

Convent 2016

Prayer is so woven into the fabric of what it is to live as a Christian, that perhaps sometimes we forget to ask that simple question: “why do we pray?”. And if we forget to ask why we pray, then there must be a danger that one day we may simply forget to pray at all.

At a very simple level we pray because we recognise that by ourselves we are powerless. In the Old Testament battles Moses recognises that the attack of the Amalekites is a real danger to the people of Israel: by themselves they may not have the wherewithal to resist, and their escape from Pharaoh will have been in vain. They have no military strategy or secret weapon to save them. Moses turns instead to constant prayer, “from the rising of the sun to its setting” (Ps 112[113]:3). He does so having faith in God, knowing that Israel’s “help is in the name of the Lord” (Ps 120[121]:2).

So too with the widow in the gospel: she has nobody to defend her rights; only by constant “prayer” - not in this case to God, but to the unjust judge - can she hope for justice.

It is right that we should, in humility, recognise our powerlessness, and be constant in bringing our needs before the Lord. But if that were all there were to prayer we would have to say that the more powerful somebody is, the less he or she would need to pray. Perhaps this is why the unjust judge, entrusted with considerable power and authority, has “neither fear of God nor respect for man” (Lk 18:4). Why bother praying for divine assistance if you already have the military might, or the political clout,

or the money, to defend yourself, and others against aggressors and injustices?

There is a clue at the end of the gospel passage: after telling us how God will see justice done swiftly in answer to our constant prayer, Christ adds, “But when the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on earth?” (Lk 18:8)

It seems that he will find lots of praying going on, at least from those who recognise their powerlessness; but will he find any faith?

We might initially think that a strange question. If people are praying to God, surely they have faith in him? But in the gospels even the demons know that God exists, and they implore him to act in certain ways. In that very basic sense you could even say that they pray to God; though we could not say that the demons have “faith”.

What Christ asks of us, is not merely that we should pray insistently for our own needs, and for justice to all - though certainly we must pray for that. He asks us to have faith: that is, he calls us to believe in God, and his word, and freely to commit our whole selves to him.

Prayer isn't about persuading God to do what we want, however noble that may be; it is about inviting God to mould us in faith, into what he wants for us. Prayer can't change God; but it should change us.

Through our prayer, our faith is nourished and deepened: and that is one reason why Christian traditions of prayer - whether liturgical or private - focus on the scriptures. Praying with the scriptures, using words given to us by

God, we enter more deeply into “the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:15); we learn more profoundly, the holiness to which our Lord calls us.

As Christians we have Christ himself as our model: God made human, was himself a man of insistent prayer during his life, and ultimately on the cross, pleading for us and alongside us for our redemption. Ancient Christian tradition sees Moses’ prayer with arms extended as prefiguring the cross (cf. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 97). The self-emptying of the cross is the point around which all the scriptures, and all history turn, and it must be the focus of our prayer as we seek to answer Christ’s call to follow him.