

## ASK AND IT WILL BE GIVEN YOU

When I was a vicar in Taunton we had two people in the parish who had leukemia at the same time. Garrick was a young family man, a dentist in his 30s; Helena was aged 7. We had a healing ministry in the parish and we offered the same healing services, the same prayer, the same love and listening. But Garrick died and Helena lived. Why? Why was one healed and the other not? Is God picky? Is he capricious? Does he have favourites?

A tailor was in the synagogue in his village in Poland at Yom Kippur. He was clearly angry, muttering and shaking his fists. After the service the rabbi asked him what was wrong. 'I was in an argument with God,' he said. 'I said to God – OK I'm not perfect. Sometimes I forget to say grace; I charge for double thread and only use single; I keep some cloth back to make clothes for my own children. But you, God! You take babies away from their mothers; young men die on the field of battle; people are cut down before their time through terrible illness. So let me make a bargain with you. If you forgive me, I'll forgive you.' And the tailor said to the rabbi, 'Did I do wrong?' The rabbi answered, 'My friend, you had such a strong case. Why did you let God off so easily?'

None of us will be inclined to let God off easily when so many unhappy things are happening around us. (And I'm not even talking about Brexit.) So what sense can we make of Jesus saying in today's gospel, 'Ask and it will be given you, search.. knock..'? How can that be true? As CS Lewis said 'Every headstone is a monument to an *unanswered* prayer.'

I want to suggest two moves that might help.

The first is to re-think God's way of working with his world - to see God working from the inside out rather than the outside in. Traditionally we've thought of God intervening from the outside, as if God is usually somewhere else, doing something else, and just popping into his world from time to time to do god-like things. And this leaves God with some very difficult questions, like why didn't he intervene to save 6m Jews, why didn't he stop those planes flying into the twin towers, why didn't he save my young sister-in-law who died in five days. If God could have stopped those things happening *and chose not to* – for some high-minded reason to do with the greater good, then I for one want no more to do with him. That God is monstrous.

But if God works from the inside out we have a very different picture. Here is a God who limits himself in the very act of creation. He limits his power in the world because of his love. As do we all. When we create a child we give up having an infinite range of possible ideal children; because now we have a particular, discrete child, real flesh and blood, with **this** character and not **that** one. From now on all we can do with this child is love and suggest and persuade and argue and bribe – but we can't force her to do anything, except in the most meaningless sense. I speak as the father of two daughters with strong personalities!

In other words, freedom is integral to any world that's worth living in. God gives us that freedom at the expense of his own control. And that must apply to the physical world too, not just to the human one. Nature must be free to be natural – to be itself. Natural disasters are just that – natural. So the movement of tectonic plates must be able to happen, even if they create tsunamis; earthquakes must be able to happen, even though buildings fall on people; cells must be able to multiply badly as well as creatively, even though they give us cancer.

So God's love for his creation turns out to be much more radical, more dangerous, than we thought.

But still, what about 'Ask and it will be given you.' I absolutely believe that to be true, but not in a simple transactional sense as if God were a divine cash machine – put in the card and you get the money; put in the prayer and you get what you want.

If we have a God who works from the inside out rather than the outside in, then we have a God who under-rules rather than over-rules. *But still he rules. He rules by the power of love.* And precisely because of the lavishness of that love, God has limited himself to work by loving persuasion, by invitation – and by *pressing every particle of creation to work to its fullest potential.* And when that truly happens, when everything is perfectly aligned, we call it a miracle. *Because the supernatural is really only an infinite extension of the natural.* Are you with me?

Think of someone you've been praying for recently... Have you got them in mind.....? We've had good reason to do that in this church family recently. We've been praying for many people who are special to us here. What we want for them, I guess, is the very best that love can do. And so God does all that infinite love can do – no more, no less. As we pray for that person we're praying that our love aligns with God's love, and that love *presses* into the situation ever more fully.

We don't know what almighty Love can do, and what it can't do. There must be limits, in a world that's been created to be free. You can't have dry rain or square circles. We have a given world, one with intrinsic limits, but also with huge possibilities. So let's pray on. Pray for Garrick as well as Helena. We don't know what the in-built limits of love are in this world. Our job is to pray.

And God will always answer, as much as love can. And where there can't be physical healing, there'll be emotional or spiritual or relational answers to our prayer. A friend of mine is going through a very hard time at present. He wrote this week: 'Meanwhile, I am exhausted. Never been more tired, I think. But at the same time, and for one of the few times in my life, I think, I feel sustained and held by the prayers of others. I cannot describe the feeling. It is a powerful sense, and in all this, it is the most extraordinary epiphany for me, and quite undeniable. It's humbling.'

‘Ask and it will be given you,’ but the ‘it’ is in God’s hands.

There’s a second move I promised. The first is to realise that God works flat out for us, but the best way to think of it is from the inside out, not the outside in, respecting the limits of love in creation. But always on our side, always pressing creation to its fullest potential.

The second move is to recognise that God’s answer ultimately to the conundrum of suffering, and prayer that seems not to be answered, is not so much to give answers, but to *enter the questions and transform them*, in the life and terrible death of Jesus. When you hear people say things like ‘everything happens for a reason’ or ‘God takes those he loves’, don’t buy it. Accidents happen. Period. But God enters into our suffering at the deepest level imaginable. There may be no refuge from suffering, but God’s love permeates that suffering through and through and through and through.

Do you remember some weeks ago I mentioned a young American writer called Kate Bowler? A theologian in her 30s with a small child – and stage 4 cancer. She said she should have felt abandoned, but instead she felt loved. And her deepest discovery was this: ‘God is here, we are loved, and that’s sufficient.’ God is here (wherever here is), we are loved, (endlessly), and that’s sufficient.

Look at the cross and see that love stretched out before our eyes. ‘See from his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down. Did ‘ere such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown.’

God doesn’t cause or allow suffering; he suffers suffering. And we pray not to *move* the hand of God but to *hold* the hand of God.

‘Ask and it will be given you.’ Yes it will. Yes it will.