

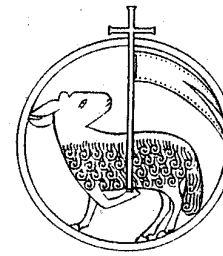
Letting God be God

The main thing is to keep praying no matter what we feel and not be discouraged by seeming failure. The Christian life is full of paradoxes and often God allows us to experience weakness and failure in order to prevent a much worse sin, pride, from creeping in. We have to learn that the effectiveness of our prayer does not depend upon what we feel like when we are praying. The Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14 presumably went away from his prayer feeling very satisfied with himself; the Publican was conscious only of his sin and his need, yet he was the one who went away justified.

And so we find that if we persevere in prayer through all the dull days as well as those when it is easy; if we come back to it no matter how many times we let it lapse, on looking back over many years we may come to see that we have indeed been changed by it. We begin to realize that happiness does not necessarily consist in getting what we want, or in getting rid of what can't be got rid of, but in a different vision. Prayer changes our vision so that we begin to see events and situations with God's eyes and so they are transformed. What seems to unprayerful eyes a tragedy becomes shot through with God's glory. It is this that can make a person who has watched a friend or relative suffer and die of cancer or some other dreadful disease be able to say that anything which can evoke such tenderness between the two of them cannot be totally evil. There are many who will witness that those days which seem to be darkest and most full of suffering can be the very ones where the presence of God is known to be strongest.

It is when our wills are in line with God's will that all our prayers are answered. As Julian of Norwich said in the 14th century:

I am the ground of thy beseeching; first it is my will that thou have it; and after that I make thee to will it; and after I make thee to beseech it and thou beseechest it. How then should it be that thou shouldst not have thy beseeching?



FAITH praying and believing ON THE EARTH

PRAYER AS INTERCESSION:

Letting God be God

We probably all struggle at times with prayer, especially intercessory prayer. Two people have cancer: we pray; one is cured, the other dies. One marriage breaks up; in the other there is reconciliation. Is it our prayer that is wrong in some cases and right in others? Is it that we haven't enough faith? It is said that God has three answers to prayer: Yes, No, and Wait. But that makes it look as if God has already decided what he is going to do and our prayer is merely an effort to get him to change his mind. We are also aware that an answer "yes" to my prayer may involve a "No" to someone else's prayer.

Of course this is a far too simplistic idea of intercessory prayer. We should not pray to the Father in order to get him to change his mind about something, but in order to change *our* minds. It has been said that:

Prayer is not an easy way of getting what we want but a difficult way of becoming what God wants us to be.
(Fr. Andrew SDC).

or:

*Magic is asking God to do our will,
Prayer is asking God for the power to do His will.*
(Robert Foxcroft)

These sayings bring a new perspective to prayer. It then becomes more a matter of bringing our wills into line with God's will, so that whatever we pray for *is* God's will.

The first thing to ascertain is, do we really want to do God's will? There is in mankind an inbuilt resistance to being dependant on God. We want to be masters of our own ships, captains of our own souls, and that inevitably leads us into conflict. A lot of the time, if we are truthful, the most we can say is "*I want to want to do God's will*". But that is a beginning and whenever there is a chink in our armour protecting us from the workings of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit can enter and begin his work of regeneration and renewal.

"Prayer is a difficult way of becoming what God wants us to be." Prayer is hard work. First of all we have to make time for it; there are so many other things which crowd our lives and seem to take priority that it takes real self-discipline to say "*no*" to some of them and carve out some time during the day for prayer. Then if we actually get to the point where we begin to pray, immediately our minds are distracted and go wandering all over the place and we become easily discouraged. The main thing to realise is that this is common experience and so we should not get discouraged. Archbishop Michael Ramsey, when asked how much time he spent in prayer each day, answered, "*Two minutes, but it takes me an hour to do it*".

Intercessory prayer, though, is not a matter of telling God what we would like him to do, and then adding piously "*if it is your will*". Jesus said "*What ever you ask the Father in my name, he will do it*". (John 16:23) and "*if you who are evil know how to give good things to your children, how much more will the Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask for it*". (Luke 11:13) We must believe that always God wills what is best for us and what we need to do is enter into that will so that whatever we ask for he wants to give. This way of praying involves a change in *us* and changing our patterns of thought and behaviour is not easy. "*Prayer is a difficult way of becoming what God wants us to be*". It is true that the change is the work of the Holy Spirit, but we need to cooperate, to do our bit. As the saying goes, "*Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not*".

Another thing that prevents our prayer being answered is the divergence

between what we are praying for and our actions. "*If we see a poor person who has not got enough food to live on and is in need of clothes: if we say 'I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty' without giving him the means to do it, that prayer is ineffectual*" (James 2:16). If we are going to pray for the relief of poverty and distress, we must do our part in relieving them, if it is possible in our circumstances, either by giving to charities or by voluntary work, or by making sure that our investments are ethical or by doing whatever little we can to help others worse off than ourselves. Most of us can do something practical to show that our prayer is more than well wishing from the comfort of our armchairs. If we are not able to help directly at least we can try to be peacemakers in our own homes.

Then there is the fact that *sin* prevents our prayer from being effective. If the prayer of a righteous man effects much (James 5:16), the prayer of the unrighteous effects little. It is useless to pray for an end to violence in Ireland or Kosovo, or go on marches demonstrating against nuclear weapons if every day we are firing off our own missiles of gossip, spite, envy, hatred, scorn at people around us. All our sins, laziness, greed, infidelity and above all, pride, which makes *me* the centre of my world without reference to the needs of other people, let alone God, cloud our vision and work to lessen our sense of God.

It can be a useful metaphor if we think of intercession not as telling God in our own words of the needs and sorrows of the world, but as focusing the beams of the love of God where the need is greatest. We can liken ourselves to magnifying glasses which are made to let light through but have become opaque with dirt. Our efforts to pray have a twofold action. They help to remove some of the dirt and make us conscious of how much dirt there is. As more light is able to penetrate the glass so it shows up the dirt much as we are aware of dust motes in the air particularly when the sun is shining. We become more aware of our sins and of anything which is holding us back from God. This can be disconcerting as we feel we are going backwards in our spiritual life, but in fact it is the work of the Holy Spirit and therefore to be welcomed.