

**Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer**  
Prof John Morris, Sunday 8th March

2. *Prayer for God to show his power* (OT) Psalms 91 & 134; Chapter 2: Come unto me;  
Collects: 4,5,6

In our prayers, week by week, we often start “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open ..” and, I guess, we often don’t think about the word “Almighty”. It is a word of power - literally “All or Most Mighty”. The concept of God is very much bound up with the concept of power. The Concordance section of any bible that has one gives lists of where any particular word is used in the bible. If you look up the word “power” there are many references to its use in the bible - the power of prayer, the power of God. Our concept of God has nearly always been associated with power.

We might think of ‘power’ as a human attribute, but power has been important since the dawn of evolution as different creatures struggled with nature and for resources to survive. In essence, power is the ability to overcome some sort of undesirable outcome and achieve desired outcomes. In itself it is neither good nor bad, though it can certainly be used for good or for bad purposes.

Humans often feel very powerless in the face of the forces both of nature and of other humans. There are so many things we can’t control in the external forces of nature, in our internal nature, and in interpersonal relationships. So, the idea of a god or gods that is all powerful or has specific powers goes back to the dawn of time. The ancient Egyptians and Greeks had many gods, all with their own specific power. The particular insight of the ancient Jews was that there are not lots of gods, each with their particular sphere of influence, but one God who is all powerful - literally ‘almighty’. In ancient Egypt the pharaoh Akhenaten (the father of Tutankhamun) instituted the worship of a single god - the Aten - but on his death Egypt went back to worshipping many deities.

So, the concept of God or gods as having great power is ancient. It is bound up with our concept of God as the creator of the universe; or of various Gods with specific powers.

In the early books of the OT you won’t find much reference to people like Jacob or Moses praying to God to show power, but rather God talking to them and showing his power. So, when the children of Israel were fleeing Egypt after the plagues and were held up at the Red Sea, pursued by the Egyptians and berating Moses for leading them into what they saw as a death trap, it is God who tells Moses what to do - “stretch forth your rod over the sea and it will part for you”; and, after the Israelites had crossed, - “stretch forth your rod again”. Time after time the people believe in God because of what they perceive as evidence of his power over nature. The manna when they are starving in the desert was the next sign; victories over neighbouring tribes another.

The concept of God is therefore intimately bound up with the ability to wield a power that is outside human understanding. A little later in the old testament, God’s power is asked for in prayer. In the first book of Kings, when Ahab became king of Israel and started to worship Baal and Asherah (gods of the surrounding tribes) Elijah first flees for his life but is sustained by a widow-woman whose son becomes sick and dies. Elijah then prays to God in a very challenging way “Is this your care for the widow” but then prays for God to show power “let the breath of life return to this child” - the first account of prayer leading to a resurrection. A little later, Elijah is told by God to confront Ahab and the prophets of Baal. He challenges them to pray to their gods for fire from heaven to burn up a sacrificed bull. They fail and, having made the task even more difficult by drenching everything with water, Elijah prays “Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God and that I am thy servant” The fire fell, and the people acknowledged Elijah’s God as Lord. This was very much a prayer of “Lord God, let me win” - presumably Elijah feared for his life if he had lost. The psalms are full of references to gods power - “The Lord’s right hand and holy arm have won the victory”. “I will make your enemies the footstool under your feet”.

We have taken, and I suggest abused, this old testament concept of God fighting our battles against those with whom we are in conflict. In wartime, God is said by both sides to be fighting for their side of the conflict. “Gott mit uns” in the 14-18 war; “Allah Akhbar” in current conflicts.

Early in the new testament, we have two references to God’s power to do something outside human understanding. First for Elizabeth, who had been praying for a child, conceiving although she was well past conceiving age. Second, when Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel and queries

how she can conceive and give birth to Jesus although she has never 'known a man' she is told that "the power of the most High will overshadow you"; much of Mary's song in the magnificat celebrates God's power.

In the temptations, Satan offers Jesus the power to do things contrary to the natural order - to turn stones into bread and to cast himself down unharmed from the pinnacle of the temple - but Jesus resists the temptation to save himself from starvation and a traumatic death. After the temptations we read that "Jesus, armed with the power of the spirit". I think this is the first time that the power is identified as the spirit, and this phrase recurs time and time again. Jesus is quite willing to use this power, God's power, the power of the Spirit, to do things apparently contrary to the laws of nature. We have only to think of the numerous instances of healing illnesses; the feeding of the five thousand; when in the boat at risk of sinking in the sea of Galilee Jesus rebukes the wind and there is calm; the raising of Lazarus.

In all these you will note that Jesus does not use his power for himself, but for others. It is not that he is not aware of his power. In Matthew we read that, when arrested in the garden of Gethsemane and one of Jesus' followers, to defend him, draws his sword and injures the High Priest's servant, Jesus says "Put up your sword - Do you not suppose that I can't appeal to my Father who would at once send more than 12 legions of angels to my aid?"

On the cross, Jesus is taunted about his power "He saved others; let him come down from the cross and we will believe" It is only that in last desperate cry 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me', that Jesus is shown to be not only divine, but also completely human. Jesus always said that it was not his power, but the power of God working through him. And, of course, that power was revealed most gloriously in Jesus' resurrection three days later.

It is that same power of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, that we and all Jesus' followers are promised through faith and through prayer.

Early in the Acts of the Apostles the disciples, their minds still on worldly power, ask Jesus "Is this when you will make Israel sovereign again?", but Jesus replies that they will receive "Power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, to enable you to bear witness for me". Power, not for their own advancement, but power to enable them to spread the gospel. In Acts and the Epistles we often read of the apostles praying but always for power to spread the gospel. In 1 Corinthians "the Kingdom of God is not just talk; it is living by God's power" and in Ephesians 3 "Glory to God who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish more than we might ask or think".

So, what should the 'take home message' be from thinking about prayers for God to show his power? First, that we must avoid the "God of the gaps" fallacy. That we use gaps in our understanding of the world as evidence God's existence or power. Every word in the bible was written by a human; by humans inspired by the Holy Spirit questing in their minds for explanations of life and all that they see around them. If you accept my definition of power as "the ability to overcome some sort of opposition or undesirable outcome", perhaps the greatest thing we humans have to overcome is the temptation to think only of our own needs and desires. Teilhard de Chardin's great insight as a priest studying evolution was the development in humans of empathy - being able to see a situation from another person's point of view. One of the most important things my life working in medical science on brain function has taught me is that everything we see, hear and experience alters our brain somehow; that is of course the way we learn. You know that lovely modern hymn "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." That is the way the power of the holy spirit can work in us.

Inevitably we shall encounter times of great stress when we will be very tempted to pray "God - use your power to get me out of this mess". But if we look at Jesus's use of prayer we should realise that this is really a shorthand way of saying "God, give me the strength or power to get myself out of this mess". Also, if we follow Jesus' use of prayer as our model, our prayers for power should primarily be prayer for others, rather than for ourselves - and if for ourselves, prayer for the spirit's power to direct our actions and interactions with others and our environment that will be for their good.