

## What happens when we pray?

This is the title of a talk I gave at Silchester in the 1970s! Happily I can't remember what I said. But it seems good to revisit the questions.

When we pray, when we worship, we are acknowledging that we don't know everything – indeed we cannot know everything, certainly not in the sense of a string of verifiable facts. Indeed, we are acknowledging that, important as those facts may be, they don't account for everything that matters to us. If we were ever to know everything, there would still be much that remains beyond our reach.

We may picture this mixture of verifiable facts and all the rest in various ways: for example, as a random collection of opportunities, dangers and delights. But when we pray we are affirming that within this random collection can be found what is perhaps best described as a presence. As we acknowledge and affirm our sense of that presence, we become aware of that same presence acknowledging us and affirming us and all that matters to us. It's not immediate; it takes time; but it will come.

Because that presence is open to everyone, whether we know them or not, we become aware that the mutual awareness of 'the presence' and 'us' cannot be regarded as entirely a private matter. We may pray in solitude, but we are never entirely alone; the conversations are always going on between 'the presence' and others. We cannot monitor those other conversations, we cannot know them, we may not judge them or dismiss them as wrong or hypocritical, and we certainly cannot stop them.

The question 'what happens when we pray?' turns out to be three questions, and they are inter-related.

First question. What happens *to us* when we pray? I would answer that question in terms of the 'presence' I have mentioned. When we pray, when our focus is that presence and nothing else, we are changed by our praying. This is where it's really hard to separate praying into watertight compartments. Here's an example.

Jesus urged us to pray for our enemies. What might he have meant by this? Are we to pray for them to learn to behave in ways that conform to our ideas of goodness? Are we trying to manipulate them to be more like us, for our safety, comfort and convenience? I believe Jesus is asking us to turn our whole thinking about 'enemies' upside down, to pray for them as we hope our best friends might pray for us, seeking their highest good as well as their relief from a present anxiety. We are beginning to think of them not as enemies but as potential friends. This may be a huge and taxing leap of the imagination, but I cannot see how our praying for others can mean any less. Our praying for them, then, changes our disposition toward them. It changes us. It would be hard to do anything damaging or hurtful to people for whom one is praying. So prayer

changes us, moving us along a journey from dislike, fear, suspicion and judgment towards love, respect and acceptance.

Our second question cannot be answered except with half an eye on the first question, and on the third (which we'll come to a little later). What happens *to the people we pray for*? Because we're praying for them, seeking their highest good as well as present relief, their world is a bit more kindly disposed towards them than their circumstances might suggest. There are people, including us, who are actually 'rooting for them'. To borrow a thought from a favourite Christmas hymn: we share in their gladness and feel for their sadness. And indeed we might even be able to do something practical for them! Two of the first-century saints – Paul and James – argued from opposite ends on this point. Much misunderstood, Paul held that it is the disposition of the heart that takes first place, but it is a disposition that must find its outlet in practical action. In short, our second question can be answered by saying that this is what happens when we pray for people: The world around them is populated not only by indifferent, suspicious or hostile people but also by praying people who are concerned for them and are prepared to work out that positive disposition in terms of practical action to help.

Our third question asks: how can our praying affect *other people*? My this I mean – people we do not know personally, people who do not know anyone is praying for them at all. These are people we can't see and in most cases do not know; we know only of their need. Such a question arises only in the modern world, dominated by a passion for experimentally observable and measurable cause-and-effect, evidence, risk analysis and so forth. We have to admit that there is no point looking for an answer in those terms. We simply can't provide an answer of that kind. We have to operate in a different way: not mechanical cause-and-effect but focussing instead on the risk and wonder of relationship, identifying with the plight of those whose need seems to loom larger than anything else about them. That very point is central to our question about how prayer works. We see the need but we are people too, and we want to know more than that about the people in need. We want to see not just statistics about hungry refugees; we want to feel we've learned something about them as persons. The only answer I can offer about how prayer affects other people is that it happens because prayer changes us.

This has not been a complete answer to our question, but I hope it will set you thinking. One final word (at least for now). If these are the terms on which we pray – that of praying for our enemies and doing good to them – some folk may decide that that's too tough a bargain. But these are the terms Jesus himself set out. More on that in a later post.