

Praying: envisioning renewed relationships

[Matthew 5:21-24](#) | 2nd July 2017

They say absence makes the heart grow fonder, but I'm not so sure. The kind of absence they are talking about is the type where the one thing uppermost in your mind is the person who's not present. They are in your thoughts all the time; you miss them and want to be with them. If you've gone a few days without thinking about someone, you don't have the kind of fondness of heart which is made stronger by being apart. There's something about being together with people who matter to us, which touches us deeply.

Last week we thought about how prayer might work inside each of us as individuals. This week I want to explore how prayer might change the way we think about and act towards others. In other words, how might prayer might promote justice and better relationships.

Prayer changes the world through us

Prayer is more about our being changed than it is about us asking that things change, particularly against the odds. I want to refine that a little bit: prayer does change the world, in part through the things that prayerful people do. Prayers are answered often through people who pray.

Gregory was bishop of Nyssa in what is now south-central Turkey. By all accounts he was not a skilled administrator, and was better at prayer than at paperwork (which might not be a bad predisposition for a bishop) He did, though, write quite a bit which has remained influential.

He argued that God has chosen to share his power with those who are committed to following God's Son, but that God's power needs to be exercised in the way God's Son, Jesus, exercised it. So Christians are to perform miracles, and these are miracles such as forgiving neighbours, and giving property away to the poor, because that is how God exercises power. God always has his creation in mind: God's fondness of heart would not be increased if God were absent, and anyway God is always present.

This radical 'being present for others' character of God is meant to fill and flood through the lives of those who are spiritually connected to God in Christ. Virtually everything we think, and everything we do, is meant to have God and other people somewhere in the picture.



And so, when we pray, 'Give us today our daily bread', Gregory said that's not us asking God for what we need. If our default disposition is others-focused with God also in the picture, when we pray that phrase will be asking for the bread which God sent from heaven to be everyone's gift. We are asking for bread for everyone. And, Gregory went on to say:

'You can only say that you have properly received your daily bread if no-one goes hungry or distressed because you are satisfied. We receive our daily

bread in its true sense when no-one is made poor because we are rich.'

'Give us today our daily bread' is a prayer, but it needs to be put into action. So the prayer becomes the resolve to work for justice along with reconciliation. That, Rowan Williams says, 'is essentially part of living out the Lord's Prayer. ... You could sum up what Gregory says about the Lord's Prayer simply by saying, "prayer heals relations". Prayer is about reconciliation, justice, and how it changes your attitude to other people and the world. Prayer is not a narrowly private activity; it is about your belonging in the body of Christ, and in the family of humanity.'

Right relations mattered to Jesus

If you don't see prayer the way Gregory describes it here, Jesus' words in today's passage become more difficult. He suggests that you should put good relations with others before your worship of God. Leave your gift at the altar and be reconciled to the person you have wronged. And you could misunderstand that as Jesus saying religion, which is the expression we give to faith, is really all about how we get on with one another. But is worship, then, merely a means to an end and not worthwhile in itself?

Not at all! Your worship of God incorporates and includes restoring right relationships, seeking justice, making peace. But we still need to worship. The gift left at the altar is retrieved and used in worship once the reconciliation is accomplished.

Right relations with God and among people all mattered to Jesus. We can make the mistake of focusing so much on God that we miss God's emphasis on earthly justice. But we could be so preoccupied with peace that we forget to pray. And it's prayer which operates as a thread holding us close to the person of God in Christ and the purposes of God in Christ. It takes some real contact for the force to be transmitted through the balls in Newton's cradle. It takes similar contact to enable God's force of love which seeks justice and peace to flow through humanity. Prayer provides the contact.

Application

There's the danger of a knee-jerk reaction when we pray, that we ask God to do certain, sometimes unlikely, things. As though God didn't know what needed done, or required us to nudge him. But let's not criticise that too quickly, for there's something deeper going on. It might not look like this, but what people praying like that might be doing is imagining what it would take if a challenging situation were to be resolved. People would be in better relation to each other. The effects of the natural world might have less of a damaging impact. Life might be lived more richly, or God sensed more fully and deeply.

I want to suggest that if we left the mechanics to God for just a moment, praying could be about our vision of the future. We could imagine what it might look like if God were to touch the lives and situations about which we pray, but perhaps we don't need to tell God what to do. My children might, in the past, have said, 'Let's go to the beach at Troon,' but they never said: 'Dad, it's an A759 afternoon' - that's the route number from Kilmarnock to the coast. The destination, or the vision, mattered much more than the way they got there.

And, now that they're older, they want to get there themselves. 'Dad, take us to the beach at Troon' is, slowly - but not too slowly for me - becoming 'Where are the car keys...?'

And there's the thing about prayer: it changes us so that we want to become the answer to the visions we pray about. It's hardly surprising that people who pray in a visionary way tend to want to contribute to answering the vision they pray about. And those who don't, don't. Prayer was a lively part of the life of the congregation I served before. I noticed there was a strong link between those who prayed about their community and those who got involved with doing things in

their community. Prayer didn't take people away from serving - it did quite the opposite. When I think about my life, I remember praying as a student about aspects of God's kingdom. That informed how I thought about where I wanted to work as a solicitor, what I did in my church, and it prompted me to think about serving full-time. I can tell you from experience: be careful what you pray for.

What now?

Can we re-imagine prayer, and perhaps think about ways of engaging prayerfully together so that praying becomes life-enhancing, enables peace-making and develops disciples? Remember that this all started with the Council of Assembly at this year's General Assembly: the desire expressed through Scotland to pray in an intentional way that God would work in our churches to refresh and renew our vision.'

Are you willing to continue, or embark, on a journey of intentional, visionary and committed prayer, perhaps done together, expecting that God is very likely to use us as part of God's answer to the vision we bring to God as we pray. What do you make of this? And what will you let God make of you as you open yourself, your imagination and your life to God in prayer?