

Does prayer present problems to be solved?

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I find it really moving to offer prayers this morning for all those Vice-Chancellors, Principal's staff and students, most of whom will have no awareness that they are prayed for, and nonetheless we ask that they receive God's good counsel, protection, mercy and love.

According to experiments run by Harvard Medical School, those who do not know they are being prayed for recover better from surgery than those who do. But I'm not sure what to make of prayer experiments because I don't know how there could be a control group, when in worship like ours today, we spread our prayers so wide.

Every day, prayers are said for the needs of the world; not much falls outside of that. Experiments are also an explicit act of putting God to the test, and God may well not play along.

Experiments are run, though, because people want to know whether petitionary prayers are effective. That's the empirical question alongside philosophical and theological questions as to whether it makes sense to ask God for things. Of course, prayer is not only petition; it is also praise, worship, thanksgiving, lament, confession, contemplation, silence, and deep listening. But when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, he taught them petition, and many of the prayers we offer follow that pattern, such as this one by Dora Bryan, British comedy actress:

So far today God,
I've done alright
I haven't gossiped
I haven't lost my temper
Haven't been grumpy,
Nasty or selfish
I'm really glad of that,....

But in a few minutes, God,
I'm going to get out of bed
And from then on
I'm probably going to need
A lot of help. Amen.

Dora Bryan, *Tapestry Tales*

In effect, she is saying 'Thy will be done,' and 'deliver me from evil'.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant would have churlishly dismissed her prayer as 'fetish-making' because God 'needs no such information regarding the inner disposition of the wisher; therefore nothing is accomplished by it'.

Logical objections can be raised about prayer that could convince us that it is a waste of time: if God is all powerful, all good, and all knowing, God does not need our praise, unless self-aggrandising (which would be a shortfall), and does not need our petitions: we can't augment God's power, or persuade God, who is all good, to be more good, and we cannot tell God anything that God does not already know. God knows us and our needs, collectively and individually, better than we do.

For these reasons, down the ages people have come to the conclusion (as Kierkegaard put it) that prayer does not change God, but changes those who pray. Prayer brings us to a place of surrender: 'Thy will be done'. This conclusion can be reached with a very full and rich sense of how prayer can transform us, as with St Augustine, who saw prayer as 'turning the heart to God, purging the inner eye, so that one might be able to bear the divine light and remain in it, **not only without annoyance** [!], but with ineffable joy, in which a life truly and sincerely blessed is perfected'.

Or, we might have a more attenuated understanding of the effect of prayer on the one who prays, as did Kant. He insisted that prayer 'can only be to induce in us a moral disposition... fan[ning] into flame the cinders of morality in the inner recesses of our heart'. Kant's interest was in how to be good, Augustine's in how to be holy. They both give us individualistic assessments of what happens in prayer, but would

recognise a social dimension: that as those who pray are changed, they affect the world around them. As Gandhi might have said, although they weren't his words, 'Be the change you want to see' and 'If you want to change the world, first change yourself'.

But are we missing something really important, and selling Jesus short? Prayer may soften our hearts, open our minds, transform our wills, have us cooperate with God's will and with one another, and is this the sum of what Jesus meant in teaching his disciples to pray? And not only to pray, but also to ask, 'give us our daily bread' and 'forgive us', even with the terrible condition that we have to forgive others. In the parable of the unjust judge and persistent widow, Jesus encourages persistence in asking, presumably not, or not only, for the sake of change in the widow, but so that she might secure a change in her circumstances.

Furthermore, why would God create a world in which we have real agency, including for choosing to nurture good or evil, but give us only a semblance of agency in our prayers? We could suggest that God creates and sustains the world without giving us agency or efficacy in anything, as CS Lewis mockingly imagines: 'Why wash your hands?', he asks. 'If God intends them to be clean, they'll come clean without your washing them. If He doesn't, they'll remain dirty (as Lady Macbeth found) however much soap you use.'

One might respond that we indeed have only a semblance of agency in our prayers because our prayers bump up against God who is perfect and changeless, and therefore we can only surrender, and this is what we must learn. But this doesn't sound sufficiently to me like the God revealed to us in Judaeo-Christian tradition. Nor does it do sufficient justice to some of the petitions coming out of this tradition, such as the prayer, you may know, that was found at Ravensbrück concentration camp, sewn into the clothing of a dead Jewish girl:

Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not only remember the suffering they have inflicted on us. Remember the fruits we have brought, thanks to this suffering--our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, the courage, the generosity, the greatness of heart which

has grown out of all this. And when they come to judgment, let all the fruits we have borne be their forgiveness.

It seems respectful of us, not disrespectful of God, that God might extend mercy in response to the prayers of those who have suffered.

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‘Great is the power of prayer’, The beloved 20th- century Rabbi, Abraham Heschel, proclaims. ‘For to worship is to *expand the presence of God in the world.*’

Heschel recalls arriving as a student in Berlin, in 1927. Being caught up in the sites of the city, and the concerts, lectures and theatres available, he had not noticed that evening had arrived: ‘I had forgotten God’, he wrote, ‘– I had forgotten Sinai – I had forgotten that sunset is my business – that my task is “to restore the world to the kingship of the Lord”.’

‘Your Kingdom come’, Jesus taught his disciples to pray.

Heschel goes on: ‘When we say *Blessed be He*, we extend His glory, we bestow His Spirit upon the world.... *Magnified and sanctified be God’s great name throughout the world....* May there be more of God in this world’.

‘Hallowed be your name.’

Indeed, the first **three** petitions that Jesus teaches his disciples are so much more than politely acknowledging God before turning to our own concerns. They are the dynamic in which all our petitions and all our prayers find their place, because they are our fiat, ‘Thy will be done’, to God’s kingdom in this world.

‘God is transcendent, but our worship makes him immanent,’ Heschel insist. ‘God is in need of man. His being immanent depends upon us’.

It may sound like a diminishment of God, to suggest that God needs us, and at odds with classic notions of God as in need of nothing from humanity, as expressed for example by the second-century Bishop, Irenaeus. But Irenaeus was making a distinction between God and the pagan gods, who needed human beings to make up some lack in them,

hence their sometimes aggressive or capricious behaviour towards humanity. Irenaeus' point is that God does not fluctuate like a being in need, and precisely for that reason is 'total sympathy, and total love'. It's in a similar vein that Aquinas in the thirteenth century writes of God as impassible; he means to show that God does not waver with changeable passions, and for this reason is able to be perfectly loving. God is a metaphorical rock not because God is like an unaffected lump of stone, but because God is reliably constant.

If we can step into a way of seeing in which God's goodness neither diminishes nor increases, and that an outworking of that goodness is that God needs us in order to be immanent in the world (rather than God bull-dozing us), this opens up ways of thinking about prayer that are different from the logical problems we often pose about petition.

God's immanence suggests dependency, which in Christian belief is manifest in God becoming not only human, but a helpless infant, whose very conception depended on Mary's fiat, 'Let it be', and whose upbringing depended on a family and community making him welcome in this world.

It's very important in feminist theology that Mary made room for God within herself, within her body, and that we can make room for God within ourselves through prayer, following also the pattern of Teresa of Avila, that we make ourselves a habitable place for Christ to dwell.

There are three thoughts I have about making a home for God in us, which to my mind change and perhaps even remove the common problems raised about petitionary prayer, although other questions do emerge.

First, the indwelling is mutual - 'Dwell in Me, and I will dwell in you', Jesus said. God becomes human that we might become divine; dwelling with us that we might be made adopted children of God, taken into the relationship of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit (or Mother God, Beloved child and Holy Spirit).

Second, the desire for love is mutually felt.

St Teresa believed that God is ever alluring and inviting us home and that our longing for God is the core motivation of our beings.

Another Teresa, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, said ‘A Christian is the dwelling place of the living God. He created me, He chose me, He came to dwell in me, because He wanted me. Now that you have known how much God is in love with you it is but natural that you spend the rest of your life radiating that love.’

It’s really not a departure from traditional Christian teaching to speak of God’s want or need. The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church articulates God’s desire for us as a visceral thirst:

The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us.

‘Whether we realize it or not,’ the Catechism goes on to say, ‘prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours.’ Quoting from Jeremiah and from Jesus’ words to the woman at the well, it casts our prayer as a response to the ‘plea of the living God: “They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water!”’; ‘God thirsts that we may thirst for him. "You would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."’

This focuses a beam, I think, on Jesus’ cry from the Cross, ‘I thirst’; he was not only after vinegar.

We can usefully go back to Irenaeus’ insight that God does not need us as the pagan gods need humanity, and so God’s thirst is not visited upon us in aggression, as though we are to satisfy a lack in God. God thirsts for us, desires us, woos us, but does not attack us with his thirst.

Third, and finally, our being caught up with God in mutual thirst and indwelling might be a place to acknowledge those parts of scripture and tradition that show prayer as coming from God: ‘O Lord, open our lips’, or ‘open our hands’, as they sign in deaf-churches. ‘God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!’, Paul writes to the Christians in Galatia. ‘We do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit...intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words’, he writes to the young church in Rome (Rom. 26f). Even

the Lord's prayer, of course, is given to us by Jesus, God's Son, so that we can offer it back to the Father. The movement of God is continually to bring us into the relationship enjoyed by Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

If in prayer, God speaks to God, most of the problems raised regarding petitionary prayer are changed. We no longer need to consider that we somehow inform God, or influence God, or empower God. God is the Subject of prayer (at least some of the time). However, we could ask whether the change brought about in God is only a Cambridge change, though I think that position would be hard to maintain. And we do invite the question of why God should choose to go via us, to which we can perhaps only say that God created us for the sake of relationship with us. Would it not be more problematic if God created us and desired no loving relationship, or there were no means of our developing a deeper relationship with God? ; or, as suggested before, if God gave us efficacy in most things but not in prayer, despite encouraging us to pray as though prayer were efficacious?

'Beloved,' Teresa of Avila prayed in her failing health, and not wanting to write another book: 'I have no idea what to say here. If you want me to do this thing, you're going to have to speak through me.' And so she produced *The Interior Castle*, a work of prayer about prayer, whose influence arguably continues to expand God's presence in the world.

Perhaps, then, prayer follows the pattern of prophecy and incarnation, both of which require human cooperation: my Word goes forth from my mouth and will not return to me empty, but will accomplish that which I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.