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**Genesis 18.20-32**

**Ps 138**

**Col 2.6-15**

**Luke 11.1-13**

*Ask, and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. (Luke 11.10) Vs 13 ...how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.*

On Friday, as we were leaving the Christian meditation group which meets here at St. James every week I mentioned that I was about to write my sermon for today thinking about ‘whether God answers our prayers’. ‘Oh yes, he does indeed’ one of the people said emphatically.

I wonder what **we** would say? An emphatic ‘yes’ – of course, God answers our prayers, or a more reluctant, qualified – yes, but.

At the beginning of today’s gospel reading, one of Jesus’ disciples asks

‘Lord, teach us to pray’. Having observed Jesus praying, he wants to know how Jesus prays. And Jesus’ answer, is to teach them the ‘Our Father’.

‘When you pray, say’ Our Father’, hallowed by your name.’ Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial’.

Our praying starts with placing ourselves before God, who is like a Father, which means, God knows us intimately, loves us unconditionally, has our best interest at heart and wants us to flourish. And this God is holy beyond our comprehension, and to be trusted. In Hebrew, referring to a ‘name’ (as in the Lord’s prayer, the phrase: ‘hallowed be thy name’) is not just the name by which a person is called.

‘The name’ means the whole character of the person as it is revealed and known to us . Ps. 9 vs 10

‘Those who know thy name put their trust in thee’.

Our starting place is our relationship with God who, like a loving parent, who knows his/her children's needs and wants to give good gifts to us. Like any other relationship we need to spend time with God, listening as well as talking opening ourselves to God's will and kingdom.

After having taught them this prayer Jesus then goes on and to speak about asking God for things, he having just responded to the disciple asking to be taught to pray.

First he tells the parable about the man, whose honour is at stake, unless, in the middle of the night, he manages to get hold of some bread to feed the guest who has suddenly arrived. (vs 13 **If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!**)

Jesus encourages us to ask and seek things from God, to knock on God's door even though there is a paradox here. On the one hand God knows what we need before we even ask, and on the other, we are urged to ask.

It seems, the asking, the seeking the knocking are important – why?

1. First of all, asking God helps us to open our hearts to God so we are more able to receive the good things God wants to give us.

St. Augustine writes about this in one of his letters:

*'Nevertheless, God who knows how to give good gifts to his children urges us to 'ask and to seek and to knock'. Why this should be necessary, given that God knows everything before we even ask might perplex us. But we should understand that our Lord God wants us to articulate our needs before him not in order to be informed of our wishes (since to him they cannot be hidden), but rather that through the process of our asking, desire may deepen in us, and through our desire God is able to prepare us to receive the gifts he wishes to bestow.'*

St Augustine goes on to say: *'his gifts are very great: our capacity to receive them is small and meagre.'*

Asking God for things helps us to open our hearts to God's gifts for us.

2. My second point is related to the first, in that turning to God with our needs and longings reminds us that God cares about us and that we can turn to God with all our needs; we are not alone. God's shoulders are broad: we can go to God with all your feelings and experiences: our anger, our frustration, our doubt, our helplessness, our guilt. And the psalms are full of this – I think it's fair to say that every emotion under the sun is reflected in the psalms – ecstatic joy, great faith, as well as anger, despair, hopelessness and disbelief.

God invites us to come with all our 'stuff' to place it before God – and by doing so, to allow God's spirit to work in us, to transform us and heal.

3. Thirdly, asking God helps us to be part of the solution.

*Martin Luther King Jr. '...to expect God to do everything while we do nothing is not faith, but superstition'.*

When we seek God's help with a problem or need, our praying can help us to find a way forward and work towards a solution. For example, if we don't get on with someone, we have to work or live with, praying about it may change our perspective, help us to see the other person differently, show us a way forward, but all this may not make any difference unless we do our part to bring the outcome about. This may, for example mean, suggesting to a colleague or neighbour, to have a cup of tea together. As we all know, we can make a real difference to other people lives, and our prayer for God's help may lead us to see that we need to take some action.

4. Fourthly, sometimes there are situations where we really cannot see the way forward; where we feel completely **powerless**; where we at our wits' end all we can do is to turn to God with open hands, handing over. This maybe in relation to a son or daughter who live with addiction, and until they are ready to seek help, there is little you can do. Or in the case of the break down of a relationship where one party does not want to talk or do anything about it.

- And all we can do is to hold our powerlessness before God -bring these feelings of helplessness and powerlessness time and time before God. And in doing so open ourselves to receiving the grace to let go and allow God to be our strength, the one who carries us when we do not know

the way forward. And hang on trusting that God is at work in that situation. And God will be at work....we may need to allow time, but God will be at work.

5. This week our hearts went out to the people in the train crash near Santiago de Compostela, the more tragic as it happened on the eve of their great festival, St. James' Day, which falls on 25<sup>th</sup> July. What should have been an occasion of much happiness has turned into grief and mourning. The Spanish Prime Minister, (Mariano Rajoy), himself from Santiago, was reported to say *For someone from Santiago, like myself, believe me, this is the saddest Day of Saint James of my life.*"

Last Sunday, we celebrated St. James day here and David spoke movingly of how loving and being loved makes all the difference in the face of death. It's God presence with us at times of sadness and loss. In the face of the tragedy in Spain, people will go out of their way to help the injured, the bereaved, I hope even the train driver whose error may have caused the accident. And in many places people will pray for the sufferers.

We do not know why a loving God allows these tragedies to happen, but we do know that God is with us in the midst of tragedy, although at the time we may not feel or know God's presence; we may feel utterly abandoned and all that's left to us is to cry 'Lord, my God have you forsaken me? 'Lord, are your ears closed to my cry'.

So, to draw to an end – I return to my question at the beginning: Does God hear our prayers?

Yes, God does, but not like a genie, who is there to fulfil our every wish and command.

The exact way in which our prayers are answered is something no one knows, but, we do know, that God, like a loving parent, invites us into ever deeper relationship with him, longing to give us the things we need, and our asking, seeking, knocking enable us to receive. St Augustine: *We shall receive in proportion to the simplicity of our faith, the firmness of our hope, and the intensity of our desire.* ' Amen.