

Reflection on Sunday 19 November 2023

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

Readings: Jeremiah 33: 1-3; Luke 11: 5-13

Check the small print

Some of you may know; some of may not know, that I only have one leg. Well, that's not entirely true – I have two legs, but one of them belongs to the National Health Service. It's a prosthetic leg or, as a taxi driver once said: *'You got one of them prosecco legs, then?'*

The other day, I had to catch a flight to New York. Now, going through an airport and boarding a plane is not easy if you have a leg made of aluminium and carbon fibre. It's a given that I'm going to set off security alarm bells and Border Control officers will have to check that my leg is not filled with prosecco or any kind of talcum powder. On the plane, I struggle with my suitcase and taking my seat, as my movement can be quite awkward. A left-hand aisle seat is best so I can stick my stiff leg out into the gangway (and trip people up as they go past).

The evening before my BA flight to New York last month, I went to check-in online and discovered that my allocated seat in World Traveller Class (that's Economy to you and me) was in the middle of a centre row. Not good. I tried to change the seat online, but the BA website kept freezing, so I went to bed worrying about what the next day was going to be like. And I prayed about it. I don't know whether my comfort on a seven-hour transatlantic flight was a legitimate cause for prayer, given

all the other things going on in the world, but, right then, that was selfishly the top priority on my prayer list. I was unusually anxious about it. I don't normally do anxiety, but I was worrying about this disproportionately.

The next day, I got to Heathrow earlier than I needed to and was still praying, quietly under my breath – I'm sure we've all done it – *'Please God, sort this out, will you?'*. Arrow prayers, we call them.

I went straight to BA Customer Services and explained my problem; the lady behind the desk understood immediately. She looked for an aisle seat in Economy – nothing available.

'Please God, sort this out.'

With a gleam in her eye, she tried upgrading me to Premium Economy (or World Traveller Plus) but there was nothing available there either.

'Please God, sort this out.'

She looked at me, I looked at her, our eyes met, we both knew what the other was thinking. She smiled, gave me a nod and said: *'Alright, just this once...'* and she upgraded me to Business Class. Seven hours of luxury travel; the best flight I've had for 20 years. Not a seat in the middle of a row but one of those single pods that you usually walk past on your way down the plane to Economy. One of those pods had my name on it.

Thank you, God (and thank you Mrs BA desk attendant). My prayer was answered.

Now, you may be wondering why I've told you this story, but it is related to this morning's readings, both of which always strike a chord with me.

The first, from Jeremiah, has a straightforward message: *'Call to me and I will answer you'*. Likewise, the gospel reading from Luke says: *'Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you'*.

I find this passage one of the most encouraging and reassuring messages in the Bible. *You want it, just ask for it.* But I also find it perplexing because, in my – maybe in your – personal experience, life doesn't always work out as we think it should, despite our petitions to God. And then we get into that impossibly complex debate about why some prayers are answered and others aren't when Mark's Gospel clearly tells us that all we have to do is ask for whatever we want. Debating the question of unanswered prayer would take forever and I'm sure I am not the right person to lead that discussion; I certainly don't have the answers, believe me.

But reading this gospel passage this week, I did have a light-bulb moment. There is a fundamental truth that I have come to accept. In Christ's instructions about prayer, there's a line of small print that we often ignore: *Ask and it will be given to you... so long as it's part of God's will and God's plan for your life... otherwise you have to accept with faith his alternative.*

You may have heard me say this before but, when I was in hospital losing my leg, the hospital chaplain said to me: *'If you*

want to give God a laugh, tell him your plans'. Now, I don't think for one minute that God laughs at us, he loves us too much, but so often we go to God and just ask him to bless the plans and ideas that we have, rather than ask him in the first place what those plans and ideas should be.

That's why it's better to make those important requests, those requests where we *seek and hope to find; where we knock and wait for the door to open*, part of an ongoing conversation with God.

Of course, a good conversation is best when it's two-way and when you ask God to open the door, you might be thinking *I'm not sure God has ever spoken to me in return*. If you're a Christian, he has spoken to you at least once. And if he's spoken to you once, he will speak to you again. But I've come to realise that you have to keep talking to him all the time, be persistent – *please God, sort this out* – not once, not twice but all night, all the way to the airport and for ten minutes with BA Customer Services.

And you have to sometimes strain to hear his response... his response may come through the Bible, through church, through the things that friends and even complete strangers say to you, through his indwelling Spirit and through the way things pan out.

And remember, sometimes God waits before he answers you because he is working on both ends of the answer. He's working on the thing you prayed about and he's working to get you ready for his answer. And, sometimes, the second thing takes

longer than the first. And, sometimes, you have to meet God half-way on the journey.

American Methodist missionary Stanley Jones (E Stanley Jones) once said: *'Prayer is surrender – surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boat hook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God.'* That's the fine print attached to Luke's gospel.

The other message beyond the simple *'Ask and you'll get it'* is: ask with passion, ask as if you really care. It's terrible to say this, but how many of us Christians pray the same prayers out of habit, not even thinking about the meaning of the words? Often, it's not until we have to deal with something very personal and immediate that our prayers become alive – when one of our children is sick, or we lose our job, or unexpected change hits us from left of field, that's when we pray with most conviction.

I have to admit, and I'm very embarrassed about this, when I stood in front of the BA Customer Service desk at Heathrow the other day, silently praying, right then, I was more focussed on my selfish desire to get an upgraded airline seat than I was about the war in Gaza. Oh yes, I can say that I had been praying about the war and would go back to praying about the suffering of people worldwide, but at that moment in time, I wanted God to grant me seat 12A at the front of a Boeing 787 more than I wanted him to breathe peace on the Middle East. Isn't that terrible? But isn't that what we do? Most of us pray with passion only when the issue is up close and personal.

So, yes, I will continue to be reassured by today's gospel reading; I will continue to be confident that God will hear me when I pray, but I must remember the small print. My prayers need to have passion because God wants to know that I really care about what I'm praying for. My prayers need to be aligned to God's will, not the other way round, and my prayers need to be offered with a firm faith, accepting that they will be answered only in accordance with God's will and that that is the best plan.

Remember what American author Bill Hybels says: If the request is wrong, God says "no". If the timing is wrong, God says "slow". If you are wrong, God says "Grow". But if the request is right, God says "Go".

Amen

