

A heart open to God changes our perception and thus our reality

Sermon for July 8th 2018 by Andy Wurm

Today I'm going to talk about intercessory prayer – when we ask God for things: for ourselves, for those we care about and for the needs of the wider world. Here's a helpful story.

Several men are in the locker room of a golf club. A mobile phone on a bench rings and a man engages the hands-free speaker function and begins to talk. Everyone else in the room stops to listen.

MAN: 'Hello'

WOMAN: 'Hi Honey, it's me. Are you at the club?'

MAN: 'Yes.'

WOMAN: 'I'm at the shops now and found this beautiful leather coat. It's only \$2,000; is it OK if I buy it?'

MAN: 'Sure, go ahead if you like it that much.'

WOMAN: 'I also stopped by the Lexus dealership and saw the new models. I saw one I really liked.'

MAN: 'How much?'

WOMAN: '\$90,000.'

MAN: 'OK, but for that price I want it with all the options.'

WOMAN: 'Great! Oh, and one more thing... I was just talking to Janie and found out that the house I wanted last year is back on the market. They're asking \$980,000 for it.'

MAN: 'Well, then go ahead and make an offer of \$900,000. They'll probably take it. If not, we can go the extra eighty-thousand if it's what you really want.'

WOMAN: 'OK. I'll see you later! I love you so much!'

MAN: 'Bye! I love you, too.'

The man hangs up. The other men in the locker room are staring at him in astonishment, mouths wide open. He asks, 'Does anyone know whose phone this is?'

Sometimes when we pray to God, we're like that woman. Her problem isn't that she's making outrageous requests to the man she thinks is her husband. Her problem is that he's not her husband. Similarly, when it comes to our prayer, we need to ask ourselves whether we are actually praying to God, or to an idol. If we are praying to God, then our prayer should correspond to God's nature.

Usually when we pray, we have already decided what we believe God is like, but we may be on the wrong track. That is why it is crucial that we reflect on and examine different ideas about God.

There are a couple of dilemmas which we need to have worked through for our prayer to be meaningful. The first is whether or not we believe that God acts in the world. If we believe that God created the world, but then leaves it to its own devices, then there's not much point to praying.

On the other hand, if we believe that God does act in the world, in what way is that?

Experience and common sense tell us that God doesn't intervene in the ordinary, natural operation of the world. Even though we hear stories about people being healed and other miraculous interventions by God, there are too many problems in the way of believing God works like that. For a start, it probably never happens to us. And then what if two people ask for different outcomes of the same circumstances? What is God to do? These are only some of the problems raised if we believe that God intervenes in the way things usually work.

Are we then forced to accept that God does not act in the world, so that God's involvement in our lives is reduced to being alongside us in the ups and downs of our lives?

The trouble with that approach, apart from God not being of much help, is that first, Jesus told people to pray, and that God would answer prayer, and second, millions of people over the years have prayed. Have those people been doing something pointless? Have they just been doing something quaint, which offers no more than emotional comfort? Out of all that, surely the most important thing to hold on to is

Jesus' advice. But that's not straight-forward either, for we know that God won't necessarily give us what we ask for. So what do we do?

This is the same question asked by a woman back in the year 412. Anicia Faltonia Proba, was a widow from a wealthy and powerful Roman family, who had fled from Rome when it was sacked by the Goths. Accompanied by a number of other women, she fled to Carthage in Africa, where they established a Christian community. To have got to that point in their lives would have required a fair bit of courage and strength, but left Anicia wondering what part God played in getting them to where they were and being with them in their future. So she wrote to another resident of Africa, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. Anicia asked Augustine how she should pray, and whether she was right in believing that asking God for the wrong thing could cause problems.

Augustine's advice to Anicia was simply to pray for a happy life. That meant it was okay to pray for things like a good marriage, children and health, and even honours, power and possessions! That sounds like a good deal, except Augustine added that it was okay to ask for those things, and anything else, *as long as what she asked for was sought for the genuine good of others*. That sounds like he was saying that it was wrong to ask God for your own needs to be met, but that wasn't quite where he was leading. What Augustine was really conveying was that the main point, or focus, of prayer, should not be your own needs, or even the needs of others. Once that is established, you can ask for whatever you want. Does that mean we should not ask for what we want? Not at all! It just means that we should not ask for what we want for the purpose of getting what we want. What Augustine was hinting at was that the true purpose of prayer is not to get what we want, but to unite ourselves to God. Augustine's famous prayer, 'our hearts are restless, until they rest in you' O God, sums it all up. The whole point of prayer is to 'rest in God', which means unite with God, put ourselves into God's hands, relax into God, fully entrust ourselves to God, commit our spirit to God, 'let go and let God', or whatever other way you want to put it.

Our real need, which underlies every other need in our lives, is for God. We are made that way. We are restless, lost, incomplete, afraid, selfish, less joyful than we can be, less compassionate and less insightful, than we can be, when we unite with God. The trouble is, that because we are stuck in our restlessness, our incompleteness, we cannot know exactly what the path to that unity is. So for example, say I am applying for a new job. I have sent in my application and have been shortlisted. Now my life is in turmoil. I really want the new job. But why? The money is better than my present job, but it's not about the money. But would I want it if the money was less, or the same? What if I get the job and it doesn't work out? Maybe I should just stay where I am. No, I want the job. I'm sure it's right for me. I really hope the others who are shortlisted don't get it. How can I get an advantage over them? But that's selfish. Is it right to want something purely for myself? ... and so on. Often when we pray, there are all sorts of conflicts and uncertainties going on within us. What should I pray for then? The answer is that I don't have to work it out. I already have the answer. But all I have within me is turmoil, what in that matters most? The answer is not within the turmoil. The answer is the turmoil. That, according to St. Augustine, is the most basic and necessary prayer. He calls it groaning. It's like the soul doesn't know what to ask for, because it's all too much. We know we want healing, or our friend to get better, a new job, or whatever, but we don't know how to let what we want connect us with God.

St. Paul uses a different term to groaning. He calls it 'sighing'. And he also knows it's not something we have to generate. It's already going on within us. We're always doing it, because we always have concerns, worries, frustration and anger over the circumstances of life. At the same time, there are great joys and pleasures we want to express, but find hard to put into words. How do we say thanks for someone we love deeply and who loves us? It's beyond words. Only a sigh captures it. Words aren't enough.

In case we still thought that all this groaning and sighing was the work we do in prayer, Paul tells us that it's actually the Holy Spirit praying in us. Our sighing and groaning is the Spirit, at work, in our restlessness, trying to take us home to Dad, or Mum. God. The One in whom our restlessness is answered. The One to whom our restlessness wants to take us.

Prayer, then, is much more something for us to let happen, than something we have to work at. The hard part is letting it happen. Sitting with our restlessness, our groaning or sighing. Sitting with it and letting it be, in the trust that it will lead us into God.

Augustine says that our tears are better than our words. Our words are helpful, he says, but only in as far as they help us on the way to knowing what we really want. Our words certainly are not for the purpose of telling God anything God doesn't already know (and God knows everything), and neither are they to get God to do anything (God is quite good at knowing what God needs to do). *Our words are for us, not God.* Our words are to help us open up to God, that we may draw into God. A fourth century monk named Denys the Areopagite says our prayers are like people on a boat pulling on a rope that goes down into the water and is tied to a rock. They think they are pulling the rock towards them, but it is their boat that is moving towards the rock. Similarly, he says, we think we know what we need and attempt to bend God to our will, but the more we pull, the closer we are drawn to God's will. We don't really pull ourselves to that power which is both everywhere & nowhere, but we can join ourselves to it.

There's a story in which Jesus heals a man who can neither hear or speak (Mark 7:31ff). A shallow reading of the story would tell us that he wants to be healed of that. But the most important thing in life is not what we are able to do, but what our heart is connected to. If it's not connected to God, then we're off the track. We're being led and fed by something else, which by definition, because it's not God, will not be in our best interest. The man's real inability is that he is unable to hear God and to speak, say, or act out, what God says, or where God leads. So Jesus removes him from the crowd and blocks his ears. He is shutting out all other voices, which tell him the wrong thing and lead him in the wrong direction. Blocking out the other voices, Jesus is able to encourage the man to open his heart. There's nothing supernatural or magic in that. To prove it, we are even given the exact word Jesus uses, in his own language (Aramaic). Ephphatha – it just means 'be open!' Now the competition has been blocked out, the man will be able to be open to God's voice, already speaking within him. Maybe the loudest voice of all is the one the man has internalised, the voice telling him he's no good and has little to offer the world. Jesus blocks that out too. And what would God be saying to him? Maybe that God loves him. Or maybe there would just be that groaning or sighing, too deep for words, which means he is turned towards God, and the more he lets that be, the closer into God he moves.

To finish off, sometimes we do need to pray with words. It is always only to clarify to ourselves what we want (if that is possible), so that our requests become movements into God. But there are four good reasons for using words to move ourselves into God. They are: (1) that God wants us to participate in God's involvement in the world, so for example, when we pray for the poor, we commit ourselves to helping them. (2) asking God means sharing what is on our hearts, and that's as essential for intimacy with God as it is with other people. (3) asking God for things is entrusting ourselves to God. It's knowing our needs and the needs of the world are greater than we can handle, and we will only begin to grasp their true significance in the context of God's relationship with us. Beyond that, there is no hope. (4) Last of all, prayer is always desire for God. Often our asking others for things is because we want *them*. We might ask a friend for advice, but what we really want deep down is for our friend to share the burden of our circumstances. We want them to *be with us*. These four reasons for praying in words influence the way we see what we are praying for, because they change our view of reality. So our deepest prayer is always beyond any words. We should ask God for things, but it's never about getting what we ask for, or telling God anything. It's more important than those reasons. It's about moving into God and taking those we love with us.

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