

### Prayer is oxygen 3

The ten year old daughter of some close friends of ours (who I'll call Molly) is being bullied at school. As parents ourselves we empathise deeply with that intense parental instinct to protect your child; their pain becomes your pain. Her mum has of course been in to talk with the teachers- various strategies have been tried but the bullying continues. Last Tuesday we received an email asking several friends to pray for Molly that particular lunchtime; the most vulnerable and traumatic part of her school day.

What do you pray for in that situation? Do you pray that Molly will have the inner strength and resolve to accept thing as they are? or that she will find coping mechanisms, ways of breaking down the barriers, befriending the bullies?, do you pray for divine intervention - that God would help change the mind of those bullying, maybe help them to walk a mile in Molly's shoes? So many different kinds of requests, but which one is right? Doesn't God himself in any case know what's best for this little girl? Why do we need to work that out?- Maybe the best prayer at the end of the day is simply - 'thy will be done'....?

More important than what we pray is what should we expect from our prayers? Do they really make a difference or do they just make us feel a little less helpless?

Praying for someone or something is called intercession; literally standing between God and another, mediating, intervening, bridging the gap. We'll do just that in a few moments in this service. It's a high point of the service; one of the greatest privileges for any congregation or any human being and yet my suspicion is that many of us (often myself included) see it as a necessary chore; the *right* thing to do, but let's not kid each other it's not going to change anything significantly, is it? Like me - your expectation levels are possibly fairly low. You might even have struggled with the why bother question? If God knows what we're thinking, do we really need to voice it? Bottom line - Can it really make a difference? We'll all have experience of prayers that felt like they just hit the ceiling - they didn't get any further, they didn't get answered or at least not in the way we'd hoped for....

There are lots of questions about prayer.

Voicing prayers - articulating them in words out loud or silently in thoughts is incredibly important.

There are times of course when we just don't have any words, don't know where to start, and in those moments I find it helpful sometimes simply to imagine that person, that situation bathed in light from above. Intercession is important; vital actually. Firstly it helps us

process what's happening, forces us to think about the dynamics involved, perhaps ask ourselves are we part of the answer? In prayer we are often taken to a place of a different perspective - we begin to see things from where God is, and we begin to see others as God sees them - intercession is the beginning of true empathy. In last month's magazine Katie Seaton spoke movingly about her experience of watching the film *Slumdog Millionaire* - the injustice and cruelty of that story didn't just didn't just make feel sorry or sad, it raised deep feelings of anger and a desire to do something. True intercession doesn't leave us the same - when we truly stand in the gap we are changed and we can become the change we long to see. True prayer costs.

Prayer is actually one of the deepest instincts we have. As C S Lewis once said *"I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I am helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God, it changes me."*

But is that all? What about God; does it change him? Does he change things because of prayer?

This week I began to think differently about that question. Previously in thinking about the mechanics of prayer, I had come to the conclusion that God answers prayer through human agents. To put it crudely we are part of the answer - God can't override human free-will, that would be to violate the conditions

of love (love can only exist freely). The idea of an interventionist God left me with too many problems... why does he intervene sometimes and not other times, why do some people get cured for instance and others don't?

The problems and questions remain, but this week I came across something that a chap called John Pritchard wrote

'the point of our praying is that it enables him (God) to do what might otherwise have been more difficult. Such is his self-limiting humility in this world order that he works by collaboration rather than by edict' When his will and ours are tuned then ... the extraordinary truth seems to be that he relies on our co-operation to make his kingdom come.

If that's true then this praying thing is more than an option, it's *the* agent of change in our world. God has designed it so that we work together to change the world.... that's the most risky, irresponsible thing if he's depending on someone like me... God *relies* on *me* to pray

I still believe that God will never over-ride someone's free will.

He will never change the minds of the Molly's bullies but he can soften their hearts, he can help them to see differently. That's ok for people, but can we really expect God to arbitrarily interrupt the natural course of

events in our world. Can he change his own rules for instance? Well if we take the stories of the Bible seriously then the answer seems to be yes. Our scientists are discovering that the texture and fabric of the universe is much more open than we had ever thought - new discoveries regularly throw everything we believe to be true into chaos, and so for instance cosmologists have had to invent things called dark matter and dark flow to make their theories hold - but what this says to me is that God's universe is not held together by calculations and formulae but by love and love is *the* most powerful thing... so God can change the 'natural' course of things. The staggering thing is that he relies on us to co-operate in that; in allowing his loving presence to come to bear on a situation and so inevitably affect it

Prayer is often seen as a last resort - on Friday evening 's Sports Relief, in a heartbreaking story of a mother waiting to see if the doctors were too late to save her child from malaria, the voiceover said 'all we can now is pray'. Prayer should be our first resort. That little child lived but many do not, even when prayers upon prayers have been offered...

So there is no easy way of understanding this. I happen to believe that all prayer is answered for some in this life for others in the life to come but that's cold comfort I know.

Unsatisfactory as the answers may be I believe that prayer is a way of laying hold of God's willingness not an overcoming his reluctance. God never *wills* pain or illness or even death.

This is heavy stuff, complicated stuff but incredible exciting stuff. Our prayers make a difference. That's why it's so important for us to come together to do this - individual prayer is great but we must learn to pray together, there is a special dynamic in that. As Jesus said 'Where two or three are gathered....God is there'

At the end of the day the point of intercession is not to understand it but to do it.

God chooses to work though prayer... this is too important to ignore

I want to end with those amazing words of St Paul we read earlier

'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings' (Philippians 3)

Those are incredible words which actually contain within them the essence of prayer

Prayer is about knowing Christ - not head but heart knowing; in an intimacy that we were everyone of us created for

Prayer is about engaging with the same power that reversed the irreversible - the power which raised Christ from the dead, holding open

to the Father those parts of his creation which stand in need of renewal

And last but not least prayer is about sharing in the suffering of Christ which is the suffering of all who suffer, learning the deep compassion which comes from the empathy we find in prayer

Come along on Holy Saturday and lets change the world, beginning with me and you...