

Passion Sunday 2019

My goodness. Where to start? Passion Sunday, a sermon about prayer as supplication, prayer as asking for things, and these three readings.

Israel sins, catastrophically. God determines to do away with them, to wipe them out and start again – till Moses stands in the breach and prays for them. Turn from your fierce wrath o God. And, the book of Exodus tells us, 'God changed his mind about the disaster he planned to bring on his people.' *God changed his mind* and Israel's story continues. *God changed his mind* – enough for several sermons there.

Peter is in prison, chained and closely guarded by squads of soldiers, waiting execution in the morning. The whole church gathers and prays fervently for him, late into the night. And then suddenly, there's a light in the cell. The chains slip off, the guards stay asleep, and an angel guides Peter to the prison door. Locked, barred ... it swings open for them of its own accord and Peter escapes into the night. I wonder if there were other prisoners on death row, with their own friends and families praying desperately? I wonder what happened to them?

And then those beautiful, simple words of Jesus: Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door shall be opened unto you. Can you even imagine that God will not give you what you need? Look at how neighbours help each other out, even when its inconvenient. Look at how earthly parents care for their children. If you human beings, in all your mess and sin, provide for each other like this well how much more will your Father in heaven? *Pray*. God will hear. God will answer.

Where to start? I start first with a health warning, and then with a fourth story.

The health warning is this. I don't have all the answers on this whole question of asking God for things. I find it hugely difficult and confusing. Part of me thinks I should even take off the robes for this sermon, because in giving it I feel much less like the authorised teacher of a tradition than usual, and much more like someone looking into things I am not sure I understand or agree with. So even more than usual, feel free to disagree.

The fourth story is that of a little Jewish boy in Poland in the 1940s. Prayer, Eli Weisel tells us in his book *Night*, was as natural in his childhood as breathing. His family, his community, loved God, trusted God. So did he. But then the Nazis came, and Auschwitz. And the people prayed, prayed that God might deliver them. And God did nothing. Weisel watched the gassed bodies of the people he loved tossed into flames and, years later, wrote this:

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul, and turned my dreams to dust ... never.

It's not just Weisel's story of course. It is the story of innumerable people. When we really needed you, God. When we really, really needed you and we cried out, You did nothing. Why God? Why?

And my problem is that for me, that fourth story is way more compelling, more obviously and instantly *true* than the first three. Hence my remark about taking off the robes. For me Auschwitz, and everything like Auschwitz, makes it impossible to stand here and tell you that life really is like our first three stories suggest. That when disaster threatens, you can pray to God, and God will rescue you. In all honesty, I don't think He will. Sometimes,

wonderfully, you will get lucky. The cancer might go into remission. And if that happens, that is wonderful and fantastic and you should be bubbling over with gratitude and joy. But the idea that God fixed it that way? Fixed it for you, for some special reason, when He didn't for the others? No. It's luck. Just luck.

So does God not care then? Does he just watch our lives as if it is all some big scientific experiment, and he's just interested to see what happens but doesn't really care? No. Absolutely not. This bit I am sure about: God is love, and in him there is no darkness at all. He desperately, desperately wants all our lives to flourish, all of us to have life to the full. He made us for joy, for beauty, for delight. That is where He wants to bring us. Of course, He cares. Of course, He loves. The idea of God just standing by and watching as we suffer is not right. It's the wrong picture of God.

So what's the right one? Well, today is Passion Sunday. And that makes it good timing for a sermon about prayer as asking for things. Because much of the time when we think about prayer, we're doing so with a certain model of God in our heads – a God who sits outside the world, watching what goes on, deciding when and whether to intervene. And to intervene of course is precisely to suddenly be where one was not before, to reach out and interfere. And it's just this idea, of God and the world as fundamentally apart from each other, which Passion Sunday questions.

Here is the radical idea of Christianity: on the Cross, God gave up being a certain kind of God – gave up being the One who sits enthroned, high, above and outside. The story of the Incarnation and supremely of the Cross is of a God, rather, who pours Himself into the world without remainder. He has given all He has to give, and that means there is no God left who can interfere here or there; he cannot interfere in the world because on the Cross he has sunk Himself into the world. He has sunk Himself into the world, merged utterly with it. He can no more interfere with it than I can 'interfere' with me. He is not outside anymore, but inside.

So when I am faced with suffering and evil, the question is not 'Why doesn't God intervene'. It is, rather, what does it mean for this suffering, this evil, that God is on the Cross?

And what it means to me is best expressed like this. The one who is pure Goodness and Love has suffered, is suffering, all that the world can throw in terms of pain and grief and violence. All that dreadful pours into Jesus on the Cross – that's what it means to say, as we will in a few minutes that he is the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world. He *bears* it: God does not plan, permit, or observe our suffering – he *bears* it, drinks it in its full terror. And then he dies underneath it.

And then, in silence, in the deep, deep silence of a cold tomb in Jerusalem, the mystery happens. Christian writing and art has for good reason been very coy about trying to describe exactly what happened, exactly what it looked like, because the moment you start to imagine it, it all seems a bit bizarre. What the resurrection looked like, we cannot know. What it meant, however, we can: it meant that suffering, and violence, and death – the things which seemed on Good Friday the most powerful things, the most really real things, were suddenly not so. There was, as C.S. Lewis once brilliantly put it, 'a deeper magic': we suddenly saw that the word God means something deeper even than evil. Something infinitely creative, infinitely resourceful, something the world can crucify with all its power and which yet still comes back, forgiving and loving and healing.

Well, that's the Gospel. In the Cross of Jesus, we see the horror and hate and pain of history unleashed and rampant. And then we see them swallowed up in something greater, in Resurrection. Horror and hate come to an end; they're turned around, converted and healed by the power that surged in the empty tomb. And then that power begins to surge in us all. That's the Gospel.

And what does it mean for prayer? That when I ask for things, what I ask for above all is to be touched by the deeper magic. I know my life is a wreck. That I am corrupted in all sorts of ways, by all the things that make for misery in myself and others. I know my lack of love, my greed, my lust, my failures. I have some limited sense of how deep they go. But I also know that in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus, there is a still deeper spring of goodness and grace into which I can be plunged, cleansed, healed, changed. The first thing I ask for is to know the power of the resurrection – or, as Jesus puts it in our Gospel reading, for the Father to give me the Holy Spirit. It's not asking God to interfere. It's about putting myself into that spring, into what God has already done and does eternally.

And then, yes, I go on to pray for others and for their situations. For peace in Yemen, or for the person dying of cancer, or for the missing child. But not because I expect God to interfere. I don't really expect a sudden ceasefire, or a remission of the cancer. I pray staring reality in the face, in the full expectation of the worst. And I do so as a great statement of faith that there is no bit of history, no bit of reality, so dark and so desolate that the Spring cannot, will not break through there. As Rowan Williams once brilliantly put it, praying is like planting God's flag in the midst of enemy territory – we do it simply to say that evil will not stand: that no matter how triumphant it looks, it will fail. Even this dark and deadly situation, whatever it is, is part of God's world. His kingdom will come, His will will be done.

And the ultimate expression of this, which normally comes at the end of our prayers of intercession, is the prayer for the dead. The dead, after all, are beyond all human hope. There is no conceivable political turn around, no imaginable change of heart or leap of scientific discovery that could help them. They are beyond all human hope – but they are not beyond resurrection. And so we pray for them, to proclaim our faith that the great Spring is coming in which no-one, absolutely no-one, is left behind. We pray to proclaim the Gospel: that in the end, God is love, Jesus is Lord, and all things – all broken, deadly things – are headed for resurrection joy. To God be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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