

JL Sermon : Luke 11 vv5 -13, 8th October 2020

I want you to imagine that you're out and about in Witney (it's up to you whether in your imagination, this is in a pre or post covid world) and that you bump into one of your closest Christian friends. You haven't seen them for a while, so you decide to go for a coffee (again, it's up to you whether this involves masks, social distancing, whether its in a coffee shop or at home - it's your imagination remember). So you're chatting and your friend is asking you what you've been up to, how you are, how's the family, children , grandchildren and so on.. All the normal stuff that you'd expect a good friend to ask. And then in the flow of this 'normal' conversation comes this question :

'And How's your prayer life?' 'How's your prayer life?'

How do you feel about being asked this question? Does it feel part of the natural flow of your conversation? And will you feel comfortable answering it, as you would any question about your earthly family? I'd venture to suggest that for some, maybe even many in our congregation, this question would sit awkwardly in the flow of conversation both in the asking and in being expected to respond. Certainly I don't think I've been asked it directly in my time worshipping here in Witney, at least not in the normal flow of conversation, maybe only in more formal settings like in PDP meetings or the process of discernment that I'm currently going through.

And, of course that's made me ponder, in my usual way, why? Why might this not be the most natural question for close Christian friends to ask each other and why might one feel awkward answering it? In one sense, it should be the most natural question. After all we're comfortable about chatting about our nearest and dearest so why would we feel awkward or anything less than natural discussing the most important relationship in our lives; our relationship with our loving creator Lord.

One reason why we might feel uncomfortable is because our personal relationship with God is so important and so intimate. And for this reason, it isn't something that we'd talk about it casually over coffee. I know that for many of my friends this is true. This type of conversation requires a great deal of mutual trust and needs to be conducted in an appropriate environment. Nevertheless, if we truly believe that our relationship with God is the source of

'living water' in our lives, shouldn't we be more open to this type and stream of conversation with one another?

This may be a valid reason for any reticence over the 'how's your prayer life' question. Perhaps a less positive one maybe that we're concerned about effectiveness of our intercessions. In today's Gospel passage, Jesus appears to make it all sound so straightforward. Ask, seek, knock and it will be given, it will be found, answered. But what about those experiences of prayer when this doesn't appear to be the case? Maybe we're somewhat self-conscious, particularly if we are ordained or in a position of leadership within the church to confess that our prayers seemingly haven't been answered or that we're not the power houses of prayer that many expect us to be.

As I've got older I have begun to understand that God does indeed answer our prayers, but maybe not in the way that we expect or demand or nor in the timescales in which we want God to work. Over 20 years ago when I was still married with two young daughters but struggling with my sexuality I prayed earnestly and often that God would transform me and thus protect my beloved family. At the time it seemed that that prayer wasn't answered . I came out, left my wife and children and turned my back on God for nearly 20 years.

However looking back, I can now see that God was at work answering my prayers but not in the way that I had expected or even imagined. I may not have been transformed in terms of my sexual orientation (something that I now think God cares not one iota about) but 20 years on I believe that I have been transformed in terms of my understanding of the all enveloping depth and breadth of God's love, mercy, and compassion not only to me and tom all of us, but to the whole of God's creation. A much more fundamental transformation than I could ever have expected when I originally prayed that prayer.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus encourages us:

- to persevere in prayer
- to be bold in approaching God with our requests and
- to trust that God will answer our prayers not just with good things (from an earthly perspective) but with the very best gift conceivable - that of our Lord, the Holy Spirit living within us.

We're often encouraged to be specific in our prayer requests to God. However the more I reflect on my prayer life, I have to acknowledge that God knows the

situations or people that I've been called to pray for and that God has the best plan and purpose for each of them. And so, I have begun to simply lift these situations and people to God for God's blessing. Maybe that sounds a bit woolly, so I'm very happy to be corrected in this thinking.

Going back to what I was saying earlier, the challenge to persevere in prayer can also give rise to feelings of guilt. Maybe I haven't prayed enough, and I haven't been consistent in my prayers for specific situations or people and maybe that's why God doesn't appear to have answered them.

Today's gospel passage is immediately preceded by Jesus teaching the disciples how to pray, in the words of what we now refer to as the the Lord's prayer. Funnily enough it's the Lord's prayer that many of us, me included pray most consistently and often. It's the petitions in the Lord's prayer – Your Kingdom Come, Your Will be done, Give us this day, Forgive us our Sins, Deliver us from evil – that we pray most often, that we persevere in. And God answers these often repeated petitions by continuing to transform our hearts as we pray.

How? As Jesus Himself promises,

'If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will God, the Creator of all Being, give the Holy Spirit to those who ask.'