

When Prayer Doesn't Work

Reading: Matthew 6:5-8

For my final sermon here are Assistant Priest the vicar has given me the topic - 'When prayer doesn't work'. Nothing like letting me off with something easy. Nothing like allowing me to ride off into the sunset, like what I did on my holiday. Oh no - when prayer doesn't work!! Great.

Prayer is such a tricky thing at times. Prayer is ok when things aren't too desperate; when things aren't too close to home. But when things come to ahead, when there is turmoil in the air, disaster at the front door; when there is desperation and anxiety and hopelessness prayer can often be frustrating and inscrutable. Especially when there is silence or there is no apparent answer... when hope slowly, inevitably fades.

These times tend to happen when people are ill or are facing certain dramas in life. The horrifying news of an accident, the diagnosis of an illness... whatever it may be. Imagine if Ebola broke out in Richmond and several hundred people dropped dead - I wonder how our prayers would change? What would happen if we really did only have daily bread and no more?

Would our prayers become more desperate do you think?

So what do we do when prayer doesn't work?

Of course there are those among us who bravely assert that in all things God is in control - even when prayers aren't apparently answered - they are, we say - even when they aren't. That regardless of ourselves or our circumstance there is always hope. But in the face of tragedy, when we are on our knees pleading and begging for an answer it is difficult to remain objective, pragmatic when all we want is a solution. In the end we accept whatever may come and we have learnt to cope with this.

And this is sometimes exacerbated when we read in the Bible of God answering all kinds of prayers and doing all kinds of marvellous things - sometimes in the most bizarre of circumstances. A person drops an axe head in the water and prayer brings it to the surface... The sun standing still so an army could continue to fight... A prayer for fire to come down from heaven and burn up the offerings... for a fleece to be wet or dry...

Prayer and healing are closely linked. So things don't get better for us when we read stories of God apparently answering prayers instantly and telling us that we can do the same thing. Or when we read of the shadow of Peter healing people as he walked by, or of handkerchiefs of Paul healing people with no problem at all. And yet we know that this isn't the case for us. People don't get healed when we walk past. Sure there are accounts of people getting better - but let's be honest the miraculous doesn't happen here in NZ as we read about in the Bible. Because there aren't people flooding places because of the healings taking place like we read about in the Gospels. The miracles today aren't so obvious because we don't have crowds of people

flocking towards us. There isn't an exodus from the hospital to the church when all hope is lost - the paralysed walk, the blind see, the deaf hear...

And of course we have theories and have ways of coping with this reality. We say death is the ultimate healing. Or the sickness brings greater grace into our life... Or God said no to our prayer - so end of story. Rubbish!

So today we claim healings and answers when the miraculous could easily be the natural. A person recovers because of the amazing healing qualities within people. Or the other great answer to prayer - a carpark is found because a person happens to finish shopping at the same time as you arrive - an amazing miracle.

But what if we have got everything completely wrong? In fact we are so out of whack with our theology we can't imagine another way of thinking about prayer - something so radical, so uncontrollable - something so "out there" that many Christians never talk about it. And our illusion is throughout the church clergy and laity alike.

What if prayer is not about anything we ask for? What if we have prayer so back to front what it is like pushing a horse with a cart uphill - it just don't work that well... It is like trying to hold a water bottle with water in our hands - it just don't work.

Today's title is "When prayer doesn't work". Which implies when we pray we don't get the answers or responses we want. But what if pray was never intended for this. That prayer was never intended to get the things we want. That in fact prayer is all and only about what God wants! And the hurdle, the incredible difficulty we have is that we don't really know what God wants. We may think we know what God wants. But in reality it is actually what we want. We live in a time and place where self-actualisation permeates throughout society. The sense of being in control, making choices and decisions - having our way or at least our opinion. We have ministers teaching us how to achieve success - worldly success. We have books helping us to be all we can be. We live in a world where we believe we are in control - more or less. The world is our oyster.

So when it comes to prayers we have been brought up with the idea of bringing things to God as a kind of "to do" list. Sure we can generalise and say that God wants all the good things we can imagine. God wants to heal and help and answer to do miracles and healings and anything else we can imagine. Of course God wants good and not evil. But imagine if the problem is us... that we are in the way!?!?!

Our prayer life - our faith has become about us - even if we are praying for other people or events. We are telling God what to do. And in a very real and scary way, in a way that perhaps we don't realise we are trying to create God into our image. Now sure - our image of God, we hope is very biblical and accurate. But Exodus 20 is pretty blunt - you shall have no other gods but me. Even if those other gods seem really good and quite like YHWH. f we are

truly honest with ourselves - the kind of honesty that comes when nothing more can be lost - we want a God who will do what we want.

So when we read a passage like - "Ask for anything in my name and I will do it" (John 14), our natural reaction is what we want to ask for over against "in my name". Or - You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it (Mat 21:22), we think of anything we can pray for over against "faith".

There is a deep and unmistakable connection between our prayers and God's will, our prayers and Faith, our prayers and the Kingdom of God. The reality could be that we are not meant to pray for anything ourselves, but rather we pray what God wants us to pray for. That this is the way prayer works. Not for us to think up the good thing we need to pray for, like God needs our suggestions or ideas - because this is absurd in the extreme.

But that prayer is God working through us - initiating and confirming and performing the miracles through us. Not the other way around. There is a very important point Jesus makes in regards to his ministry found in John, "I can do nothing on my own. I judge as God tells me. Therefore, my judgment is just, because I carry out the will of the one who sent me, not my own will." (John 5:30).

When we read of the lives of people in the Bible - Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, the prophets - we see that the initiative came from God always. These people did what God asked them to do. Some weren't that keen. But they are known as the mouth piece of God. Their lives, their sacrifices, their theology centered on God's will. Obedience mostly and when they didn't things quickly got bad - even with the best on intentions.

And perhaps if we think about it we can easily see where miraculous prayers could lead people. If we had the power to heal and do miracles where would it lead us, what would it open up within us if we weren't truly with God? Could we follow the right path or would be quickly go the way we want to go - thinking, perhaps with all confidence and certainty, that we are doing what God wants us to. But perhaps it won't lead people to God... I don't know. Could we handle the popularity, the power, the success and crowds?

When prayer doesn't work it isn't because God doesn't work. It isn't even because we don't work. It is because we are looking in all the wrong places - just take a look at the Psalms. When these people prayed to God about the dire situation they were in things changed markedly when they remembered God. So it doesn't matter if evil people prosper - God has things under control. It doesn't matter if enemies surround us - God is in control.

When prayer doesn't work it is simply because we are getting things wrong. We are wanting God to work through us. When the Bible clearly shows that people are to work through God. The difference is subtle. But the difference it makes will be obvious, I think.

The biggest problem we have in the West especially is that our faith isn't an all-consuming fire. It is a life style choice where we pick and choose what we want to do and not do. We tell God what we want to happen and what we don't want to happen. It is only when we have no control that faith becomes tricky. But perhaps being in a state of no control - utter dependence on God is the key. So we don't rely on our finances or our natural abilities or our resources. We rely on God.

And for some of us this may feel like a scary thought - being totally dependent on God - being led by God, praying for miracles on behalf of God - seeing what our life may actually become...