

## Getting to know our Faith and our Church

"Does God answer our prayers?"

Several years ago I attended a Lenten course conducted by John Nockells. He said, in effect, that God does not answer our prayers but that we should continue to pray anyway. One of the biggest stumbling blocks on my journey of faith is prayer. I find it hard to pray. We all know, or know of, people who have lost their faith because their prayers have not been answered – a loved one lost in battle or failed to survive an operation or an illness. I am aware of the prayer (but unable to quote) I asked for A you gave me B. I asked for X you gave me Y. I am also conscious of the well-known prayer of St. Chrysostom which reads '... when two or three are gathered together in Thy name Thou wilt grant their requests; fulfil now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of Thy servants as may be most expedient to them.'

Day after day countless numbers pray for peace and yet the world is wracked with war and conflict. Every year there is a week of prayer for Christian Unity and although there has been some progress – unity is still far off. From these examples I am forced to one of three conclusions: –

- a. We do not have sufficient faith to have our prayers answered.
- b. God believes that conflict, discord and disagreements "are most expedient to us".
- or
- c. God does not answer our prayers but follows his own agenda.

Please comment."

I am thankful that the invitation to respond to this month's question is phrased as 'Please comment' rather than 'Please answer'! Over the years Christians have tried to make sense of the senses and emotions of joy, confusion, dismay or relief that they feel when they reflect on what has happened after they have prayed for something specific. There is no absolute explanation for either the times of joy or the times of dismay. People have however recognised several relevant factors: Firstly, it could be wrong to assume that 'yes' is the only acceptable answer to a prayer. God may, for reasons that are unclear from a human perspective, answer 'no' or 'not yet'. It is possible that we as human beings ask for the wrong thing or at the wrong time.

When pain or suffering does not decrease despite fervent prayers, it is natural to wonder how God can bring anything good out of such a bad situation. But the Christian faith has always involved trust that, even in disappointments and setbacks, 'God works for good for those who love him.' The symbolism of the way of the cross is relevant here – sometimes it is the way that the cross is borne that matters, not finding a way to avoid it.

Secondly, it may be that we are confused by God's response to sincere prayer because God is working on a completely different timescale. Although it seems from a human perspective that prayer has made no difference, the answer may be experienced some time later.

The Prayer of St Chrysostom, one of the great preachers whose statues adorn the pulpit at St John's, to which the question refers is as follows:

Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplication to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will be in the midst of them: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. Amen.

And the passage, attributed to an unknown soldier of the American civil War, included in our main service booklet at St John's, which reminds us that our prayers will be answered, but maybe not in the ways which we expect ...

"I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;

I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey,

I asked for health, that I might do greater things;

I was given infirmity, that I might do better things,

I asked for riches, that I might be happy;

I was given poverty, that I might be wise,

I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;

I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;

I was given life, that I might enjoy all things,

I got nothing that I asked for

– but everything I had hoped for.

Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered,

I am, among all men, most richly blessed."

Prayer is far more than intercession, asking for particular events to happen. Prayer in its fulness is a life-long complex journey of opening our hearts and minds to an indwelling of God's grace so that the prayers that come forth are not simply ours but those of God's Holy Spirit working within us. That can be a disturbing and challenging process: I recall a conversation after a meeting where prayers had been offered and several times those praying had mentioned gifts of strength and courage. I commented afterwards that those gifts were probably rightly prayed for but that they also reflect that the journey ahead was not going to be easy, things might get a lot worse than they were, and then the gifts of strength and courage would be an invaluable blessing – not only to those involved but also to those who saw the example of how they faced their 'way of the cross'.

Were I to write at far greater length I know that I would still be far short of answering the whole question – but I hope that the dimension of prayer that includes embracing the way of the cross and walking it in the strength and grace of God may be relevant not only seasonally as we move from Lent through Holy Week into Eastertide, but also as a dimension of deeper engagement in faith with God who in Christ walked the way of the cross for us.