

Sermon, Rogation 2006 What should we ask for?

Ask and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full. But what should we ask for? It's no use asking for what we'd like, because all our likes – all our desires – are corrupted. When it comes to what we want and desire, we're a bit like schoolchildren with their turkey twizzlers and chips. But I must admit to a moment of pure joy listening to the *Today* programme last Friday morning. They were talking about the government's latest totalitarian gesture to ban certain foods in schools and force the children into gastronomic correctness. But the reporter added that some children were doing a nice trade in selling to the others what he called *contraband* - that is officially disapproved crisps, snacks and sweeties. Just when I thought every last trace of initiative had been bludgeoned out of our children and all of them brainwashed into sentimental socialism and politically correct fads, I hear of this marvellous example of entrepreneurship. Pass the turkey twizzlers Jack, while the Education Secretary isn't looking!

But we tend to like and want what's bad for us psychologically and spiritually. Our prayers go wrong when we ask for health and happiness. Not that there's anything wrong with health and happiness, but they are not the main thing: they are incidental to the main thing. And I'll come to what the main thing is later. So is it safe to ask for anything? Yes, you are safe asking for the good of others – your friends and acquaintance, those who need our prayers. But even this can be a bit dodgy.

Have you ever been to one of those weird churches where the intercessions are like a sort of global tour? They pray for parts of the East End and the whole of Africa. These intercessors trail after the TV news like rodents following a dustcart. Searching for the latest local disaster or famine. Or they pray non-specifically for *peace* – even when what's probably required is a just war vigorously fought. But the trouble with all these kinds of prayers is that they are so selective and they omit by default. OK so we pray for Upper Bongo Bongo Land. What about the benighted denizens of Lower Bongo Bongo Land? I think it was Auberon Waugh who said, *Living in Tunbridge Wells and praying for the Fiji Islands is the first sign of madness.*

The Litany in the Prayer Book gets it right: it prays for everybody, all sorts and conditions of men. So pray for others by all means: it's quite safe to do that. But remember, prayer is not sympathetic magic. Prayer is imaginatively entering the condition of the person you're praying for. If I dare say so, I'm sure that Our Lord's miracles of healing were accomplished because he has able to enter completely into the condition of those who came beseeching him. He felt for them. We must learn to identify with the person we pray for. And there is no sympathy without imagination. And the imagination, like all our capacities and skills, has to be practised, honed and trained.

And this kind of prayer is not sentimental. As my mother used to say – as Alan Bennett would say, *when she was alive – A bit of help's worth a lot of pity.* So the first consideration when we pray for someone is to wonder whether there might be also something practical we can do for him. Praying for the hungry is a fine thing. And so is fetching the groceries for them.

But let's talk about ourselves. What can you ask for yourself? You can and should ask for the forgiveness of your sins. This involves accepting that you have sins and that you are responsible for what you do. I thought of this when I read *The Times* recently and Bel Mooney's agony aunt column. A young woman working in the City had written to her saying that she was fed up of going out three or four times a week, getting completely sloshed and waking up full of self-disgust in some stranger's bed. What did the expert Bel Mooney have to say to her? She gave her 800 words of cod psychology about *getting in touch with your inner self* and *learning self-acceptance*.

In other words, she didn't see the young woman as having behaved irresponsibly and destructively: she saw her as a victim of social determinism and irresistible psychological forces. What should she have said? *You don't like getting sloshed and sleeping around? Then don't do it!*

But our unbelieving society regards us not as responsible people who fall into sin because now and then we are irresponsible. Our decadent society regards us all as *victims*. So people don't just drink too much: they *have a drink problem*. We're not merely fat because we're always stuffing our faces: we're *suffering from* obesity. How about murder? You would think you might be to blame if you murdered someone. Not at all. Last year a twenty year old spoiled toff murdered his father and mother and went off to New York with his girlfriend on their credit cards. Pretty much bang to rights, you'd think? No, he was subjected to a psychologist's report and diagnosed as suffering from *narcissistic personality disorder*. What's the difference between narcissistic personality disorder and being a selfish little prat. I am not making this up.

The Christian faith is majestically realistic. God bids us see ourselves as we are: not as pathetic victims of our psychopathology but real moral agents, as sinners in need of forgiveness. So we should ask God for the forgiveness of our sins. And then we should ask him for help in spiritual warfare. We should ask God to help us overcome our vicious habits and selfishness. We should ask God to help us mend our personalities – which is another way of saying *save our souls*.

The great lie of our modern age is that we can't help being what we are. Christianity tells us exactly the opposite: changing what we are is the one thing we can do – with God's help. But you need to accept that you're in the wrong. Most of us lead pathetic lives of desperate respectability, as it were watching the sins of the neighbours from behind the curtain. We're called to stop this. For *if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us all our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*.

We are really perverse: all the good things we do by the grace of God, we take credit for; and all the things we do by our own wickedness we blame on circumstances and external irresistible forces. We must ask God to give us the courage to help us face ourselves.

The modern psychology of excuses and victimhood and syndromes does not work. It perpetuates misery. But let me give you an example of what forgiveness can do. In Malta recently I read a little story in the newspaper which perfectly demonstrated the influence of traditional faith and its superiority over the secularised, politicised *rights*

culture which afflicts us in Britain. A 65 year old man had molested an 11 year old girl. The report said:

The minibus driver sat near the girl and kissed her on the lips. She told him to let go of her but he kept her seated and touched her legs and her breasts. The magistrate heard the girl say that she had forgiven the man – although she admitted she had had a few sleepless nights. He said that in view of the girl's statement that she had forgiven him, he was jailing him for seven months instead of the maximum of twelve.

How wonderful! The evidence that the little girl had forgiven the man – and that her forgiveness actually counted for something when it came to the sentencing. Imagine what would have happened in a similar case in England where we have paedophile hysteria endemic. The social workers would have solemnly proclaimed that the girl's life *has been totally ruined*, that she was suffering from *post-traumatic stress disorder* and that she would *never* be able to get over the incident. If it had been in England her parents would have gone on the telly and clamoured for a life sentence for the molester so that they could *move on*.

The main thing. I said I would get to it. If you want the best for yourself – that is if you want what can really do you good, you should ask God to give you himself. Here's a short daily prayer: *O God, make me want you and desire you. Make me long for you. Take me out of myself and give me yourself. Make me to love you, O God to serve you and to obey you. For you are all my delight. Amen*