

Proper 12

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew, Guernsey on Sunday 24 July 2022

Readings: Colossians 2 vv 6-15 and Luke 11 vv 1-13

In the face of devastating events and in our polarised political climate, it's all too easy for politicians, leaders, and even clergy to offer 'thoughts and prayers' in response to tragedy or injustice, because it is the easiest thing to do. The worry is that 'prayer' in such situations has become code for: 'I don't know what else to say.' Or, 'I want to say something neutral and inoffensive.'

But Jesus didn't teach us to pray so that we could be passive or inoffensive. In the gospel reading for today, Jesus offers a parable about a neighbour whose persistence in asking will eventually get him the help he needs. Jesus teaches us that prayer should be like knocking on your neighbour's door in the middle of the night, demanding loaves of bread. When the neighbour doesn't want to get up because he is already in bed, Jesus' advice is to keep asking until he gives in. It doesn't matter whether or not he wants to give you the bread; he'll do it eventually if you bother him enough.

Prayer is meant to be bold and persistent; even uncomfortable; it's meant to get results. Jesus says, 'Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.' It seems unlikely that a petition in the prayers of intercession is going to lead to any kind of radical, lasting change. So, what does Jesus mean when he says, 'For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened'? It just doesn't always seem true.

So, why do we pray? How does Jesus want us to pray? How can Jesus promise us that God will hear and respond to our prayers, that we will receive what we ask for, that doors once locked shut will be opened?

Sometimes prayer is answered in the way for which we yearn. Sometimes, it is not. And yet we can still be overwhelmed by the spirit of God. We can be filled with deep peace and conviction – even for a result that we may not initially have wanted or expected.

Prayer is the practice of seeking God's presence and guidance, and placing ourselves into God's presence, as we work toward creating a better world. Prayer is one way we know God is with us, even when the challenges ahead seem insurmountable.

Jesus wanted our prayers to lead us to difficult places; to challenge us to do uncomfortable things in his service; to give hope.

Jesus promises us that if we knock the door will be opened, but we might have to knock hard and often; we might have to ask others to join us.

That is persistence. That is faithfulness to what Jesus wants of us.

And if that seems hard, I invite you to think about, and find hope in, what we are doing this morning. At the heart of this service is our faithfulness to a command of Jesus, a command which he gives to his disciples as he spends precious time with them on the night before his crucifixion. 'Do this in remembrance of me.'

Some seventy years ago, an Anglican Benedictine monk, Dom Gregory Dix, wrote *The Shape of the Liturgy*, a book which has had a huge influence on the development of our

understanding of the Holy Communion. Scholars have questioned some of Dix's conclusions, but the influence of this book cannot be ignored.

In one passage, Dix reflects on Jesus' command, 'Do this in remembrance of me.' The language of the 1940s may be dated, but I still find Dix's words profoundly moving.

Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacle of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman much tempted to return to fetich because the yams had failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret; for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain so-and-so wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonisation of St Joan of Arc - one could fill many pages with the reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the *plebs sancta Dei* - the holy common people of God.

This is persistence. This is asking for, and receiving, God's grace in prayer and faith.