



HOMILY FOR SUNDAY, 25TH JULY, 2010
LUKE 11:1-13

Bruce Nolan was a local journalist, under-appreciated at work, unsuccessful at landing a top job as an anchor-man and generally feeling let down by life. His relationship with his girlfriend was effected by his negative outlook. And one day, after one run of bad luck after another, Bruce complained that God was unable to do his job properly. In steps Morgan Freeman – God, to you and me – who allows Bruce to have all of his divine power for a few days to see if he could do a better job. Bruce mainly uses his new powers to make his own life more enjoyable. He can make his dog use the lavatory, he can take revenge on his enemy, Evan, by making him speak gibberish on live television. He can do anything he wants. And he also is responsible for answering prayers, which appear on his computer e-mail account, not Yahoo!, but Yahweh! All the answering of prayer becomes a bit of a bind, there are just so many of them! So Bruce just says ‘yes’ to them all, resulting in, among other things, a riot because so many people ended up winning the lottery! Now, even allowing for the cyberspace metaphor, I think this is how most of us are tempted think of God and prayer. We send a message off to the almighty and he chooses whether he is going to say yes.

But is this an adequate view of how God acts? Doesn't it make him, well, a bit like us, its just... better. Like a human being, just an exceptionally capable one. A formidable multi-tasker. A marvellous speed reader. An excellent maker of snap decisions. The kind of person you might want in government, or running a church. But not God, not the creator and sustainer of the entire universe.

And yet, when we consider today's Gospel reading, ‘the parable of the friend at midnight’, at first glance Jesus appears to want us to think like this. Just like the man who has been woken up, if we simply persist in asking for things from God, he will, eventually, perhaps begrudgingly, respond positively. Now there are very many problems with this understanding of prayer, for starters, it looks suspiciously like a cosmic vending machine. If you put the correct quantity of the correct currency in and press the right button, you'll be sure to get your desired result. There are a few reasons which might make us reconsider what is going on in the parable:

First, Jesus tells this parable, at least partly in answer to his disciples request to teach them how to pray. And Jesus teaching on prayer starts and finishes with the Fatherhood of God. God wants to give, he stands more ready to give than we are ready to ask! Now there is a slight problem in translation of the parable we've got in front of us, and the problem is the word ‘persistence’: “if the man does not get up and give [the bread] to him for friendship's sake,” we are told, “persistence will be enough to make him get up and give his friend all he wants.” The word which, for a variety of rather boring historical reasons is translated persistence, should probably be translated ‘shamelessness’, ‘guile’ or even ‘audacity’. There is no hint in the parable that the man had to ask time after time for bread. Rather, what he had in his favour was simply the guts to ask. We often think that some of the things we want aren't really appropriate things to ask of God, so we tend to stick with asking for spiritual things, or abstract things. Jesus teaches us to have the courage to pray for the things that we actually want and need, no matter how petty they may seem to us. We should

pray for what we want, and not what we think we should want. We should pray for what we want, not for what someone else has told us we ought want.

In fact, most of the time, we don't even have to ask God for what we want or need. Through a variety of means, most of what we need and much of what we want is provided for us without ever uttering a prayer. The sunshine and rain come, the crops grow. God provides for everyone, even those who don't acknowledge that what they receive comes from God.

So if God gives us what we need without having to ask, what is the point in asking? If everything comes to us as a free, undeserved gift from God, why bother praying? This is where we get to the heart of prayer. It is precisely because everything, every day comes from God as an undeserved free gift, that we tend to be forgetful. So to help us remember that all good gifts come from God, he wants to give some of them to us as answers to prayer. We can't use prayer to make God do things he was previously unwilling to do. God doesn't change. It seems the heart of prayer has to be that prayer doesn't change God, but changes us. It moves our hearts closer to God's heart, our wills closer to God's will. It helps us to be grateful, even for the small things we receive from God, and to desire God's kingdom above everything else.

So, there is the technical bit. But how does this help us live the Christian life? I want us to think about a problem which I am sure we have all struggled with, unanswered prayer. If we tend towards the vending machine model of prayer, if we don't get what we want the obvious question is, why? Weren't my prayers good enough? Am I not good enough? Maybe I don't have enough faith? Maybe God just wants me to try a bit harder. Maybe God just doesn't love me? Jesus teaches us though that God does love us as a Father loves a child. He loves us so much that he knows what we need without our asking and is waiting to give us what we need. I'm going to say something here which might seem a little controversial, here goes, unanswered prayer doesn't actually exist.

Now that might sound a bit glib, and I'm sure you have heard platitudes before about God always answering prayer, sometimes with yes, sometimes with no, sometimes with later. But what if our requests have some of the urgency of the man in the parable? He needed bread for his guest and he needed it quickly. Later wouldn't do. And 'no' isn't really what we would ordinarily call an 'answer' to prayer. But what if, by our developing an attitude of prayer, by laying all of our needs and wants and concerns before God, God gives us something greater than the things we ask for? If the real purpose of prayer is to shape our wills to the will of God, to form our character into a closer resemblance of God's character and to help us to realise that all that we have comes from God. Then surely the greatest answer to prayer, even though it doesn't look like an answer to our particular request, is that God grants us a closer walk with him, or as Jesus puts it, in the final part of this morning's gospel, God will grant the Holy Spirit to those who ask him, to those who pray.

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