

**Easter V, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2020**

**Acts 7:55-end; Jn.14:1-14**

*Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it.*

If there was a competition for 'bits of the bible that Peter Waddell would prefer were not there', there would, believe me, be a crowded field of contenders.

The last two verses of today's Gospel reading would be fairly prominent among them.

Jesus says, 'I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father will may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'

Well. How on earth do we make sense of that?

I imagine, that like me, there are lots of things you have prayed for, for a long time. Good, important things. Not selfish trivia, but for people to get better. For conflicts to be settled. For addictions to be healed, for churches to grow. And I also imagine, that like me, you would have to say that the results of such prayer are decidedly mixed. Perhaps, on occasion, the promise seems to hold, and when it does that it is wonderful. But often – most often, perhaps – answer comes there none, and those problems remain stubbornly and dreadfully unfixed.

And of course if that wasn't so, if prayer did seem to work more effectively than that, we'd be faced with a whole set of other difficult questions. Why didn't it, work, say, during the Holocaust? Were all the people praying then somehow not quite doing it right? The Gospel says you've got to ask in Jesus' name – well, fairly obviously the Jews wouldn't have been doing that, so maybe that's why their prayers weren't answered. Maybe God just answers the prayers of Christians, and to everyone else He's deaf.

You only have to say it out loud to realise what an appalling theology that would be. But remember, every time you hear someone go on about how their prayers have been answered, how God has intervened to solve some problem, that's the kind of hard question that needs to be faced. Why not Auschwitz? Why here, and not there?

I'm afraid I can't answer those questions, not adequately anyway. They are among the biggest challenges to my own faith; always have been and I suspect always will be. I haven't worked out the answers to my own satisfaction, let alone anyone else's.

However, there is just the beginning of a clue in the pairing of our two readings this morning. Listen carefully to how Stephen prays. 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' Does it ring any bells? Well, it should, because it is a direct echo of how Jesus prays on the Cross: Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Stephen's prayer is the prayer of someone who has become very like Jesus, whose character has become soaked with Jesus. My prayer, in similar circumstances, might have been for the stones to miss. Or for the injuries to not be fatal. Or for the mob to have a miraculous change of heart, or failing that for a thunderbolt to come crashing down out of heaven onto them .... For anything really, except what Stephen's prayer actually is. It's a letting go not only of his life, but of the desire for vengeance or even simple justice. It's a prayer to be like Jesus, for the strength to just give himself away.

Well, that is what the Bible means when it speaks of praying in the name of Jesus. It doesn't mean that you just add those words 'in the name of Jesus' or 'through Jesus Christ our Lord' on at the end of a prayer, as some kind of magic formula to get God's attention. It doesn't even mean that you pray words very like Jesus', as Stephen does here. It means praying in line with the character of Jesus. Praying in tune with his heart. Praying that the kind of life which was in Him will be in you. Praying that his identity, his *name*, will be the deepest, truest and most powerful thing in you – despite everything in you that might push the other way.

And the promise of John 14 is that *this* prayer shall always be answered. This prayer shall always be answered: the prayer that asks to be more like Jesus. The prayer that asks Him to burn through everything about us which resists that. The prayer that asks for our little flames of love to become a blazing furnace. The promise is not that that will happen immediately. It does not, as the vast majority of Christians will tell you. But it will – that's

Jesus' promise. Whatever you ask for in my name, I will do it. In the end, the love I am is the love that will fill all things, even the darkest parts of you.

At which point you *should* be asking, well is that it? If prayer in Jesus' name is really just praying that we'll become more like Jesus, well, why, then, are we always praying for lots of other things? For all those names on our sick list, for peace in foreign countries, for the Queen, for the hospital staff – what's the point if it doesn't actually do anything for them?

Now I don't pretend my answer is anything like complete or good enough. But for me, it goes something like this. Jesus says, in the end the love I am is the love that will fill all things, even the darkest parts of you. And even the darkest parts of this world: the cancer ward, the failing marriage, the adolescent trapped in self-destruction. In all of it, Jesus will one day shine through. One day, all his children will be free and the whole earth live to sing his glory.

And when we name a particular person in the prayers, really what we're doing is proclaiming our faith, our trust that the great healing of Jesus is going to envelop them too. There's always a temptation to give up, to believe that people are not in fact as precious as Jesus said they were, to give up the conviction that each one of us is destined for glory beyond imagining. Naming people in the prayers is the refusal to do that, whatever cancer or Alzheimers or depression does to someone. Despite even, finally, what death does to us all. When humanly speaking there is nothing left to hope for, despite even that, in the prayers we say not just that we still love a person but that they remain *destined* for glory. This person is *destined* to be swept up in the great healing of Jesus; this person, whatever the present darkness, will be happy and whole and free. As Rowan Williams once put it, praying for someone is planting God's flag in the midst of enemy territory: no matter how over-run it looks now, the earth is the Lord's. This particular piece of earth – Dick, Jane, Sue – is the Lord's, and it shall never be surrendered.

Now, wonderfully, sometimes, you get a glimpse of the liberation to come. People get healed. Peace deals get signed. The young man helping murder Stephen repents, and becomes the greatest of the apostles. Love begins to fill the darkness, even now. Why here and not there, why in this case and not that one, who knows? That is beyond our wisdom to tell, and it is immensely painful to experience. But whatever the answer, it is not that prayer

has in one case failed and in the other worked. No. All our prayer always looked for the bigger healing, for the bigger justice, for the Kingdom to come on earth as it in heaven. The little healings we see now are indeed but glimpses. Rejoice in them, certainly, but they are not what we hoped for. They are not the promised land. We are praying for a salvation far bigger, far richer, far deeper than anything we glimpse here. For resurrection: for the release of all things into beauty and brilliance.

That bigger hope is what Jesus lived, died and rose for. It was the desire that filled him and drove him. And when we pray in that desire, when it fills us as it filled Him, it's then that his promise holds: whatever you ask in my name, I will do it.