

Along the track

Does Prayer Make Any Difference? Part II

It's easy to tell God what we think ought to happen! When we take some time to pray, we usually come with our own agenda. That's not unusual as when we speak, whether it is to God or another person, we come with our own beliefs, understandings, prejudices and so on. When I pray for myself, my own emotions may be somewhat confused or my ambitions and hopes and dreams change and grow with the passage of time. What appears essential today may even be soon forgotten. At times of prayer, we can have the tendency to talk to ourselves rather than to God! I may choose to pray for peace in the Middle East. The reality is that I have little knowledge or understanding of the situation. This conflict in the Middle East has its roots in history thousands of years ago. The situation is highly complex and so will the solution be. So what am I asking God to do?

How we pray relies very heavily on our image of God and how we see ourselves. Sometimes we can maintain a childhood belief in a Heavenly Father who can or should direct all human affairs. We can cling on to this belief even long after our rational minds have moved on. Surely a loving God ought to intervene directly in human affairs – after all, isn't that what God did in the stories we read in the ancient Scriptures? We may also continue to believe that terrible things shouldn't happen to good people.

On the other hand, prayer can also be used to shore up prejudice and self-righteousness. Jesus talked of that quite often. For example, on a number of occasions he was very short and sharp to the self righteous Scribes and Pharisees who walked about in big prayer shawls and created laws and regulations that covered even the minutest details of life. He told the parable of the self righteous man at the front of the temple who boasted of his generosity and dedication (Lk 18), contrasting him with the widow who stayed at the back of the temple in humble prayer, open to the God who loved her, and gave what little she could. (Mk 13 1-2)

So, is the solution to pray for nothing or not to pray at all?

Not really! We need to pray and others need us to pray for them. But much of our prayer can be misdirected. To begin with we need to recognise that most of us struggle with the conviction that we

are loved. We can say it, but do we really believe it – that God loves us like no other. We are in loving hands. Because we are loved by God, it is safe to give up the grudges, the hurts we cling to. And so it is safe to be vulnerable. Because we are in loving hands, we can let our loved ones be free, because they too are loved by the same God who loves us.

But, as spiritual writer Ronald Rolheiser writes. It's not easy to believe that.

Perhaps if we had all been loved perfectly, had perfect confidence, and had never been wounded, disappointed, betrayed, or made to cry tears of regret, we would find it easier to believe that it is safe, that we can trust, that we have no need to protect ourselves, and that we do not need to be forever anxious about how we are measuring up, how we are being perceived, how we are being understood, and whether we are worthy of love. (Newsletter 9.10.2006)

Developing a mature prayer life is challenging, but it is certainly worth the effort

So are my prayers answered? "Divine intervention" is always a mystery. Anything is possible with God. So I still ask God for things. But I have discovered that God neither causes the suffering that is so often the subject of our prayers, that so often deeply disturbs us nor does God prevent it, but God is there with us. I have also discovered that silent listening and waiting are vital elements of any prayer. I believe that prayer is frequently answered, though rarely in predictable ways. So I still ask.

I have also discovered, however, that essential elements in prayer are listening and 'waiting', that is taking time to be in God's presence. They are more important than asking. Much of what we pray for, peace, health, harmony and love are needs which can be met through human choices and decisions. So when prayer is 'answered', human action is part of it. God doesn't take over, as it were but rather urges us on to be the answer to another's prayer. Prayer changes those who pray as well as those for whom they pray. Believers or not, we can be the answer to others' prayers.

Regards
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