

# SERMON, ST JOHN'S PENTECOST 7

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”

Jesus' teaching on prayer, which includes Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, has often troubled me. Is it really true that when you seek, you will find, or that when you knock the door will be opened for you? Isn't it pretty obvious that we often ask and get nothing in return, no response at all, and knock and find the door not only doesn't open, but is slammed in our face? Undoubtedly, if I'm going to treat prayer like some great Amazon Prime account in the sky whereby I order my favorite Illy caffe from Italy or the most obscure tome of Hawaiian history and it arrives in two days, I'm going to be seriously disappointed. Prayer isn't simply a shopping list we send off to God as though his job is to run and fetch whatever we desire, a puppet on a string whom we artfully manipulate to fulfil our every whim. Nor is God Santa Claus who delivers good gifts to good little boys and girls, while the bad children getting a stocking full of coal. We know all too well that good people suffer, while the not so good prosper. The Calvinistic and, therefore, classic American belief that righteous behavior has physical and material benefits simply isn't true in the world that we know.

That isn't to say that there aren't impressive perceived answers to prayer. I'll never forget the extraordinary sight of a massive Coptic cathedral recently built on the outskirts of Cairo where the Virgin Mary appeared on a rooftop to a Muslim garage attendant and answered the prayers for healing of thousands of people, both Christian and Muslim. The walls of that gigantic church are entirely covered with bras, underpants, t-shirts and socks representing the parts of bodies healed by the Virgin. Real answers to prayer! Just this week on the Cup of Cold Water run, one man told me a beautiful story of how he came to sobriety after years of drug abuse and imprisonment. Just when he was bottoming out, he earnestly prayed to God to free him from the hell of addiction. Shortly thereafter he saw a silver cross on a massive chain hanging from a tree at Kanahā Beach. “Cool,” he exclaimed, “I can sell this (which he was told was worth \$800) and get money to buy more drugs.” Instead, he checked himself into rehab and now he feels called to reach out to his old buddies at Kanahā who are still using. An answer to prayer, and a particularly moving one! I have my own stories of prayer answered in my own life, stories of healing, of blessing and spiritual enlightenment, of occasions that can be described as nothing short of resurrection, of rebirth. I have also stories of prayer unanswered, of disappointment, despair and brokenness, when it has felt as if there was no one in that vast universe who cared to listen. What's your own experience with prayer? I would imagine that you can, indeed, celebrate those joyous and astonishing times when prayer has clearly been answered, but can also relate to the grief of heartfelt prayers left unanswered, of knocking earnestly and faithfully at a door that remains steadfastly shut.

George Herbert was a late 16th/early 17th century priest in rural England who wrote some of the most searingly beautiful and, I would say, practical spiritual poetry in the English

language. One of his very best (and one of my favorites) is his poem entitled “Prayer I.” I can think of no other better demonstration of the rich and varied experience of prayer in the Christian tradition than this:

Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age,  
God's breath in man returning to his birth,  
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,  
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth  
Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tow'r,  
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,  
The six-days world transposing in an hour,  
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;  
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,  
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,  
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,  
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,  
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,  
The land of spices; something understood.

He begins by suggesting that “the church’s banquet,” the Holy Eucharist, must be at the heart of prayer. Here God offers himself for our eternal sustenance and we, in turn, offer ourselves as a holy sacrifice to God and one another. So, prayer, not as petition, demanding things **from** God, but of offering ourselves in love **to** him and one another, is at the very heart of true prayer. The words “angel’s age” celebrates the core truth that prayer is about our relationship with God that begins before time and extends through all eternity – you and I are loved from the beginning of creation. “God’s breath in man returning to his birth” refers to that beautiful passage in Genesis where God breathes life into Adam, and so, every prayer we utter is a return to our true home in the heart of God, which is also our destiny. This means that prayer is the most natural endeavour of our human nature – when we speak to our Creator in prayer, we are returning the very breath that brought us into being.

Herbert continues by speaking of the “soul in paraphrase,” an exquisite way of demonstrating how when we pray we put into words (when we are capable of doing so!) the deep and complex thoughts, emotions, dreams, aspirations and desires of our hearts. Prayer is, as he puts it, “the heart in pilgrimage,” the yearning of us all to return to our home in the heart of God: as St. Augustine put it so well, “O God thou hast created us for Thyself, and our souls are restless until they rest in Thee.” Herbert goes on to speak of prayer as a plummet – just as a plummet line is used to measure the depth of the sea, so prayer reaches both earth and heaven in its universal extent. Possibly his boldest metaphor is of prayer as a siege engine attempting to scale the heights of heaven and reach the heart of God, a tower that empowers even the grossest sinner to reach the courts of heaven and be heard. The same idea that God loves us so much that he even entertains the idea that we can assault him with our deepest aspirations is expressed in the wild image of reversed thunder, lightning flashing back towards heaven from whence it normally comes! And just as the side of Christ was pierced for love of us, prayer is our sword piercing the heart of God. Wow!

“The six-days world transposing in an hour,” refers to God’s creation of the world in six days. The power of prayer is such that all creation can be transformed in one hour of prayer, a truth that Christians know so well, for in one instant, at the moment of Christ’s resurrection, the whole created order would never again be the same. As such, prayer is “A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear” because it has the extraordinary power to change the world. Perhaps we can begin to see the Resurrection as the greatest prayer ever uttered in all creation.

“Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss, Exalted manna, gladness of the best, Heaven in ordinary, man well drest.” Here Herbert’s tone shifts from language of power and assault to the healing effects of prayer on the human soul, for prayer is most importantly more about **receiving** God’s grace than about demanding things of God. This aspect of the two-way street of prayer is perhaps what we least understand and is probably what makes us most disappointed in our prayer lives. The Russian Orthodox teacher Archbishop Anthony Bloom writes that we complain that God doesn’t hear us when we pray to him for five minutes in our day, but neglect to see that God speaks to us with his love and grace the other 23 hours and 55 minutes! We are constantly fed with manna from heaven, but don’t know it and “heaven is in ordinary things all around us,” but we don’t see it. To acknowledge these things is truly prayer. And Herbert goes further: when we see the divine in each other, “man well drest,” we are engaged in the profoundest act of prayer.

Finally, and brilliantly, Herbert closes his great poem on prayer by moving from the “homely” quality of prayer as seeing the divine in the ordinary to the cosmic dimension. Prayer is the “Milky Way and Bird of Paradise, church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul’s blood, the land of spices, something understood.” The Bird of Paradise, by the way, according to legend, remains in flight and never comes down to earth. Prayer, then, is our return to the source of being, beyond the stars, indeed within the essence of star-dust, in the heart of God. Ah, but is it really “something understood?” I think that this final word of Herbert’s poem, which fascinatingly, reads as one extended run-on sentence with no main verb, is intended to be ironic. Prayer is a run-on sentence, not to be understood by the intellect, but fathomed only by the fathomless depths of God’s Love.