

## 2013 Hilary Week 1, Evensong, Jesus College Oxford

### ***Does prayer work?***

Jonah 2  
Luke 11.1-13

In nomine...

Writing a sermon sometimes feels a little bit like writing an essay, or a thesis (sorry, did you want sherry tonight?). Because sometimes you get given a really difficult title. Groan. And sometimes you get given a choice of really difficult titles, so you have to work out which one is least tricky. Potentially quite annoying. More aggravating still: you get to choose your own. Where do you start? You can end up spending ages thinking about a few words, when you've got thousands to write. Extremely annoying, however, is that moment when your title is approved, or published... and you realise it is all your own fault. You've chosen a nightmare title, while sherry-fuelled, mince-pie stuffed, at a time when you're so carried away that it feels really quite normal to be singing carols, in November, and in Welsh.

So, here we are: 'Does prayer work?' No. But before any of you jump from your cushions and enlist me for the British Humanist Association, or, if you're a Chapel Clerk, resign... actually what I'm talking about is *the question*. Yes, the question works in so far as it has, perhaps, grabbed your attention. But it's a bit like asking 'Does having friends *work*?', 'Does being at University *work*?' or indeed 'Does asking questions *work*?' And that sounds a bit weird. What do we mean by *work*?

A very good theme for the beginning of term: Work. Hours – no doubt – staring at a computer screen – no, not FaceBook – trying to do our problem sheets or essays or thesis outlines, when we might be really tempted to play football or go to the bar or watch something funny on iPlayer. More of that – next week.

Prayer doesn't *work* in the same way that – I'm sure – you do. It does not go to a library and work through a textbook, or sit down at a computer and pile paragraphs upon paragraphs in an essay.

And neither does prayer *work* in the same way as your laptop computer, kindle, or any manner of i-gadget works. It's not about function and expected outcomes. Just as we can't say that conversation *works* or that love *works*, so we can't say that prayer works.

Which makes it sound like I'm saying prayer *doesn't work*. Which is quite astonishing no doubt from your Chaplain. But it seems to be the kind of thought expressed by some Christian poetry, like the first words of R.S.Thomas's poem 'In a Country Church':

To one kneeling down no word came,  
Only the wind's song,

Prayer isn't necessarily about *getting the outcome we want*. Neither is it about *getting a response when we want it*. Prayer sometimes only seems to be met by silence, disappointment. Didn't Jesus say (in our second reading today) "Ask and it will be given to you?" Apparently unanswered prayer can challenge our faith, or, even seem to offer evidence that God doesn't exist; or if he does, is apparently giving us a scorpion when we ask for an egg (a reversal of Luke's Gospel earlier). C. S. Lewis, in his book on prayer, *Letters to Malcolm*, wrote:

"Every war, every famine or plague, almost every death-bed, is the monument to a petition that was not granted."

We struggle with the existence of suffering in our world – how can we hope that God intervenes as a result of our prayer if suffering still exists? That's too much to think about here, but do come back and listen next week about the existence of suffering in our world.

But such apparent failure in achieving results doesn't mean that prayer doesn't work. Having our prayers seemingly met by silence doesn't mean that prayer doesn't work – which is what R.S. Thomas is actually saying.

After all, a conversation may not have the end result we want, but it is still a conversation. And someone we write an email to may not respond that day, that month, or even that year. But that doesn't mean that conversation doesn't work, or a letter doesn't work. So prayer may not give the answer that we want; but it may give the answer that God wants us to want.

Our second reading today was Jesus' teaching on how to pray. He gave us The Lord's Prayer. I was given a lovely Egyptian cross over the vacation which has the Lord's Prayer in Arabic on it. Sadly I can't read Arabic. But I can refer to our Gospel texts. One line in the Lord's prayer is 'Your kingdom come'. Interestingly, Luke (as we heard) does not have the next phrase 'your will be done', which we get in Matthew. Perhaps Luke found that a very hard thing to pray. He was wise. He was later to recount how Jesus prayed, just before his death, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."<sup>1</sup> Sometimes we might want our own will to be God's will, and we discover it is different. To pray for God's will to be done can be hard. We might have to brave difficulties. It might not be the easy way out. It might mean harder work for us. For Jesus, it

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 22.42

meant the cross. But the more we pray, the closer to God we become (even though it might not always *feel* like that); and the closer to God we become, the closer our desires become to his desires for us. God's will and our will become one and the same.

So to pray 'Your kingdom come' is in fact rather similar to 'Your will be done'. For the coming of God's kingdom is about God's will being brought about throughout the world. Yes, it is piecemeal – because God has chosen to limit himself – so right now we perceive glimpses of his kingdom but not the fullness of his kingdom. Because his will is not that he should do it and we stand on the sidelines – but that we play a part in the coming of his kingdom, in the bringing about of his will on our earth.

But there's more to the Lord's Prayer. Alongside our huge-scale prayer that God's kingdom come, there is also the minutiae of prayer. We ask God for our daily bread – the little, everyday things that we need. It is OK to ask God for little things as well as big things.

And alongside the petitions, Jesus teaches us that there are other aspects of prayer. Prayer isn't all about asking. It's about confessing our own weaknesses and wrongdoing, it's about trying to live up to the will of God, and it's also about praise of God. So in the first instance we pray 'Forgive us our sins'. Yes, this is a petition – for forgiveness. But that means we have first to recognise our sinfulness, those times we have done wrong, or failed to do right.

Then we try to live out our faith: 'for we also forgive everyone who sins against us'. Pretty hard, sometimes. It may take a lifetime, and we will need God's help in that too. But again, we don't just stand on the sidelines, we try to work with God in bringing about his kingdom, and that means forgiveness and reconciliation.

And last but not least, prayer is also about praise. Think back to the passage from Jonah. It's a prayer – but it doesn't have any requests in it at all. But the result is that the fish 'vomits' Jonah out onto dry land. The very act of prayer, the very act of coming before God, is an acknowledgement of our neediness, and God's power. There is the *humility* we practise in coming before him, whether in sadness or anger, hope or despair, thankfulness or doubt. So there is the *praise* we offer in daring to voice that, in trusting that in some way, *this works*. So we address God 'Father'. And we say 'Hallowed be your name' – your name is to be worshipped, glorified, recognised as holy. And what better a place to do that than in the college that bears the name of Jesus?

So, thinking about our college... You'll see on your music lists, which are scattered about the chapel, and look like this, this rather beautiful archway. I wonder how many times, and not seen words Which reads "Ascendat oratio, descendat gratia": 'May prayer ascend, may grace descend'. It's not a simple statement of what happens, it's a prayer, effectively, that

our prayers may be answered in whatever way chimes with the will of God. So as you walk around first Quad, look at this doorway, think of this, and pray - that these words may be your reality.

Maybe I've raised more questions than I've answered. Maybe I've worked those Sunday evening brains of yours more than you were expecting. So do feel free to come and ask me more over the coming week or term.

But let me also – much more simply – assert in faith and confidence, that God does answer prayer. Because, whether or not it came about as expected at the time, I can reassure you that God has answered many prayers in this Chapel. I can tell you that he has answered many prayers of those who pray at home. I hear your stories, their stories, and I know my own experiences. Talk about it, learn about others' experiences, share your own. Miracles which spew us unexpectedly out of disastrous circumstances still happen. Above all, prayer transforms. It transforms those for whom we pray. It transforms the world around us. And it transforms us who pray. I am changed by my daily prayer, here, or at home, or in the bus. And I know that you too by prayer can be open to the transforming grace of God.

Prayer has a good 'work-life' balance. Yes, it works (often in unseen or unexpected ways); and thereby it gives life. Have faith in prayer. May you spend time with God, and may God's grace continue to transform your lives and the life of this college. And may you learn every day to say 'Amen' to that.