

WHAT SHOULD WE PRAY FOR?  
A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Easter, 2011  
On the Text: Propers for the Day  
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

The first two verses of our Gospel lesson this morning raise a hard and prickly question: Why don't we get what we pray for? Let me read you those two verses again: John 16:23-24 **Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. 24 Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.**

That seems to be very clear, but does this mean that God has to give **us** anything **we** ask of Him if we ask it in Jesus' Name, especially if we end our prayer with the phrase "**through Jesus Christ our Lord**". or something similar? Unfortunately, no!

Where do we get such ideas? Mostly from wishful thinking. Many of our wrong ideas about God and what He has meant by many things in Scripture come from just that: wishful thinking. I have begun to think of this as the wishful thinking hermeneutic. A hermeneutic is just a way of how to interpret the Bible, of how to get meaning out of it. Part of the wishful thinking hermeneutic is the idea that anything Jesus ever said that could possibly imply something good for me in this world has to be true and mean what I think it means, particularly such as this passage that would seem to imply that God has to give us anything we ask for if we ask for it in Jesus' name. Somehow, I am reminded of an old Janis Joplin song which she sang in her raspy, whiskey voice, "O Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?" We have the idea today that we can ask for just about anything. Why not just ask for a few million dollars?

We can ask God for just about anything; and I doubt that it would make Him angry, unless it was something that was downright evil. Just don't try asking something like, "God, please let me do this (where this is some particular sin you like) just one more time, and then I'll never do it again?" How far do you think you are likely to get with that request?

The wishful thinking hermeneutic can get you into a situation you would likely prefer not to be in. If anything Jesus said that might be good for you is that you should lay hold of, then what do you do with what He told the "Rich, young ruler" as St. Mark describes it in Mark 10:21 **21 And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."** Are you ready to do that?

This wishful thinking hermeneutic does not look at the context of anything; it just looks at what Jesus said and says you ought to do that or use it in some way. As to thinking that anything we pray in the name of Jesus will be given to us, we already have enough examples to know that that doesn't always happen. In fact, it seldom seems to happen. Why? Because the wishful thinking hermeneutic just doesn't work; it gives us wrong ideas of what God wants us to do.

Let's try the old tried and true hermeneutic of "Context is King". What is the context of this passage. First of all, where does it come from? Who woulda thunk it? It's from the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. Since the Gospel lessons for the previous two Sundays were also from this same chapter, we know where and when this happened and to whom Jesus said those words. It happened on Maundy Thursday night in the upper room in which Jesus celebrated the Passover with the 12 Apostles, but it happened after Judas Iscariot had left on his errand of betrayal. Jesus is talking to the remaining 11 Apostles who will become the nucleus of the fledgling church after the Ascension and Pentecost.

Ask yourself, who were these men, and why I or anyone might think for one minute that something that Jesus said to them in private that night is something that might apply to me? First of all these were men who had been chosen before time began, and they were men who did what the rich young ruler would not, or could not, do; they did forsake everything to follow Jesus. The fishermen Andrew, Peter, James and John, dropped their nets, left their boats and followed Him. The Tax collector Matthew just got up and left his tax booth when Jesus said, "Follow Me!" They were men for whom, if they were alive today, would care nothing for a Mercedes, a Jaguar, or a Porsche, or a Chris-Kraft yacht. I do not sneer at anyone who owns or has owned such things. I once owned a Porsche. Owning such things is not a sin. Jesus did not directly tell me I should sell everything and follow Him as He did the rich, young ruler.

Things that Jesus said directly to a single person or to some small group in privacy may or may not apply to us today. In one instance of a healing, Jesus told the healed leper to go to the show himself to the priest and make the sacrifice required by Moses. We are not told that we must show ourselves to a priest after being healed and then to make a sacrifice that Moses required. However, in another healing, Jesus healed 10 lepers at once; they all left, but only one, a Samaritan, came back to thank Jesus. Jesus said nothing directly to any single person in that story or to us in the future, but the idea is clear that we are told that story as a lesson to be thankful for all that God gives us.

What do you think the Apostles might have prayed for? Would it likely have been anything that God would not have been willing to grant them in the first place? These were men to whom God gave the power to raise the dead, as illustrated when St. Peter raised Dorcas as described in Acts 9:36-41. What would they have been likely to have prayed for? For strength, for deeper faith, for perseverance in the face of adversity, for an increase of faith in new converts, for provision that none might starve; but most likely never for luxuries, just for necessities.

What should we pray for? Many things. Jesus gave us the model in the Lord's prayer. We also have that model called A-C-T-S, a mnemonic for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. These are three things we need to do before we get around to supplication where we can ask for things. We need to offer our Adoration and Praise of God first; secondly, we need to Confess our sins, and then give God Thanks for all the blessings He has given us.

What do we do in the Lord's Prayer? We first acknowledge God as our Father, as our Creator, that He is in Heaven, and that He is One whose Name is sacred. That is not gushy, but it *is* Adoration. Then we ask for His Kingdom to come and for His Will to be done on earth the same way it is done in Heaven, a Supplication that acknowledges that What God wills is what is most desirable and that is what we should want to be done on earth. Only then do we ask for simple, daily sustenance, to have our daily bread. Then, assuming that we have already confessed to God the sins that we know we have committed, we ask that our sins be forgiven subject to the condition that our sins are to be forgiven in the same way that we forgive the sins of others. That is followed by a request that we not be led into temptation and that we be delivered from the devil. ( The best translation of Matthew 6:13 is, "but deliver us from the evil one.) The prayer ends there in St. Matthew's Gospel, but continues with a doxology of Adoration and Praise in St. Luke's Gospel. Prayer is something God wants from us.

Prayer is found all through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. The first mention of prayer in the Bible is in Genesis 20: 7 where God tells Abimelech to return Sarah to Abraham: Genesis 20:7 **7Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you, and all who are yours."** We are told many times by St. Paul in his Epistles that we should be pray often: Romans 12:12 **12 ... , be constant in prayer;** Colossians 4:2 **2 Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.;** and the old standby: 1 Thessalonians 5:17 **17 pray without ceasing,"**. But we don't find out how important God thinks prayer is until we read

Revelation 5:8 **8 And when he [the Lamb] had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.** The prayer of the saints are considered to be incense to God. Prayer is that important, and remember, St. Paul considered all believers to be saints!

Now let's go back to those first verses of the Gospel lesson. I think we have to admit that the church itself may have decided that the wishful thinking hermeneutic was true for the church because we end so many prayers with **"through Jesus Christ our Lord"**, or **"in the name of Thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord"**. The church has done this through the ages, perhaps thinking that she is the inheritor of the mantle of the Apostles, so that this will be true for her as well. After all, the church does not in her liturgy ask for luxuries, nor should she.

Two final questions for today: What then can we legitimately pray for, and how may we expect God to respond and answer those prayers? First recognize that prayers of Adoration, Confession, and Thanksgiving are not likely to get us into trouble. In those we seldom ask for anything other than to be forgiven, or for God to strengthen our faith. It is only in supplications that we are likely to ask for things when we make personal requests that God may not want us to have. We are less likely to have our prayers go unanswered when we make an intercession by praying for something we think is good for someone else, but that can happen too.

Problems arise only when what we think will be a good outcome is not what God intends. The trouble is that we have no way of knowing what God thinks is best in any particular circumstance. We may ask God to heal someone who is sick, and the person heals, but very slowly, or perhaps succumbs to some other malady. We may ask God that someone who is missing in a disaster be found such as the tornado in Joplin Missouri; and the person is found, but not alive. Young widows may ask that God bring them another husband only to find no one who seems suitable. What is going on here? God is not being tractable. We think He is not answering our prayers. The problem is that He *is* answering our prayers; it's just that we don't like the answers. God's answer to a prayer may be anywhere from: **"Yes right now"**, to **"Yes but wait a while"**, to silence, to a flat **"No"**. And His silence may mean anything from **"Yes but wait"**, to **"No"**, or even **"That is not a good question."** We have to be careful what we pray for.

What we are not seeing here is that every prayer that asks for something should always be thought of as starting with the phrase: **"If it is Thy Will, O Lord, please do...?"** All that happens in this world and the next is subject to God's Will. Even Jesus knew that when He prayed in the

Garden, Luke 22:41-42 **41 And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, 42 saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."** And He did God's will, which was for Him to go to the Cross.

Our prayers will be answered the way we want them to be answered when they our requests are in harmony with God's Will, and not our own. As St. Chrysostom puts it in his prayer at the end of Morning Prayer: "...fulfill now, O Lord, the desires and petitions thy servants as may be most expedient for them." God's answers will always be what is best for us and for our souls even if we do not agree. It is His way of Guiding us on His path to eternal life. As St. Paul put it in Romans 8:28 **28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.** All too often we cannot see the good in things that happen that we think are tragic or unfair. But God has told us when He told Isaiah that we cannot always understand Him: Isaiah 55:8-9 **8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.** Even so we must continue to pray without ceasing, trying to pray according to God's will, and in Jesus' Name. Then we may begin to agree with God's answers.

I tried to find a snappy ending for this and couldn't, perhaps because there isn't one, because learning to pray the way God wants us to pray is a life-long process that is part of our growth as Christians. As we learn to pray for those things God wants us to pray for, the answers will become "Yes!" more frequently, whether we close our prayers in Jesus' Name or not; and that will happen because we are becoming conformed more and more **to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.** and that is really the purpose of all we do in worship and in prayer.

AMEN