

Five Myths about Prayer

As preached on 7 May at Morcott –background reading for the Spring Study Group on The Lord's Prayer

In the winter of 1871 The Prince of Wales fell ill from Typhoid. It was assumed he caught it in Scarborough during a hunting party. His health declined and a committee including the Archbishop of Canterbury and The Prime Minister William Gladstone decreed that the nation should pray for the Prince's recovery on the next Sunday, 10 December. The following week the prince's health took a turn for the better and in February 1872 a grand service was held in St. Paul's Cathedral to give thanks for his recovery led by the queen herself.

We are approaching a period of special prayer in the life of Our Church: Rogation-tide, Christian Aid Week, The Archbishops' Novena of Prayer which began on Ascension Day (Thursday) and a spring study group on The Lord's Prayer starting on 21 May. So this morning I want us to think a bit about prayer and especially 5 myths which are commonly held about prayer.

Before we get into the 5 myths, just what is prayer? Let me offer you a simple definition: prayer is seeking union with God. I had a conversation recently about holding people in our prayers. I do a lot of that but what exactly am I doing? If we hold onto that definition of prayer as '**seeking union with God**' we can test it by exploring these 5 myths.

Firstly, there is the myth of the slot-machine God. This God is supposed to answer our prayers on demand. It is a mechanical and random exercise. We don't always win because God seems to be biased against the user and in favour of the casino. What is more, we seem to be guessing the answer to our prayers as if we knew what God's will might be. This sort of prayer to the slot-machine God put us at the centre of concern and not God. Are we really seeking union with God or just displaying our selfishness?

Secondly, there is the 'health and wealth' myth – the expectation that God wants the best for us. Well of course he does! He wants us to have life in abundance (Jn. 10.10)! If we're not careful, this is a prayer for material blessings and only one response is acceptable to us. This seems to be a prayer to baby Jesus associated with Christmas presents and ignores the suffering Christ on the cross. Jesus too prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup of suffering would be taken from him. It wasn't; but the cross allowed us all to see and participate in a more abundant life.

Life takes many twists and turns. We can only say, with Jesus, '*nevertheless, not my will but thine be done*'. How do we see the hand of God in all of it?

Thirdly, there is 'feeding the meter' God. Regular prayer is critical and if we miss out on an opportunity then we think the lights will go out. Such regularity in prayer is important but it can be mechanical or superstitious, rather like professional footballers running on to the field and making the sign of the cross for good luck. Professor David Wilkinson of Radio 4's 'Thought for the Day' fame talks about taking his family to Yorkshire for a Christmas

break. The cottage had a very thirsty electric meter and demanded a daily run to the bank and a convenient chair next to the meter so that the place could be kept warm. However, they soon discovered that the oven was on a separate circuit so they basked in free heat for the rest of the holiday! This is not like a God with whom we can have a personal relationship but rather a robot. A union with such a robot is dehumanizing.

Then fourthly, there is making ready for a miracle. I once went to an evangelical church in a carpet factory to observe what went on. After a great deal of hype and emotion, the leader called people forward to be healed. A blind student went up and a great fuss was made in prayer. The result? Nothing – except for one distraught woman. Sometimes in our prayers we ask God to break the very laws of nature he has established. Why should he do that for one person? How can God manage the expectation of the Norfolk holiday maker praying for fine weather and the Suffolk farmer wanting rain for his crops? Surely, we seek a union with God whose presence must be predictable, reliable and generous?

Finally, ‘prayer doesn’t change anything’. Billy Graham used to say that God answered his prayers except on the golf course! If the laws of nature are immutable and nothing can change then there is no point in praying or even getting up in the morning! We can’t change anything!

A simple scientific observation will tell us that this is not true. When water cools it actually contracts until it gets down to 4 degrees centigrade and then it expands, contrary to popular opinion. As we know to our cost this year, spring does not arrive on any given day. Humans are good at variation; the laws of nature are flexible and since the scientific revolution quantum theory and chaos theory have been discovered which have shown scientists that there is not so much predictability in the physical world as had been supposed. It is an open system and it is here that God can work, in the variation and variety of life as we know it and much else that we don’t know about. It is here that we come up against the mystery of God’s work which we must take into account as we seek a closer union with him.

We have explored 5 myths about the practise of prayer, mainly in connection with prayers of intercession. This last myth – that nothing can be changed – leads us into the mystery of God and a whole new exploration of God in terms of listening, loving and waiting in simple adoration.

Jesus himself spent much time in prayer, often alone. He taught his disciples to pray and encouraged his followers to pray. It was through prayer that Christianity first spread through the Mediterranean world like a blazing fire. We too have the opportunity to work with that power for the glory of God.

Amen.