

## Prayer – John 14

How many people here know someone who calls themselves an atheist? A strong show of hands! And how many people here know someone who says “I’m not religious”? Even stronger. Of course this is part of being a Christian today. We live and work among people who simply can’t begin to understand our faith.

There are lots of aspects of Christianity that these friends of ours don’t understand. But chief among them is prayer. This is a big stumbling-block for lots of people. It’s partly because of the sort of Bible reading we’ve heard here this morning: John 14:13-14 – “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” OK, say most sensible people. That seems fairly clear. I ask – God does it. Let’s give it a try, shall we? Can we have peace in the world? Can we have an end to famine in the Third World? Can we have a cure for cancer? Even just cancer in children?

It seems to most people to be a fact that these requests aren’t met in any straightforward way. What Jesus seems to be saying will happen just doesn’t happen. So either the people who carry on believing in this God are stupid or haven’t thought it through. Hence the outright contempt there is for Christians among so many atheists today – especially the famous ones.

But since the earliest days, Christians have known that it isn’t quite like this. Jesus, after all, prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, that he could avoid the suffering to come. And that request wasn’t met. So Christians have known since the very beginning that prayer isn’t a matter of room-service, making requests that the management has to meet. So why are we still praying?

Prayer is first and foremost an acceptance that we’re not in control of our lives. God is the creator of everything from nothing, the reason why there is something rather than nothing. God is the one in control of our lives. Atheists and other non-religious types often think that you start being a Christian by believing that God exists – you look at a number of faulty arguments and then you decide to ignore their faults and believe. But that’s a misconception. The beginning of the Christian faith is this issue of control. If anyone’s in total control of the universe, it’s not me. Whoever or whatever is God – that’s not me. So – “thy will (not my will) be done”. Prayer is accepting you’re not in control and talking about it.

Secondly, prayer is about priority. Prioritizing is a massively important part of life, and part of wisdom. People sometimes think wisdom is a matter of profound and complex philosophical ideas. Maybe it is, at some level. But I’ve never found it very helpful to see

wisdom in that way. Wisdom, I think, is about contemplating the bewildering variety of choices that confront us, and deciding which choices to make. We choose what we attend to in life. What should we attend to today? Maybe you're thinking about a particular task that needs doing; maybe you're oppressed by putting it off; maybe you're unwilling to talk to a particular person; maybe you have a problem with someone and you don't know how to proceed. Prayer is a way of prioritizing. A lot of the time, that prioritizing will take the form of realizing that your own concerns are petty and your anxiety about them overblown. That's healthy, I think. Equally, prayer challenges the clichés of prayer. We prioritize one conflict, when we pray for peace. Right now, we pray for Syria. But even as we pray we should be reminded that Syria isn't the only conflict on earth, so that if that one were resolved, peace on earth would be a reality. Where am I ignorant, Lord? What don't I know? Have I come before you with a true knowledge of your world, or just the small sense that I've lazily developed of suffering somewhere? If prayer teaches us to prioritize, then it constantly also teaches us to expand our horizons.

Thirdly, prayer is a test of faith. This seems old-fashioned these days. We want to see God as somehow undemanding. In our minds, the whole idea of God as demanding takes us back to the petty-minded tyrant of the Victorian age, who sent children to hell for misbehaving on Sundays. But in our reaction to some bad theology, we probably should be wary of falling into an opposite error. Christianity makes demands on us. Being a Christian can never mean just getting on with your ordinary life. It demands radical change that will be visible in your life. For me, that change was a desire when I was in my early twenties to turn away from all the flippancy and facetiousness and distancing irony of modern life (which I found very comfortable indeed) and be serious – hence this rather serious sermon today! For you the demands may be different. But be sure that Christianity makes real demands - and sometimes they are almost unbearable. Almost, but not quite. Prayer is demanding because if God answers prayer at all, then sometimes he says “no”. And then it is up to us to see how God's love may be at work in what we are given. We will either get what we want, or what we need. It will not always be what we asked for – and sometimes it will be terrible. I have been with people whose children have died – and it is so hard to say that God's will is being done through childhood leukaemia or a senseless accident that to pray at all seems like an obscenity. It is the most profound challenge. But if we believe in God's infinite goodness and love being a reality, we have to take that challenge head-on. We have to say, if this is God's will, how is his love revealed here? Once we have said that, sometimes – just sometimes – the grace of God is revealed in surprising and beautiful ways. In other times we continue in perplexity. Sometimes the God we believe in is hard to understand. But the alternative is not a God who is easy to understand. The alternative is no God at all; and the

experience of your child dying of leukaemia or a senseless accident is no easier for those who believe in no God.

Fourthly, prayer is simply about intimacy with God – and therefore about honesty. John 14:1-14 is not a sort of travel brochure. When Jesus says he goes “to prepare a place for you”, he’s not offering you an accommodation deal. He’s saying to his disciples that the closeness they experience with him now won’t end. He will always be with them. The “many rooms” in the house of the Father is just a metaphor for the generous closeness of Jesus’ relationship with his followers. Prayer is an invitation to that house, and an intimate embrace. And that is why honesty is so important in prayer. There is no intimacy without honesty. Anyone who’s married knows that. When we approach God in prayer, we must be prepared to be revealed as who we really are. It’s not often a pretty sight. Prayer isn’t prayer unless it finds you out. You might have to say something like this: “Father God, it’s me. A lot of what I think is misguided. A lot of what I’ve done was wrong. I’m often self-centred, and self-regarding. And when I try and be less selfish and do things for others – well, often it turns out that I’m doing them for me. Lord, I realize sometimes that I must be deluded about many things. I try and present to the world a happy and functioning and successful person. But you know I’m messed-up and a bit crap.” If you bring a dishonest self to prayer, the intimacy of the love of God won’t work. But bring honesty to yourself in prayer and the love of God will transform you, and make you fit to love yourself and therefore fit to love others.

So in prayer, we say: whoever is God, it’s not me. In prayer we say: of all the things that I want, or I say that I want, or that I think the world wants, what is truly important? In prayer we say this is terrible and it tests my faith, but how is God at work here? And in prayer we say: God, it’s me, transform me by your love. If that’s how we pray, then maybe our faith will be better understood by others, and we will be better adverts for it. Amen.

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