particular moment, and are then disappointed when it doesn't happen.

"Ask and you will receive". Does that mean that if I pray to God, that in the middle of this morning's service the roof boss in the tower ceiling might suddenly open and Boris Johnson swing down on a rope, wearing only a leopard skin before dancing the Macarena and singing a medley of songs from The Lion King - "I just can't wait to be king," for example. Is that really going to happen? Well in the current febrile state of British politics, I can't absolutely rule it out, but if it were to happen it wouldn't be because I had prayed that it might be so, even though Jesus says "Ask, and it will be given you."

Prayer is supposed to be a serious business. It's not about asking for the first hundred things that come into our heads - and so the thrust of this morning's reading, about the man who persists on banging on his neighbour's door at night until the neighbour gets up and lends him some bread, and the instruction to ask to search and to knock: the message is that persistence in prayer will finally revealed to us what it is we really want. One of the problems of living in an age like ours which is obsessed with trivial things, is that we simply do not know what we really want. We are skilled at distracting ourselves

with endless sensations and new experiences, so that for many people life is lived on the surface to such an extent that we're not even sure we have a core identity - it's constantly shifting according to the choices we make. And if there is any truth in that, then prayer is a vital tool for helping us to discover who we really are: in persistent prayer, we discover what it is we really desire; what it is that really matters to us.

And the examples Jesus gives provide a clue: a neighbour asking for bread so that she can offer hospitality; a child asking a parent for a fish or an egg. The expectation in the punchline of the passage, that the purpose of prayer is to ask for the Holy Spirit. The idea is echoed in the Lord's Prayer itself: give us this day our daily bread. The proper subject matter for prayer are the essentials of life: bread; fish; egg; the spirit of life. But what are the essentials really? Earlier in Luke's gospel, Jesus has fended off the devil by saying, "One does not live by bread alone." There are essentials even deeper than bread: the love of others, for example; the gift of life itself; freedom from spiritual blindness and untruth; the presence and peace of God himself. These are perhaps the kind of things that should form the focus of our prayers, but it is only as we put these needs and desires into words and try them on for size that we discover how real and importance to us they truly are.

So can I encourage you this morning not to waste your time looking for a hundred new things to pray for, far less for 100 spiritual experiences to have before you die. The thrust of Jesus's teaching is that the Father wants to give us the Holy Spirit, but before we can receive, we have to discover that the Holy Spirit is really what we want. So let's learn to pray for God's good gift of Himself. Let's persist earnestly and with all our might, seeking God until we discover that it really is God we want. It fits in with what we were saying about praying to God as Father last time: the Father offers freedom from all that enslaves and deceives; the Father offers intimacy and peace; the Father offers the inner change and transformation that is the consequence of union with Christ. All of this is the work of the Holy Spirit, which is why the thrust of Jesus's teaching on prayer is that in the end all prayer is prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit - the gift of God's own self, a gift which God is longing to give his needy children.

Jesus says, "If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" And when we ask on that basis, surely we shall receive; when we search diligently and deeply, surely we shall find, though the search be long and hard. And when we find the boldness to knock, the door will surely swing open and the Lord himself will enter in.