

Shameless Prayer

I always remember when I was a student studying theology I was at a College Communion service and I found myself watching my Professor praying as he partook of the bread and wine. He seemed almost transfigured and I remember thinking that he seemed to be in some place I had never been. I remember thinking that he seemed to be caught up in something I knew very little about. And maybe it was a similar experience that led the disciples to ask Jesus to teach them to pray. We read that ‘At one place after Jesus had been praying, one of his disciples said, ‘Lord, teach us to pray...’ Maybe there was something about the sight of Jesus praying that made the disciples want to learn how to do it. And what Jesus goes on to teach is very simple and very reassuring. The Lord’s Prayer that Jesus gave his disciples is not complicated. And the stories that Jesus told afterwards in the verses that follow are very encouraging – about someone who comes to a friend’s door in the middle of the night in need of bread for a visitor; about a child who asks a father for a fish or an egg. And the implication is clear. We know how to treat one another as friends and as parents. We know how to be responsive and generous. How much more can we expect of God? And that is fine and it is very heartening. Prayer is a natural part of a relationship with God that exceeds the relationship between friends and between parents and children. We should expect even more from God.

The trouble is of course when we do not experience God that way. The problem is when we pray in situations where we know that any parent or friend would do everything that they could – and yet God evidently doesn’t. I mean, do we always experience God as a super-dutiful parent, a super-attentive friend? I love the story of the 16th century Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila who was once out raising money for her monastery in miserable weather and her cart was thrown into a muddy river. Tired and exasperated, she complained to God, and she heard a voice within her say, ‘This is how I treat my friends’, to which she replied, ‘Yes, my Lord, and that is why you have so few of them.’ Can we not sympathise with

Teresa? And it is very heartening that Jesus says, ‘seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened’ but we all know people whose prayer knuckles are red and bloodied with knocking and yet the door doesn’t seem to open one inch. Indeed maybe we are those people. And so God as the divine parent and the faithful friend are fine as far as it goes but maybe it doesn’t go far enough. And what I want to do therefore this morning is to suggest to you a slightly different model of prayer. I want to suggest to you a different approach, but one that I actually think is consistent with these verses in Luke’s Gospel. And to do that we need to look at one or two other passages where we find people praying to God.

Let’s turn first to our reading from Genesis 18 and I am so glad that we have read this today as I think it’s a crucial passage. It is a dramatic scene – the fate of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are in the balance. God has heard the outcry over life in these cities and now it is payback time. Sodom and Gomorrah are ripe for destruction. And Abraham is appalled at the prospect of God obliterating these cities, irrespective of the presence of the righteous. And suddenly the scene resembles a stall in a middle-eastern market place as Abraham haggles and barter over the fate of these people. The question is, how small a remnant of righteous people must there be in these cities for God to spare them? 50? 45? 40? 30? 20? And Abraham is determined to beat God down, to get a good bargain. He is questioning God – indeed he is almost shaming God into being merciful. ‘Far be it from you to do such thing!’ he says. ‘How can the righteous die with the wicked? ‘Should not the judge of all the earth do what is just?’ In other words, ‘shame on you, God!’ This is Abraham in strop, outraged mode, arguing and cajoling with God.

Then jump ahead to another story of a later time and picture Moses up on the mountain, receiving the Law of God. And while Moses is up there basking in the glory of God what are the people down below up to? Well, they are busy partying and constructing an idol to the very gods they have just been rescued from, making a golden calf. And when God sees this the divine fuses finally blow. It’s judgement time! ‘Get out of my way so I can destroy them!’ says God to Moses. ‘No way’, replies Moses. ‘Just think! Think of your reputation, God! Just think what the Egyptians will say when they hear that you led the people out of captivity only to destroy

them in the desert! What kind of a flaky God will they think you are?’ And again – Moses is effectively shaming God. And the outcome is that God changes his mind. We read those wonderful words, ‘so the Lord thought better of the evil with which he threatened his people.’ Here is prayer as protest. Here is prayer as cajoling God, arguing with God, shaming God – and it impacts upon God as God’s mind is changed. Here is prayer as give and take between us and God. Listening to Moses I am reminded of a prayer I came across which goes,

Lord, give us grace,
for if thou give us not grace,
we shall not give Thee glory:
and who will win by that, Lord?

That seems to me to capture the kind of impertinence that we find in the way that God is addressed by both Abram and Moses. And yes, God may be the super-parent or the super-friend but that does not make us compliant or submissive, but it is rather an invitation to a combative and insurgent prayer life.

Think again of the Lord’s Prayer that Jesus taught his disciples and that we pray every week. ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done, give us bread for today, forgives us our sins , do not put us to the test...’ Just think. Are these polite requests or are they commands, imperatives? Are we humbly beseeching God to do give us bread, forgive our sins, to bring in the kingdom? Or are we pressing God to do these things, pushing? Well, maybe it’s sometimes one and sometimes the other. The simple fact though is that God invites us here to call God Father, ‘our Father’, and father is a word that denotes intimacy and respect and affection. But it is a loaded term because a father has responsibilities and we surely expect certain things of a father, indeed we have a right to expect – maybe even to demand - certain things. We don’t expect a scorpion from our father when we ask for an egg and we don’t expect a snake when we ask for fish and if our fathers treated us that way we would shame them – and all the more so with God.

And that brings us to the other picture in our passage, that of someone awakening their neighbour in the night because a guest has arrived and must be fed. And we are told that it is this man’s persistence that makes his neighbour get up, no doubt waking up the

rest of his family in the process as they would all be sleeping in the same room. But the word ‘persistence’ there should really read ‘shameless persistence’, for shame is the issue here. In this culture there were strict protocols and expectations about hospitality. It would be incumbent upon this man to offer hospitality to the guest who comes knocking on his door in the night or else he would be shamed, and the neighbour knows this and it is therefore his responsibility to do what he can to help. There is pressure on him to respond to his neighbour in need and it seems therefore that similar pressure can be brought to bear upon God – indeed all the more so.

I wonder if this is how we are used to thinking of prayer - a haggling with God, a shaming of God, a shameless and persistent pressuring of God. Maybe it seems disrespectful, blasphemous even. Or maybe we actually encounter here one of the most extraordinary features of our faith as Christians, that God who is sovereign Lord of all and before whom we are dust agrees to be subjected to human scrutiny and to being questioned and challenged. Something here is seen of the sheer humility of God. And from one perspective that is what prayer is all about. It is about holding God answerable, holding God accountable for the world for a world that God has promised to save and to redeem. And that gives prayer an edge. Perhaps at times we can be too deferential. We are used to the phrase, ‘knock and the door will be opened to you’ but one theologian has given that a whole different feel by describing prayer as ‘rattling God’s cage and waking him up’. And that is certainly the spirit of some of the psalms. And the wonder is that God allows that, indeed invites that from us. Indeed the wonder is that God responds and is affected by our prayers and may be prompted and moved by them – as in the example of Moses.

I do not suggest that this is all there is to say about prayer – of course not, but I suggest it is where these passages lead us. There is however one last point to be made. Holding God to account, holding God responsible, shaming God, is all very well, but accountability cuts both ways. We may put God on the spot, rattle God’s cage, demand a response – but God may reply by doing exactly the same thing to us: put us on the spot, rattle our cage, demand a response from us. If prayer is about holding God

responsible for God's world, that's fine, but prayer is never, ever a negation of human responsibility and it cuts both ways. And if in prayer we are pressing God to 'do something about it' then that is fine but it may be that God turns to us and says, 'Yes, I've heard you - and now what are you going to do about it?' And so it is as God is pressed and prompted by us and we are pressed and prompted by God that the world is changed and God's kingdom draws near.

So finally to those closing words: 'Bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask of him?' Here Jesus promises us that when we knock on God's door we will be given the Holy Spirit. That is a great and treasured promise for the Holy Spirit is God's very presence drawing near to us. This is a Spirit of peace and strength and comfort and these are God's sublime gifts to us, whatever else God may or may not give to us in response to our prayers. May God grant that by that same Spirit our ears and our hearts and our arms may be opened to the needy person who is knocking on our door. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
you are the generous God,
you are the extravagant God,
you are the open-handed God,
the God who gives us this world in all its splendour,
and who gives us life in all its richness,
and who gives us our daily bread,
and who forgives us our sins,
and who leads us and guides us along right paths,
and we praise and worship you.

And yet we come this morning knocking at your door
for despite your generosity we are in need:
in need of your love because sometimes
life in the world leaves us feeling unloved;
in need of grace because sometimes
we are unsure if we have the strength to go on;
in need of hope because sometimes
the future seems bleak;
in need of courage because sometimes
we feel afraid,
in need of peace because sometimes
our hearts are troubled;
and always – in need of forgiveness.
For we come, confessing our sins
and saying together...

Gracious God, leave us not knocking at a closed door,
but open to us and embrace us and welcome us in once more,
and lets us feast with you at your table,
you who give good things to your children.
And we pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord
In whose words we pray together, saying...