

Protection

Not long after we moved to Hertford, we were sorting out some things at the front of the house. It was in the days before we had a gate; just a gap in the fence which leads out onto the B1000. Elijah, then a toddler was with us, and we could only have turned our backs for a few seconds when we suddenly realised that he was no longer there.

Sick with terror, I ran towards the road only to find him walking carefree on the other side, oblivious to the cars that had, thank God, stopped.

Well, as you can imagine, I scooped him up in my arms and signalled my gratitude to the car drivers, all the while feeling like the worst parent alive... and thankful beyond words.

I thanked God that day, but what exactly was I thanking Him for?

Was God in some way responsible for the safe return of my son? Did he somehow intervene to protect him? Or was it just a lucky escape; a case of me needing somewhere, someone to be the focus of my gratitude and relief?

If I knew my son was in danger and I couldn't do anything about it, my first instinct, like many of us, would be to pray; to pray for God's protection. For as long as we humans have been around, we've prayed to our gods for protection; against natural disaster, against enemies, against evil; against whatever bogeyman we might believe in.

As Christians, however, what are we praying for when we ask for God's protection?

That's something I've been thinking a lot about recently because, in my role, I find myself praying for the protection of homes, safe journeys, unborn babies. It's a beautiful thing to be asked to do, but what exactly am I asking for?

The reason why this feels so important is because some of us will have experienced times when we weren't protected in the way we prayed for, from the storms of life and/or death.

To protect is one of our deepest human instincts. Most of us would throw ourselves in front of a bullet or a speeding train for someone we love. We would do whatever was within our power.

So, maybe the real question is, 'What is within God's power?' Because we have to believe that God, too, wants to protect those he loves.

Now, this is where some of us will believe different things. Some of us will believe that God still intervenes supernaturally in human life; still cures the sick, still raises the dead, still stills the storm. And there's plenty of evidence of that within scripture. Myself, personally, and it may be a lack of faith or an attempt to manage my expectations, but I find that difficult, not least because of that question, if God *can* do these things, why doesn't he do them more often?

And maybe that's a question, a mystery, I just have to live with. But, for me, the unexamined faith isn't worth living. So, in my wrestling this is where I'm at.

I choose to put my trust in a God who may not cure but does still *heal* the sick (and there's an important difference, which we'll be looking at in September in a sermon series, so 'to be continued'). I choose to put my trust in a God who no longer raises the dead but instead raises us from the depths and the graves we dig for ourselves. I choose to put my trust, not in a God who stills the wind and the waves, but in a God who stills the storms within my own mind.

So, when I ask for God's protection over a home for instance; I'm asking for a peace to dwell within those who live there; a peace that casts out any fear or disharmony or disquiet.

When I ask for God's protection over someone travelling, I'm asking – God use that person's wisdom and experience (and that of others) to make wise, informed and safe choices.

When I ask for God's protection over an unborn child, I am asking that God will surround that mother with love, with peace, with wise council, with skilled professionals.

In other words, God's protection is always, I believe, in cooperation with human beings. I've come to this through my own disappointment with God, or, more accurately, with my former beliefs about God. And it hasn't constricted my faith;

it's enlarged it, I think; it's made my prayers less passive and more engaged. Prayers matter because they don't change God, they change me. Prayers matter because they don't require God to parachute in, they require us to ask, 'How am I part of this?'

Prayer is the most powerful thing any of us can do. And to pray for someone else is the greatest privilege any of us have. I love what Nadia Bolz-Weber says: 'When we pray, we... mindfully hold others in the presence of God, (and these prayers) are like gossamer threads connecting us to God and God's children. And when we pray on another's behalf, we become connected to that person through God and we become connected to God through that person. Because maybe these silken threads of prayer which connect us to God and to one another, and even to our enemies, are how God is stitching our broken humanity back together.'

Prayers are gossamer threads that stitch our broken humanity back together; that weave a safety net, that spin a cocoon to hold and enfold.

Prayer reconnects us to ourselves, to others and to our God, the source of our being. Prayer awakens God's Spirit within us - an indwelling Spirit that prays in us and through us and for us and even as us; and so we become part of that stitching, weaving, spinning. I believe God does this first and foremost in the territory of the human mind and soul; through nudges, through conviction, through inspiring and coaxing; through reassuring and en-couraging (literally putting courage in us).

There's a lyric from a song: 'I'll stand in front of you, I'll take the force of the blow; protection'.

One of the most beautiful things any of us can do is to stand with, if necessary stand in front of, someone in solidarity, as protection, in prayer; especially when that someone is too hurt or too tired or too depressed to stand or protect or pray for themselves. Maybe there have been times in your life when all that's held you together is the knowledge that someone is praying.

The human mind is a battlefield. As Anne Lamott says, 'My mind is my main problem all of the time. I wish I could leave it in the fridge when I go out, but it likes to come with me'.

In prayer, as we re-centre and reset ourselves, we can begin to retrain all that negative commentary in our heads. As Richard Rohr says, 'Prayer is sitting in the silence until we are silenced; choosing gratitude until we are grateful; and praising God until we ourselves are an act of praise'.

Prayer is reaching out to a love that is already reaching out to us.

Prayer doesn't still the storms of life or remove the obstacles, but it can still us and remove from us the fear and the panic. In prayer we ask that God would stand beside us and in front of us, taking the force of the blows to our minds, our souls.

God never promised to protect us from the suffering of life, but he does promise to hold us and deepen us through it. God never promised to protect us from death, but he does promise to protect us in and through it; to forever hold us in the hollow of his hand.

So, back to that rogue toddler and that terrible father. I don't believe that God miraculously stopped those cars. I can believe that perhaps he prompted that moment of realisation in us just in the nick of time; I can believe that maybe he prompted those motorists to be extra vigilant on that day.

Whatever it was, I'll continue to thank God because regardless of what happens or doesn't happen, there is a healing and a power in that God-given instinct; because gratitude, too, like prayer, can change us.