

SUNDAY 17C ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD 2022

Do you ever hear an academic or so-called expert get asked a question and then they don't really answer the question but give another answer entirely? It can be infuriating at times. In fact, it happens in our gospel today. The disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray. And as so often happens he doesn't give a direct answer. Lord, teach us to pray, is the request. Instead of doing that Jesus launches into the experience of prayer. He doesn't say what prayer is, there's no teaching about how it works, there's no argument to convince us that it's worthwhile. No, he just goes straight into "say this". We are not even told to pray in our own words, but in his words. We are to repeat his words in order to try and put the same mind in us. One assumes that repeating his words helps our prayer to become like his.

Jesus is simply saying, 'this is the experience, try it, and work from there'. The only way to learn to pray is to do it. We do not learn to pray just by reading books about prayer. We have to set aside time to actually do it in order to learn how to pray. To start

with we are to use the words of Jesus himself. Eventually our prayers would become his prayers.

2

So we begin to pray, we use Jesus words, we use our own words. What then? Being the sort of people we are we may well ask 'does it work?' 'Is it achieving anything?' 'can we see results?' We keep looking for answers to our prayers. It's almost as if we don't trust God to do something with our requests. We ask, and we want the answer to be presented to us obviously and immediately. The parable Jesus tells suggests we should expect answers. Ask and it will be given to you.

Are we then to ask and expect to receive what we ask for? Or are our prayers of request no different from the wishes we make when we blow out the candles on the birthday cake? Are they just pious hopes for something we would like, but cannot really believe we will ever receive?

Those prayers we make which ask for things, the requests we put to God, should be compared with

other specimens of the same thing. What happens for instance, when we make a request of someone?

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We might ask for a raise in pay; we may ask a friend to feed the cat while we are on holiday; we might ask someone to marry us. It doesn't matter what we ask, sometimes we get what we ask for and sometimes not. But when our request is granted, it is not nearly as easy as we might suppose to prove with any certainty that our asking caused our receiving. Did we get what we asked for because we asked, or would it have happened anyway? Our employer may have known we could get better money elsewhere and was going to give us a raise in any case. Our friend may be a humane person who wouldn't have let the cat starve, even if we'd forgotten to make arrangements. As for the person who consents to marry you, are you sure they hadn't decided to do so even before you asked?

4

There is a doubt about whether our request actually causes us to get what we ask for. We might have been

going to receive it anyway. But what the request often does is to open the way for us to receive what was going to be ours. These requests we make of each other are no different from our requests to God. When we make a request of God we open the way for him to give us what God wants to be ours.

From the parable of the man who goes to his friend and persists in his request for bread, one might think that Jesus is telling us to persist in our requests. In fact the opposite is true of God. The friend in the parable gets up and gives the man what he asks for because he persists in his request. The contrast is that God will give to us out of friendship so there is no need for persistence. God gives because he loves, not because we persist in our requests.

5

"Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ...If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy

Spirit to those who ask him.” God is not less generous than us. God is more generous.

But what of our requests which seem to go unanswered? Does that mean that God has withdrawn his love? Prayer is not magic, nor is it a machine. It doesn't function automatically. Prayer of request is just one part of our friendship with God. When we make requests to those people we know, that asking is just a small part of our friendship.

If our friendships consisted entirely of making requests, our friends would soon be our enemies. Friendship is not just about asking for things. The requests we make of our friends cannot always be answered. Sometimes it would be wrong for us to have what we desire for ourselves. But the point of the request is that it strengthens our friendships.

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It strengthens them because the request is a sign of the love that exists between us. We love one another, therefore we can ask. Asking allows our friendships to grow and develop and mature whether we get what

we ask for or not. If our human friendships grow because of our requests, then it is even more so with our friendship with God.

Isn't that the point of all prayer? That we become closer to one another and to God. It doesn't matter whether our prayers are requests, prayers of praise, confession or thanksgiving; the purpose is to increase our friendship with God. As friendship grows it does not matter whether or not our prayers of request are answered in the way we want, or if they are not answered at all. The important thing will be the friendship itself which will grow and develop because we trust God enough to ask. By asking we show the love we have for God and each other. One of my favourite ways to pray is the divine office. This is essentially the reciting of psalms and canticles. Many might confuse this with just 'reading'. But in fact, this is one of the most ancient ways of prayer. For as I said we often confuse prayer with requests. Prayer is as much about us as it is about God. Praying the Psalms for example gives us a language for prayer just as the Lord's Prayer does today. May I encourage you this week to think about how you pray. Perhaps look at how you can pray the offices of

the church too. I am always happy to explore this with people.

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And as we come to this Eucharist this morning we will ask many things for our lives. We also remember that God's generosity is beyond our understanding. God will give us more than we desire by giving us the Holy Spirit to dwell within us. God's love is all we need.