

ASK, SEARCH, KNOCK

Job 28. 1-11

1 John 5. 12-15

Luke 11. 5-13

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

In the eleventh chapter of St Luke's gospel, we find the familiar 'Parable of the Shameless Neighbour'. This little story arises out of the request of one of our Lord's disciples who observed him praying and said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray' (Lk 11. 1). Earlier in chapter 11, Jesus has given a model for prayer, which we call the Lord's Prayer; and now he gives assurances that God answers prayer.

The parable occurs in the setting of a Galilean village. At that time, houses were simple structures of one or two rooms. Women baked bread in ovens in common courtyards, and so they would know who might have bread left at the end of the day. Hospitality was a very serious duty, and any failure to provide for a guest would bring shame to the host.

A man in the Galilean village has received a guest, and is obliged to provide him with a meal. Presumably there was other food in the house, but not any bread, which was considered to be the essential ingredient of the meal. The parable then asks whether anyone could imagine a situation in which one would go to a friend in the middle of the night and be told by the neighbour that he could not get up to give his friend the bread the petitioner needed, because he and his family were asleep. To get up in the middle of the night, get the bread, and draw the bolt on the door would awaken the whole family. Would a neighbour turn away a friend in the middle of the night and allow him to be shamed because he would not provide hospitality for a guest? Such a thing would be unimaginable in a Galilean village.

This parable invites us to compare our expectations of a neighbour with our assumptions about God. If a neighbour would help us, would God be slow to answer an urgent request? The neighbour might have to be roused from sleep, but as the psalmist wrote '(God) who keeps Israel will neither slumber or sleep' (Ps 121. 4). We may pray confidently, therefore, not because we trust in our own persistence, but because we know that in a time of need God is even more trustworthy than a neighbour.

The sayings that follow the parable in our appointed reading further develop the principle that we may pray confidently because we know that God is ready to answer. This section of the text contains an admonition to pray confidently, using three metaphors: ask, search and knock. 'So I say to you, Ask, and it shall be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened' (11. 9, 10).

In these verses, Christ makes an amazing declaration. There are staggering implications here. Some people interpret these verses to mean that we must belabour God with our prayers; and that the only way we can expect to get anything from God is to persist in prayer; to hound him; to picket the throne of grace until he gives in and gives us our request. But I am absolutely sure that our Lord is teaching the exact opposite. God is not like that sleepy, reluctant neighbour who does not want to get up out of bed.

Sometimes we are tempted to think that our prayers have failed because we have not been persistent enough. We may find prayer difficult and an effort; and we say, 'I know that I should pray more; if I prayed more, more things would happen'. Some of us may think that God is a reluctant God who needs to be wheedled. In these verses, Jesus says that this is not the case. God gives willingly, freely, without fail,

to every child who comes. 'Ask, and it shall be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you.'

And Christ continues, 'Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?' (11. 11,12). God does not hold out false hopes in prayer. He does not give capriciously or vindictively. He means what he says. We, as earthly fathers and mothers, would not give in such a manner; and neither does God. And indeed, just as human fathers and mothers give good things, so will our heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit – the greatest gift of all – to those who ask.

So we see that when the disciples ask our Lord to teach them to pray, he does not give them magic formulas to repeat from memory. Instead, he teaches the disciples about the nature of the God to whom they pray. The greatest motivations for prayer are not only the awareness of our need; they are also our knowledge and experience of the character of God. Jesus' teachings assure us that prayer is effective not because of our cajoling, or because we have found just the right words, but because God is a Father who loves his own and wants to give to those in need. As we recognise and trust the love of God as a heavenly Father, we are able to pray effectively.

The three-fold admonition to ask, search and knock offers us assurance that our God is the God who gives; he is the one who opens; he is the one who allows us to find. The danger comes, however, when we take these sayings as a blank cheque on which we can write anything our hearts desire. Jesus assures his followers that God answers prayers; but he does not guarantee that they will receive whatever they request. The assurances that Christ give assume that those who ask, search and knock will ask not only according to their own need, but also according to God's

will. It is assumed that we will be seeking the kingdom of God and the fulfilment of God's purposes for his kingdom.

We may be anxious about the necessities of life, but our Lord calls us to a higher pursuit: 'strive for *his kingdom*, and these things will be given to you as well...for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom' (12. 31, 32). Our praying should be consistent with our seeking the kingdom. Then, when we pray as Jesus taught us, the assurance that God answers is hardly needed.

Jesus' teachings on prayer remind us that prayer is ultimately the worship of God as Father, acknowledging God's holiness and devoting ourselves to the coming of God's kingdom. When we bring our need to God's love in faith, that is prayer.

Amen.