

Lent Sermon Series 2014

5th Sunday in Lent, 6th April

St Mary's Kidlington, 10am

The Key Questions group talk on **When prayer isn't answered ...**

The 'Key Questions' group comprises about a dozen members of the church, started by Rev Tony Knox. We meet once a month, led usually by William, and have been asked to provide the sermon slot on the topic ...

William started his sermon on the role of silence in prayer saying that he had been handed a difficult task. He emphasized that prayer involves talking to God and of course 'talking' implies some conversation, some answers. So at first sight the very question – how do we cope .. seems to be a denial of the concept of prayer.

As we have heard in these sermons there are many aspects to prayer. Here our question implies that it is our supplications, our asking, our petitions that isn't answered. This gives us an even bigger problem because we read in the gospels (Matth) "Ask and it shall be given" John (to the disciples "Whatever you shall ask in my name, that I will do."

Those of you who read Felicity's sermon at St John's last week on the web will have noted that Terry Waite, in captivity, prayed only the words of the prayer book and no extempore prayer because he felt it would just degenerate into 'God get me out of here'. In last Sunday's compline we looked at prayer in the Psalms, where many are clearly prayers expressing Anger with God.

As each member of our group was asked to give their views on the question, it was striking how often personal testimony featured in the answers, and so three other members of the group Judy, Philippa and Richard are all going to contribute.

Each week in the formal intercessions in church we pray for those who are sick or dying. When the dying person is someone really close to us, we are all confronted with the question of how we deal we deal with this in prayer. Judy is going to say something of her experience.

When the nature of my husband George's illness was finally diagnosed I knew it was far too late for any prayers of mine to be answered. But, in a strange way, I have come to believe that I had already been prepared for the catastrophe that was to overtake me, by being led to studying for a second BA in English here in Oxford some years earlier. The poets, playwrights and novelists that I continue to study – all looking for an extra spiritual dimension, or God, in various ways – have become for me both a consolation as well as a form of prayer.

William Whyte, our leader, suggested that I find a poem to illustrate this. It is a sonnet by George Herbert, simply called 'Prayer'. It is a list of all the blessings of prayer and perhaps what we focus our minds on when we pray. It contains no verbs, suggesting I think that we should be prepared to listen when we pray, and I would ask you to listen to the last two words which perfectly highlight, I think, the difficulty we often have in pinning prayer down.

*'Prayer, the Churches banquet, Angels age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth.
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage.
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;
Engine against th'Almightie, sinners towre.
Reversed thunder; Christ-side-piercing spear;
The six-daies world transposing in an houre,
A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear;
Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,
Exalted Manna, gladnesse of thebest,
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bels beyond the staires heard, the souls bloud,
The land of spices; something understood.*

The death of one's adult partner is, of course, personally shattering and it can, of course, seem that prayer has not been answered. In our logical minds, however, we know that we can't pray that no-one shall die, or we would be crowded off this planet even faster than is currently happening. But when the death is one of a child – a normal, happy child with prospect of a beautiful life before them, what seems to be unanswered prayer for their survival seems even more antithetic to a loving God. Could any good come out of such a tragedy? Philippa is now going to tell us about such an event in her family.

My nephews and a niece mean a great deal to me. My sister's family consisted of three boys growing up. Angel, a practice nurse, and her husband, a solicitor, live in London. My siblings and I were brought up in an Anglican vicarage, because my father was a clergyman. Angela married into a roman catholic family, so the boys were brought up in that faith tradition.

In 1998 Patrick, the second son, was diagnosed out of the blue with a rare cancerous brain tumour. The surgeons removed all they could but not the entire growth. We were all devastated at the news. We all prayed hard that Patrick would recover and the cancer disappear. He had just completed his first time at his secondary school, Worth Abbey. He was fourteen years old.

He was determined to live as normal a life as possible, undergoing radiotherapy and then chemotherapy. He got to school as much as he could during the treatment. The headmaster, Father Christian Jamieson and the staff and matrons were so supportive and the monks so prayerful and understanding. There was always an inspiring story of how Patrick was coping when my sister rang to tell my elderly mother and myself. It was a roller coaster of two years. We and so many people kept praying. Patrick was so brave. His class mates helped him as much as they could and deep bonds of friendship were formed. He was such a talented young man, he loved music and drama and

sports of any kind. At the end of 2000 we learned that the tumour had grown again and he underwent more surgery. This left him with paralysis on one side and he struggled with more chemotherapy, but then it was obvious he needed to be at home. There was a wonderful atmosphere in the home; his bed was in the sitting room. There was "open house". Many people visited and his school friends came to see him in great numbers. The monks from the Abbey came to say Mass. He slipped away quietly on 22nd March 2001 aged 16 years with his parents and brothers at his side.

His funeral was in a very crowded Worth Abbey; his brothers Christopher and Anthony compiled and read their prayers; many of his cousins took part in the offertory. Father Christopher preached and remarked how this had affected so many and they would never be the same. The boys lined the route to the monks' cemetery where he was buried. A concert was given in his memory to raise money. The new 6th form block is in his name. On his birthday and his anniversary we always remember him and still his class mates make contact with the family.

In talking to my sister and Anthony, who was 11 years old at the time, they said they were of course the poorer for not having Patrick around, but they wouldn't be what they are today without that experience. God's love shone out in so many ways; the family has evolved and grown. New challenges present – we must keep praying.

The key here is at the end. It is not that those around were led to see that Patrick's death was somehow a 'good thing', but rather that the very fact of all that praying around an event that – given the physical world God created and our frail human bodies is part of the biological order – somehow sustained and continues to sustain all those involved.

When in the weekly intercessions we pray for the world, we often have to confront something like a famine, or a tsunami. Things which, having said in the Lords Prayer "Thy will be done on earth" no-one in their right mind would think of as the will of a loving God. Indeed, at such times even those who normally have little to do with church may come in to pray. Richard is going to lead our thoughts on how we deal with this.

Sometimes bad things happen. Sometimes even when we pray about a situation bad things happen. A common response in this situation is to say things like "God has answered in a different way", God is answering "not yet" or "God has a plan and a purpose for this".

But, sometimes we are faced with a situation that is truly awful, truly horrendous. I am thinking of murder, natural disasters or genocide.

In these situations to say this is all part of God's plan or that God is giving a different answer seems trite if not wholly inadequate. We might be forgiven to ask "where is God in all this".

Well, I believe in a loving God. Out of love, when faced with these situations, God is horrified. God is horrified. God shares in our feelings of distress.

I believe in the crucified God. Who feels the pain, shares in it and weeps with us. The bible says that Jesus takes upon him the sins of the world.

And I believe in the God of the resurrection. God loves us, through that love he shares our horror, he shares our hurt and cries out with us. But God is also the God of the resurrection who having felt the hurt acts to comfort us, to heal us and allows us to hope. Some of that work comes through us his people.

When we pray “God be with you” that prayer is always answered; even before we make that supplication. God is always with us in every situation carrying us. I pray, that those who face truly awful situations know God is with them, loves them and there is hope.

God always alongside us, and not only in times of trouble when we are most likely to turn to him, but throughout our lives. So what about the way that God answers prayer by changing us?

At times when we pray for guidance – often hoping (even subconsciously) for a particular outcome – and things do not transpire as we hope, that may be more a problem with our hopes than with the answers to prayer. The answer we have received is that we need to review whether what we are asking for is really best for us. Often it is only the 20/20 vision of hindsight that lets us appreciate that.

When we pray for those horrendous situations like famines it makes us think about our own care of the world God has given us. When we pray for those in need it makes us think about our own role in caring for them.

Taking the model of the Lords prayer, after the adoration, the first petition “Give us this day our daily bread” reminds us to pray for those things that we NEED, rather than those that we might WANT. When we ask “forgive us our trespasses” there is the rider – “as we forgive those who trespass against us” – again our responsibility.

We close with the fact that the prayer “God be with you” is always answered, even if we can’t see it. During our discussion the key Questions group were reminded of the footprints prayer in which the person praying dreams they are walking along a beach with the Lord and looking back sees two tracks of footprints but only one track at times when they felt lowest and saddest. They ask the Lord – “Why when I most needed you did you leave me on my own?” Our Lord replied “My child, I love you, and would never leave you during your time of trial. When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I was carrying you.”

Amen