

Any Questions' Sermon Series

Week 7: What about unanswered prayer?



Recently Tim and I spotted a rare day in the diary when we were both free, and took off for a long walk on Dartmoor. I have a hopeless sense of direction, so Tim is always the navigator on these occasions, not to mention the bearer of emergency rations, water-proofs and probably the kitchen sink. Sometimes we find it's a good time to talk about serious stuff; sometimes just to chat about day to day details, work, family; sometimes, often, we don't talk at all, simply enjoy the scenery and each other's company.

So why am I wittering on about Dartmoor ramblings when I'm supposed to be tackling the thorny question of unanswered prayer?

WHAT IS THIS PRAYER THING?

Well, because it struck me - a couple of miles outside Chagford - that this sort of walk provides an interesting picture of prayer. If we're concerned with 'unanswered prayer', that implies that we've been asking questions, or making requests. But that is only a very small part of prayer, just as on our walk we spent very little time asking each other for anything.

One of the important things for us is that, unless we plan it, it's easy to go for far too long without spending any quality time together, or having any real interaction, or continuing to deepen our relationship. The same applies to God: unless we plan to take time simply to be consciously in his presence, it's all too easy to be ships that pass in the night, senders of quick emails, online shoppers. Just as Tim and I spent long periods in silence, so to learn to be still before God gives him time to speak to our hearts, whatever it is we need to hear: a word of love, of reassurance, of peace perhaps; or of conviction, or wisdom, or simply to restore our perspective. Just as the wonderful long views on Dartmoor are restorative, and speak of the greatness of God, so we often need simply to be reminded of his bigger picture.

This is the first element of prayer: taking time to know God, to praise and thank him.

Another thing I appreciate about our walks is that they remind me how much I depend on Tim. I know I wouldn't venture half as far if I didn't have a reliable guide, though in many ways I can be horribly independent. Again, there's a parallel: it's all too easy to depend on our own resources, our own strength, and be unwilling to admit our dependence on God, or that we limit what we could be, or do, if we're not open to his inspiration, leading and enabling. Taking time simply to remember that everything we have, our strengths, our talents, our work, our friends and family - and our forgiveness for all those times we fail, are all gifts from God is both humbling and reassuring. He knows us inside out - what we're capable of, what freaks us out; what encourages us, and where we might stumble and fall. He will remind us that we can trust him to be our guide, and to have in his rucksack, as it were, everything we need in order to complete our journey, the journey he has planned for us.

This is the next element of prayer: knowing ourselves to be known by God.

Then there's the more serious conversation. Have you noticed how much easier it often is to talk through major stuff when you're out walking? I don't know what it is - something about being side by side rather than confronting one another... or having that wider perspective all around you... or simply being free from other distractions... We don't necessarily come to any conclusions or solutions, but we have perhaps clarified the situation, understood one another better, aired the whole thing, opened it up.

Many of the things that confront us - whether personal or further afield - leave us feeling confused, helpless, unsure what to think, how to act, what to pray. And maybe it's often better not to try to put prayer into words, but simply to hold those situations before God, asking the Holy Spirit to work in them as he knows best, 'to be with God with the people on our heart', trusting them to the God who alone understands everything, and whose love and wisdom are unquestioned.

This is trusting ourselves and our deepest concerns to God.

Am I ducking the question? I don't think so, because it must be first things first.

Michael Ramsay, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, asked how long he'd spent that morning in prayer, famously answered '2 minutes.'

The interviewer, somewhat aghast, said '2 minutes??' 'Yes,' replied the Archbishop, 'but it took me 28 minutes to get there.'

So, what was he doing during those 28 minutes? Well, everything we've just been talking about: what Jesus, in our gospel reading, calls ABIDING. In 11 verses, he uses the word 'abide' 10 times - so it could be important... and just look at v.7: 'If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, *ask for whatever you wish and it will be done for you.*' So this abiding, this taking time simply to be with God, with Jesus, with the Holy Spirit - to allow him to love us and to give us his perspective - is the condition for our praying in a way that will enable God to answer. Why? Because in that time of stillness, of listening, of openness and trust God can help us to understand more of his purpose, more of how we can best respond in the situations that concern us. Or perhaps, to understand less - and therefore be less inclined to dictate to him how we think he should act, and more inclined simply to hold on and trust.



YES, BUT....

Of course it's right to ask God for things - for ourselves and for others.

We are children of a heavenly Father, and children ask, demand, question, argue - it's all part of growing up! And there are plenty of examples in the Bible: Abraham, Jacob, the Psalmists, people needing healing, people needing wisdom - and Jesus himself, whose prayer in Gethsemane was, if you like unanswered in the sense that his request wasn't granted. It was answered, though, in that he also prayed that God's will be

done: and it was, in the only way, apparently, that it could be. Many of us, I'm sure, will have been in the place of the Psalmist: 'How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? Why don't you DO something - it seems that either you can't or you don't care. Lord?'

Sometimes it's quick and easy; back to the Dartmoor ramblings, I ask Tim to pass me the water, and there it is: no problem. Then I ask if we can have lunch in the pub at Chagford: but that's a 'Wait and see" - it may not be open, it may be full, we may not feel like it by the time we get there, it may be too expensive, we may not like the menu, there may be a better option - or it may be fine. Just wait... But if I ask for a couple of months' stay at Gidleigh Park Country House Hotel, the answer is likely either to be incredulous silence, or 'You have to be joking!' Are we open to *any* kind of answer?

CONCLUSION

We have only to look to Jesus to be reassured that no prayer ever goes unheard, or that God is ever anything other than 100% for us, loving, caring and wanting the best for us. Sometimes his 'answers', or his silences, are perplexing, frustrating, hugely difficult for us: but prayer is far less about changing circumstances than about changing ourselves, helping us identify with God's heart and purposes as we spend time in his company. As we wrestle, plead, argue, we must remind ourselves too that he is the Alpha and Omega, the source and the end of all things and we are his creation: beloved children, yes, but also the woolly-headed sheep of his pasture who will never understand the half but can trust him utterly.

'My Father, I do not understand thee, but I trust thee.'

*Corrie ten Boom,
survivor of Ravensbruck.*

