

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

You Don't Know What You're Asking!

James and John say: *We want you to do what we ask*. Jesus will say: *You don't know what you ask*. That, in a nutshell, is the trouble with our prayer. Like Peter's, ours is a dual personality: now exuberantly self-possessed, fully engaged, a good scout with the firm conviction that he will always know, want, and achieve the very best, completely naturally; then a tear-stained, wrecked person with a broken heart, who has so totally lost his grasp, and is practically paralysed as a result. The first Peter packs his sword, jumps into the water, professes his faith; the second goes out weeping bitterly, saying: *I do not know him*; and this is the one who is promised, at last, that he will follow the Lord.

Follow Me

In our praying we do not set an agenda for God. He already knows what he will do, and a multitude of prayers on our part will not deflect him one iota from his direction. That isn't what praying is for. It's much more concerned with changing the agenda *we* have. When I want something very much, I am really very confident that it is good for me. *Lord*, I may say, *make it possible for me to win the lottery*. *Then you will see how much good I will do for you*. There is a confident prayer, and of course it may be true that I'd do a lot of good, and surely God wants me to do good; and if I don't win, and some selfish person with lousy taste and evil inclinations wins it instead, I can make the psalm my own: *See how the wicked prosper!* and that will be very little consolation. God the Father may hear this prayer with a wry smile, and say to me: *You do not know what you are asking*. So what prayer *am* I allowed to make? As time goes on I seem to think that the nearer we get to *Thy will be done*, the more likely we are to be able to say: my prayer has been heard. In this we come close to Jesus, and can say that we have learned a little about following him. It occurs to me that he taught this prayer when others asked him for lessons in prayer; but he made it his own in the garden, at the time of his own greatest human need.

So Why Pray?

If we can't change the mind of God or the plan of God, why pray at all? Because in the encounter with God *our hopes change*. We sense the hidden

selfishness, the narrowness, of our praying exposed in his presence. As he hears our (very limited) plot for the unfolding of history, he hears how we transparently set our little story at the heart of the universe. In his fatherly love he knows why we are going to be disappointed. But, also like a generous parent, he knows how we are *really* going to be blessed. He knows that when the *real* gift is set before us, we shall forget all the blind alleys and false goals that used to attract us; our Father never stops offering us life, in all its truthfulness and wonder. So the school of prayer teaches us how to lay aside our poverty-stricken schemes for happiness in the name of a divine promise beyond our power to predict. Every mother and father knows the transience of a child's desires; and for all the joy of momentary fulfilment, the opening of the birthday gift, the gaining of the longed-for possession, *there is more value in the desire itself*, which teaches us how to yearn and long for something always greater. There is a thing in my computer called a search-engine, and I suspect that there is one in me as well. When the computer one has given me ten Internet answers, it asks me poignantly, "*Have you found what you were looking for?*" The answer is often *no*, because I'm not that good at telling it what to find; but if it is *yes*, it could still ask: *So what are you looking for next?*" James and John wanted *whatever we ask*; the lives they actually went on to live, as apostles and martyrs, can tell us something about prayerful trust in the goodness of God.

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