

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

If At First You Don't Succeed, Pester

The Lord's advice about prayer surprises us. We are full of mistakes about it, which make us pray at best badly, and at worst, not at all. Fatalism refuses to pray because "it is foolish to expect God to change his mind". Quite true; but the mind that changes during prayer does not have to be the mind of God. Prayer for change, if it is honest, must envisage change in the one who prays; and God's eternal changelessness actually *enables* change in others, because there has to be an unmoved force, a firm foothold to make our movement safe and sure. *Asking God to change* misunderstands God's life and nature, like seeking for a flexible diamond or a chocolate teapot. But bringing desire to God has huge effects *on our desire*.

Truth in the Heart

Jesus promises that *when we ask in prayer, God grants what we ask*. Great scandal has been taken at this verse, because people have prayed earnestly, and had their requests denied; they then have to decide between thinking they are especially displeasing to God, or that the Bible tells big fibs. But examine the tradition more closely. We are told of various conditions about effective prayer: we must ask *in the name of Christ*, and particular stress is laid on the shared nature of prayer: the actual words go, *where two or three of you agree to ask anything in my name, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven*. This community of prayer is not just laying on the agony; it is the setting of the right atmosphere for the right prayer; and I think it refers forward to an even sterner judgment, in that the desire that is expressed has to pass the ultimate test - the scrutiny of God himself. Can our desire be honestly expressed before God? If it includes anything selfish, or cruel, or lustful, or hateful, then the answer is *No*, and the encounter with God should be enough to expose our "prayer" for what it really is. It is in this way that God purifies our desiring. We should not call that a punishment, but a gift in itself most estimable: because it puts us on the way to desiring what is going to happen: this desire we express in saying *thy will be done*. To an unbeliever, these words sound like resignation. But to the eye of wisdom, they are in fact excellent good sense, shrewd judgment, the best of choices.

Near To God's Heart In A Garden

Thy will be done comes from the Lord's prayer, and it is most dramatically quoted in the story of the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus teaches us huge lessons in that scene. There *is* resignation involved in his prayer: that of his human desire for healthy life,

happy relationships; there is even (most movingly) a fear of what God's plan involves (*take the cup away*). For Jesus to experience this human fear is the lowest point of the Incarnation, where Jesus is seen as totally human. But his prayer for the will of God to rule lifts this humanity up in sacrifice, *and that is the answer to his prayer*. Luke adds a brilliant stroke to the story: while Mark has Jesus pray three times to a silent heaven, Luke says that he prays only once - so earnestly, that his sweat falls like great drops of blood. Again there is no answer to his prayer, but *an angel appeared to give him strength*. This is superb theology. Jesus is not plucked out of his situation in answer to prayer, but strengthened to stay where he is, so that the will of God can be accomplished.

Deeper and further desire

The plain truth is that our desires are limited, that *we do not know how to desire enough*. Like a child at a banquet, we're ignorant, and inexperienced, out of our depth. Unsure about the truffled turkey, we seek fish fingers only. *We* are pathetically content to accept this limitation; but it will never be acceptable to *God*, "who has made us for himself" and for nothing less. We have to learn to want more, not less. St Augustine likens the praying heart to a leather purse, which can be stretched according to the amount it is destined to receive. If you hope for little gold, quickly delivered, you can keep the purse small; if, on the other hand, your longing is boundless, let it enlarge the spaces of your hopes, until they hope for God.

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