

Prayer That Changes Things

29th Sunday, Year C

Luke 18: 1-8

17 October 2010

Is it legitimate to pray for good weather? General George Patton apparently thought so. In late 1944 the allied armies were pressing in on the borders of the Reich. The Wehrmacht was staging one last desperate attempt to push them away. For the Americans the problem was the weather – the snow, hail and rain that prevented them from having at the enemy. Bringing all resources to bear on the problem General Patton telephoned his chief chaplain Monsignor James O’ Neill and requested a prayer to meet the situation. The prayer books had nothing suitable to offer, so O’ Neill penned this prayer, which was printed on a quarter of a million cards and given out to every soldier in the Third Army:

“Almighty and most merciful Father, we humbly beseech Thee, of Thy great goodness, to restrain these immoderate rains with which we have had to contend. Grant us fair weather for Battle. Graciously hearken to us as soldiers who call upon Thee that, armed with Thy power, we may advance from victory to victory, and crush the oppression and wickedness of our enemies, and establish Thy justice among men and nations. Amen.”

If you think that Patton was pushing the envelope of Divine Providence in this instance, consider another incident from earlier in his life. His wife found him deep in prayer before a polo match in which he was about to take part. Afterwards she asked him,

“George, were you praying to win? No,” he said. “I was praying that I would do my best.”

To what extent does prayer change things? One of my fellow students at Mirfield used to say, “I believe that if enough of us asked God with deeply believing faith for peace in Northern Ireland it would come to pass.” “Dear Richard” we all thought. “How quaint and touching. It’s good to have a few naives and innocents around. And to think that he is a doctor too.” Now, many years later, when we are enjoying an outbreak of peace in Northern Ireland I am wondering if he was right. After all, there are those who are saying that the Berlin Wall came down, and the tyrannies of the East collapsed, because of the weight of prayer that had built up over the years from many committed intercessors.

But isn’t this what the psychiatrists call magical thinking - wish fulfillment, romantic longing, together with a considerable imaginative capacity for fantasy, and a passive approach to life. Don’t most human beings long for someone special to unexpectedly turn up and get them off the hooks of their dilemmas and defeats?

What it comes down to is the balance between action and grace. Between our efforts and God’s helping hand. Perhaps Augustine got it right when he wrote, “work as though everything depended on you, pray as though you expected a miracle.” We are in the driving seat here, stewards of a God given freedom, creating a destiny, which could go in almost any direction. But we have an invisible partner in these strivings. One who draws us on to the utmost maturity we are capable of. God will not do for us what we can do for ourselves. But God is intervening in the process. Moving things along from behind the scenes.

Entering into whatever openings we offer for the operation of grace in this world, capable too of wonderful things in places and situations where we had apparently sealed off all possibilities of new beginnings.

That is the punch line of those words of Jesus. They are about deeply believing prayer. Prayer that makes a difference. Prayer that changes things. Prayer that is after the mind of Christ. The character of God – just, holy, merciful, and responsive – determines the answer to persistent prayer. The widow in the story only asks for justice, and what God grants is justice. The parable is not a commitment that God will give us whatever we want, unless what we want is in line with the character of God. What more could we want.

So the call to us is to persistent prayer. Prayer that does not give up. Prayer that expects great things. Prayer that undergirds our actions and our strivings. Otherwise we risk running on empty. Pushing ahead in programmes and policies that are more about our inner emptiness than about God's partnership with us in building the good world.

We cry out from the ground of our beseeching. Hoping against hope we call on the one who can summon new possibilities from the broken dreams of our life. Having done all that we can, we look to the one who holds us in the palm of his hand.

Our faith is about more than ethical striving. We are not in the business of pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Grace meets us at the level of our striving. It changes the spiritual atmosphere of our point of struggle. And it opens up a new world where all things are possible to those who ask boldly and persistently.

Once we begin to take prayer that changes things seriously we need to get organised in the way we go about it so that we don't just end up praying for the same limited number of people and situations over and over again. There are a variety of ways of going about this. Here is mine.

I have a notebook, which is divided up into the days of the week. In the first part is the day-by-day intercessions relating to my personal world, my family, friends, people from the past that I remember with affection, and people that I am concerned about. And of course I pray for those who have died – they are always at the bottom of the page, after I have prayed for the living. These names are growing year by year.

In the second section is a day-by-day roll call of the people in my vocational world – you in fact. I pray for each one of you by name each week. I also pray for the Church organisations I belong to in the wider Church. And I pray for countries that I think particularly need God's help.

I also make use of the Anglican cycle of prayer that prays for each Anglican diocese in the world day by day, the Board of Missions prayer leaflet that prays for our missionaries overseas, and our Diocesan cycle of prayer that enables me to pray for each parish month by month. And last but not least I use the parish of Avonside monthly cycle of prayer that prays for each street in our parish, and all aspects of our parish life. I can supply a copy of this on request.

I don't expect lay people to be as assiduous as this in praying for Church concerns. It is the business of a parish priest to make sure that he prays for those who may not be praying for themselves, and to uphold all the people he serves in regular prayer. But

I think it is very helpful for all of us to have some sort of method about the way we pray for others, to be organised and systematic so that our prayers reach out across a wide field of concern and interest. After all we serve and love a God who is interested in everything.