

Lent Sermon Series 2014

5th Sunday in Lent, 6th April

St Mary's Kidlington, 8.00am

Revd Felicity Scroggie on *What do we Do When Prayer isn't answered?*

Some of you may know that I am passionate horse-rider. I have been talking with a lot of people recently about the connections between sport and faith, in the disciplines and regular routines – and that has set me wondering what sort of sport might Christianity be compared to?

Is Christianity like cricket: looks dull from the outside, but enthusiasts are keen to assure us that it is really very exciting!

Or is it like tennis: fairly predictable, but with the word 'love' used in public from time to time.

Or maybe its like golf: essentially its easy – putting a ball into a hole, until you see the size of the hole, the size of the ball, and how far away they are from each other.

Is it a team game like rugby, which needs people who are light on their feet up front and people who are very solid to prop up the rear?

Or is it like snooker: something which only a few people play well, but which has a vast army of armchair critics?

And then I remember God's favourite sport: WRESTLING.

Through Lent we have been examining different ways of praying: silence, with scripture, together as the body of Christ in the church, with set prayers or extempore as is right for each of us. Today in the last of our series we ask a wider question. How do we make sense of praying when it all gets tough and our prayers are not answered? Are some prayers not heard, and some denied?

The prophet Elijah held a contest between the priests of Baal (400 of them against him alone). They each had to sacrifice a bull on the altar and ask their God to consume it with fire. The priests of Baal, sacrificed their bull, engaged in vigorous chants, and danced around the altar until their feet were swollen and bleeding. 'Baal, answer us!' they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. 'Shout louder!' he said. 'Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.' So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention. (I Kings 18) Elijah stuck his neck out – he did rather put God to the test – and the Lord God of Israel vindicated his faith and consumed his sacrifice with fire. (As a footnote we might notice that Elijah went on to slaughter all the priests of Baal!)

We are of course to learn from the story that in a multi faith context the God of Israel is shown to be the one true God who alone is worthy of all worship and praise. Why would we follow any other? And we are assured that when we pray to the one true God, in faith our prayers are heard, and answered. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am with them" "Very truly I tell you if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you." (Jn 16. 23) or again,

"If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him" Matt 7:11

As we have explored these last few weeks, the heart of prayer is so much more than a list of requests; it is an alignment with God's will, a coming closer to God so that we begin to see people and the world more through his eyes and less through our own; it is the working through of our desire for holiness and holy living. Today though we focus mostly on the prayer of asking – intercession, where we bring before God the things that are on our minds and hearts, the needs of the world and of individuals.

We are assured that none of us ever pray in vain. Our Father in heaven loves us, and is not too busy, not sleeping, not travelling, or absent, but is ready to listen and willing to grant us whatever is good for us. Every prayer is heard, though not every prayer will be granted in the way we think it should be.

And yet, if we are honest, often prayer is a struggle and though we pray with the best intentions (not greedy or self seeking, for others in need of God's generosity and his healing hand, with an honest yearning for his Kingdom of righteousness to come into our world - just as he taught us) yet we do not see an easy correlation between the prayer and results. Prayer is not magic. When we pray for healing, people still die – perhaps the healing was actually the inner peace of a good death... When we pray for peace, another conflict springs up. Maybe peace between the nations can only be realised in the fullness of God's Kingdom. Sometimes it may indeed feel that our prayers are like the prayers of the priests of Baal and that God has taken a holiday.

Will we take offence at God because he has not given us what we asked for, or throw our toys out of the pram and seek another game to play? Some of us do... it is easy to be faithful when all is going well, but when life is not going well – there is the real challenge to our faithfulness. the hallmark of Faithfulness is that it remains even (or especially) when things do not go according to our desires / plans. Shadrach Mesach and Abednego, the three faithful Hebrews in the book of Daniel have much to teach us here. King Nebuchadnezzar is about to throw them into the burning fiery furnace because they refuse to bow down and worship his statue. He taunts them that if their God is any God at all he will rescue them, and their reply echoes across the generations as a lesson in faithfulness: "If the God whom we serve is able to save us from the blazing furnace and from your power, then he will. **But even if he doesn't**, Your Majesty may be sure that we will not worship your god" (Daniel 3.18) Even if he doesn't rescue us, he is still our God. Even if our prayers for help are not answered, we will worship him. Even in tragedy and disaster he is still our God and we will praise him. This is the pattern of the psalms too – over and over again the psalmist tells the human story as it is, the wicked prosper, the enemies laugh at him, life does not go well.... And over and over again the laments end with an affirmation of faithfulness "yet I will praise you for you are my God". I was taught in philosophy classes that the philosophical problem with this is that if the faithful believer will not allow **any** evidence to change his opinion of God's goodness, then ultimately the belief is blind and unfounded.

I too have wrestled with this over the years and it has seemed to me that what is asked for in our spiritual growth is not blind belief, but honesty in prayer. The psalmist does not hold back from the realities and the pains of the situation. He does not accept what comes unthinkingly – he rails and shouts, and shows his anger, and grapples with God, like Job, and Jacob, and Jonah, and Jeremiah. And ultimately he, and they, come to see that the perspectives of God are wider than their perspectives, the mercy of God more than they can conceive, and his power greater than they can imagine. It is in this context that they can say **Whatever happens**, I will praise the Lord. For his God-ness and our worship are not dependent on him satisfying our desires.

In the garden of gethsemane Jesus **wrested with himself** to align his will with the Father's will. "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground" (Lk 22.44) If our religion is not to be an opiate then our prayer needs to encounter reality more honestly. We are called to **wrestle with the state of the world and our place in it**, to engage with the world in its pains, the hopes, its shattered dreams, and its fearfulness, to bring all this to God in prayer and to call on His help. And in this we will **wrestle with ourselves**, our crooked desires, limited vision, ill-disciplined consciences, and lack of understanding. Job wrestled with his doubts; Jeremiah wrestled with his anger; Jonah wrestled with the narrowness of his compassion and the mercy of God – God who was in the end too merciful for his comprehension.

And in all of this we are called to **engage with / wrestle with God himself**. When Jacob encountered the full reality of God active in the world and in his life it was as a wrestler in the night; the two of them struggled the night long and at the end Jacob was marked for ever by the struggle.

This is not what we expect of God (we call Christ prince of peace, not welter weight champion of the world!) yet sometimes God chooses to engage us in a struggle which we would rather avoid. In the prayerful struggles of life and death, discernment and obedience, justice, and the human situation, there may not be a simple single answer to our prayers; instead we are given a life-time's journey towards trust in the infinite wisdom and unfailing love of the Almighty God who alone is worthy of our praise and worship so that we too can come to say with the psalmist, with Shadrach Mesach and Abednego, with Job and Jacob and Jeremiah, in better and worse times, 'But as for me, I will praise the Lord all the days of my life.'