

Paul and Prayer

Well, we've been looking at Colossians for some weeks now, and we are almost at the end. And it seems that the last of Paul's instructions is concerned with prayer. But in an educated church, with a reputation for being liberal and socially active – what do we really think about prayer, actually. What is it? Does it work? Is it pointless. Is God really sat there twiddling his thumbs until a bunch of Christians gather to pray in his name to get him to do something? That's what some books on prayer seem to imply. Or are there legions of angels, sitting around on heavenly standby, waiting to be called into action by zealous prayer warriors engaged in supernatural struggles. What happens when we pray? What difference does it make?

Was I destined to have a car crash on the way here, which was averted because someone prayed for travelling mercies for me. And what kind of a God would we be addressing in prayer, if he allowed these things to happen unless Christians asked them not to? And why, when we pray for justice and peace in the world, do we still witness thousand upon thousand of deaths every day because of injustice and war? What is prayer? Why do we do it?

Paul's list of items for prayer – reads a bit like a shopping list! Is that really what Paul means when he talks about prayer? When Jesus went off to pray all night, did he climb into the hills, unfold a piece of A4 paper and read off the items on his list for prayer?

I think if you look at the dictionary definition of prayer, it describes it primarily as asking of God. Is prayer really about asking God for stuff? Isn't prayer instead about communion with God, about simply being in his presence.

The Shack

Well, it's popular as a secular novel, and has been celebrated by Christians on both sides of the Atlantic. Eugene Peterson puts it on a par with Pilgrim's Progress. Chuck Colson bids us not to enter. It has been fiercely criticised by conservatives in the States because the theology it propounds is dodgy. It has been welcomed by more liberally-minded evangelicals because it's a warm, emotional encounter with God.

The Shack is a story of how one man, suffering desperately from severe grief, encounters the Trinitarian God in... not surprisingly ... a shack!

A long conversation ensues, which sounds rather like the kind of theological debate you might have in the pub – except of course, the author's views are presented as God's. But it is playfully written, the portrayals of the Trinity refreshing, and the picture of how the Trinity interacts are superb. The narrative, though rather crude in structure, is extremely well written, and fun to read. As an antidote to dark, dry, one-sided theologies that still dominate many of our churches – this story of a playful God works extremely well. And it is hardly surprising that its theology has invited such widespread criticism from conservative sources.

Of more concern that the picture of God that is deliberately presented, however, is the picture of God that is accidentally portrayed. This is a God whose primary concern is with the healing of one man. So far, so good. But this one man's personal journey takes place at the expense of the personal journeys of others. This recipient of God's love is encouraged to

forget about the world's injustices – its economics, its politics. Those problems are for the Holy Spirit to sort out. Instead, this man simply has to focus on loving those nearest to him.

When confessing that he doesn't know how to put the world to rights, Jesus assures him, "all I want from you is to trust me with what little you can, and grow in loving people around you with the same love I share with you."

In this sense, the book depicts a God who gently and quietly and lovingly endorses the principle evils of our age. When one wealthy, privileged man's personal journey eclipses the state of the world God so loved he sent his only son – idols are being worshipped. Individualism is dutifully obeyed. And it is for this reason, that prayers of intercession are falling from use in British Baptist and other forms of church.

Shopping lists

Occultism, in all its various forms, has always been occupied with following certain rituals in order to manipulate the world in one's own favour. This is true not only of the prophets of Baal, of witchcraft, or of various ancient paganisms. It is also profoundly true of various contemporary belief systems associated with science and technology. Belief that salvation is to be found in techniques, in methods, in or in any attempt to follow a prescribed pattern in order to manipulate the world for the benefit of ourselves is deeply – if unwittingly - occultic. And for many Christians today, prayer itself has become just such an occultic practice.

That is, for Christians, prayer can all too easily become a tool for manipulating the world in our favour. This is why to celebrate the 'power of prayer', to declare that 'prayer works' or to encourage people to be 'prayer warriors' are all practices that share an occultic view of the world.

Prayer is simply a gracious gift of communion with the Holy God – it is not a thing in itself. It is not a force external to God, or greater than God, nor a means by which Christians can enjoy some leverage over God. It is not a magical means of scribbling tasks onto God's 'to do' list. It is not about getting our will done in heaven but rather getting God's will done on earth.

If prayer were approached in this way, perhaps the contents of our prayers would have more chance of getting beyond the door of our homes or churches, and the demands for blessings upon us and our friends. Equally, it will be more threatening to us than prayers for the world which essentially regurgitate the news headlines before adding the dispassionate refrain, "God bless 'em".

If to pray is to seek God's will on earth, then to pray by faith does not mean that we perform mental gymnastics to convince ourselves that God can make our dreams come true. Rather, to pray by faith is to make ourselves ready to be the means through which God answers our prayers. There is then no tidy distinction between our prayer life and our daily life.

To 'pray without ceasing' (I Thess 5:17) then, does not mean that we 'babble endlessly like the pagans...' (Mt 6:7). For pagans, prayers express the desires of daily life; for Christians, our daily life expresses the desires of our prayers. There is little point praying for victims of suffering in the third world, and then as relief agencies plead for more resources do little more than give the middle class equivalent of loose change. This would be an occultic attempt to

manipulate the world without disrupting my daily life. To pray without ceasing is to live out the prayers we offer to God.

The prayers of the righteous man are powerful and effective (Jas 5:16), not because he has earned his way into God's good books, but because he means what he prays – his daily life expresses the desire of his prayer life. If however, our daily life bears no resemblance to the prayers to which we say 'amen', we would be better off leaving our Bibles at home this Sunday and bringing a ouija board to church instead.

Us and them

Rather than approaching God with a shopping list of things to do – and of course we all know how that works – others first – then ourselves... Lord's prayer...

Our relationships with others in Christ, comes to the point at which the distinction between us and them is blurred. That these others for whom we pray, come to occupy such a place in our lives, that when we commune in God it doesn't occur to us not to mention them. And by giving us specific instruction about what to pray for, I wonder whether Paul is not saying so much – okay, here's what I need to achieve God's purposes, so send one up on my behalf and we're more likely to achieve it! What Paul seems to be saying, is – look, here is what stokes me up, here is what puts fire in my belly – here is what I am struggling with. If you are engaging God in prayer, and I am in your heart, then here is who I am today. Paul then may be read, not so much seeking divine assistance for his mission, but seeking to find a deeper communion with God himself.

And if prayer is about this communing with God, then – for those of us at least who do not worry about our daily bread – it is not constantly about asking God for stuff. Of course, it may entail that. If some disaster hits, and you are in communion with the king of the universe, you are going to ask him to do something about it! But to place asking God for stuff as the basic definition of prayer, is like saying that your relationships with other people are based on asking them for stuff. And the closer you get to that person – the better you become at asking them for stuff!

Maybe, the closer we become to another person – the less we ask them for stuff. The more we want to please them. Maybe, the closer we come to God, the less we seek his blessing on our plans, the more we seek to revolve our lives around his plans. Maybe, the closer we come to God, the less we seek for our will to be done in heaven, the more we seek for his will to be done on earth. Maybe, the closer we come to God, the less we have to say, and the more we have to listen. Maybe, the closer we come to God, the more we find ourselves living the kind of lives that answer the prayers we might once have uttered.