

Matthew 7. 7-12. Ask and it will be given to you. 25<sup>th</sup> February 2021

Ask and it will be given to you, search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks, receives, and everyone who searches finds and for everyone who knocks the door will be opened.

Really? Do you always get what you pray for?

Sometimes our condition as sinners may mean that, motivated by selfishness and worldliness, we ask inappropriately, even if we are blind to the inappropriateness. And then, we would hardly expect God to give us what we ask for. Though perhaps God might do that for our ultimate spiritual benefit, something we perhaps see happening in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Still, I don't think we can say that all praying where we don't get the result we want must, in virtue of that fact, be sinful. When we pray for someone to be healed, for instance, this can surely be a motion of pure love and goodwill, understood rightly by us as attuned to God's love and goodwill and stemming from our commitment to the God who bids us love our neighbour. And yet the healing we pray for may not come. We ask and it is not given.

Famously, St Paul asked and was not given: in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to the Corinthians he writes

a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10.)

Paul was not given what he *wanted* but *was* given something *better* than what he wanted. He was given an explanation of the thorn, an enhanced understanding of the working of God's grace, and a contentment in suffering and a capacity for a truer service of Christ arising from that enhanced understanding. A straightforward granting of prayer here would have left Paul a lesser agent of Christ. Yet had the ungranted prayer not been made, the spiritual gain would not have accrued.

Another ungranted prayer:

Jesus fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." ... for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." ..., he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is not clear about what God's will might be. So he prays conditionally: if it is possible; if this cannot pass unless I drink it. He wants something, it seems, that is in fact not in accord with the will of God. But what he also wants, what he

wants above all, is that the will of his Father should be done. Perhaps it's not quite accurate to say he prays for something he doesn't get. In any case, we may suppose that the utterance of the prayer which includes the possibility of something being given that isn't actually given strengthens Jesus' resolve to do his Father's will, to drink the cup if that is what must be done. Praying the prayer, as with Paul, delivers a benefit, if not the benefit Jesus conditionally asks for.

It may be that we can say that prayers of petition, at any rate when they are not contaminated by our sinfulness, are never ineffectual. We may not get what we want but we will be given something good. I think to understand things this way allows our response to the invitation Jesus offers us in today's Gospel to be other than that sceptical 'Really?' with which I started.

In fact, it may be partly a matter of translation that inclines us to take Jesus' words as an assurance that we will get what we ask for. It's the 'it' in 'Ask and it will be given you,' where we perhaps take the 'it' to refer to what has been asked for. I'm not sure we should – one way of rendering what in our version is translated 'knock and *the door* will be opened' is 'knock and *it* shall be opened'. 'It' here doesn't refer to a door; rather the English passive formation means, 'there will be an opening,' and likewise, with 'it will be give, 'there will be a giving': in the Greek there is neither 'it' nor 'door', just the passive forms of the verbs 'give' and 'open'. That allows us to think that in response to our asking, there will be a giving, that when we search, we will find something, that if we knock an opening will occur - but that in none of these cases will what is given, found, opened up necessarily be the thing we asked for, that which we searched for, or even the door we knocked at. All we are assured of is that, in response to our asking, searching, knocking, God will give us the 'good things' of which Jesus speaks and which he leaves, tellingly, undefined.

So, it seems, we are not ultimately going to be disappointed when we pray out of good intent and in a humble awareness that what we are asking may not be what God wants. We are to ask, even in our uncertainty as to whether what we want is aligned with God's will. Paul speaks in Romans of the Spirit's assistance in our prayer when we do not know how we ought to pray. '...the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.'

It seems that the Spirit will make up for our defects in prayer, and, certainly, however defectively, we are to pray; we are to ask, we are to seek, we are to knock. The threefold formulation indicates Jesus' urgent insistence on the point. We are to bring ourselves, and that includes our longings, our wills, to God because God wants our engagement, wants our trust, wants our love – and wants the best for us. But if we fail to make the approach to God in prayer, fail to ask, search, knock, (even if that failure arises from an honourable sense that it's God's will, not ours that should be done), it's not clear that God can bless us with the good things he is ready to give us, which might include, of course, the modification of our longings and the conversion of our wills.

However, when we do make the engagement of petitionary prayer, far from being

disappointed by a heartlessness that would give stone or snake in place of bread or fish, we are likely to find ourselves surprised by how what we have been given, have found, have had opened up for us is a different good, perhaps a better good than what we had desired. God can honour our praying by giving us more and better than we could pray for or imagine, as Ephesians has it.

Or is this too facile? I suppose I have to leave the answer to that to your reviewing of your disappointed prayers and your sense of whether what you got instead of what you wanted was a good, perhaps even a better gift. And, actually, it's not just disappointed prayer – it's all the failures and disappointments and disasters of your lives. Have they, negative as they appeared, as they *were*, have they, nevertheless, brought you good gifts from God? Perhaps an asking, a searching, a knocking can break open a good gift concealed in your suffering, even now.

Jesus' conditional prayer to be delivered from the cross was refused. I've suggested that the prayer is likely to have fortified his resolve to serve his Father's will. But of course, there is a much greater reward for Jesus' engagement with his Father, his trust, his love, much greater gifts in response to his agonised asking, searching, knocking. In the cross, the opportunity for the expression, the enactment of the greatest of loves, after the cross, the resurrection. The faithful prayer of Jesus' humanity is not answered as he would want, or would have wants, and yet is wholly honoured by his loving Father – *our* loving Father.

'For everyone who asks, receives, and everyone who searches finds and for everyone who knocks, it will be opened.'

Really?

By the grace of God, Yes. Really. Keep asking, keep searching, keep knocking.

