**The Weakness of Prayer**

Based on [John 16:23-33](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Jn16.23-33)

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The Sixth Sunday of Easter ~ Rogate

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One of the most challenging doctrines that Jesus gives his disciples and us is spoken in today's Gospel. Jesus teaches what has often been referred to as “the power of prayer”. Jesus often teaches his disciples that whatever they ask in his name, it will be granted by God.

So someone might say, “So, if we ask for protection from COVID 19 we will get it?” Yes, it seems that on the face of it, Christians should never have to face evil or danger or trial or struggle. And yes, Jesus says we can take heart because he has overcome the world; that not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from his father, that all things work for the good of those who love God.

On the other hand we have passages like this one. Saint Paul writes, “7 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Three times Paul pleaded with God to remove his thorn, whatever that was, something he didn’t want. Three times he pleaded, asked, prayed that God would remove the thorn and, to paraphrase, God said no I will not remove it. Did he not ask in Jesus’ Name? Of course he did. No apostle asks for anything from God in any other name. Did Paul ask without faith? That would also be a stretch. In any case, the reason God denies the request (and he does so three times!) is because God wanted Paul to rely on his grace in his weakness...Not in his strength.

You have been born and born again. You have been born from below, and through baptism, born from above. You have Jesus Name, being baptized in it. You have faith, having renounced the devil and trusted the Gospel. You have everything necessary for salvation and required for your prayers to be heard and answered by God. You have everything necessary that the Apostle Paul had when he asked God, and certainly you do not have more salvation or faith than him. He had to hear a no from God in prayer, and so we can expect that at times too. This is as clear as an open sky. Jesus does not mean, cannot mean that God becomes your genie in the lamp if you have faith and ask with the right formula. He must mean something else.

In the garden of gethsemane, Jesus himself asks his Father in prayer to take away his suffering, his assignment to suffer at the hands of sinful men and die on the cross, but God his Father says no to him. //// Jesus is still consigned to suffer and die in the same way as before he prayed. So, if perhaps you think that you have more faith than Paul, or you have the right prayer formula and he didn’t and that’s why you know God cannot say no to any request in prayer from you...remember that God said no to Jesus. The Father said no to the Son. And unless you make yourself out to be of greater faith or better in prayer than Jesus...then you need to revisit any notion of “the power of prayer”. Because, with God, even the “power” of prayer is made perfect in weakness.

Someone might say, “Well then, Jesus lied to us when he said to ask anything in his name, and his father will give it to you.” No, Jesus didn’t lie. Instead, you extracted a promise that Jesus never made. Jesus never promised that you can ask for contradictory things. When you were baptized, you were baptized into a doctrine which immediately confesses and asks and expects certain things from God. You were baptized into a faith that asks for others to be forgiven their tresspasses, that asks for Jesus to come, and that, above all else, asks for God’s will to be done. As a christian, the premier sign of your christianity is faith, which is a trust that what God wants done is superior to what you want done. It is a faith that thinks without question, if what I ask is against your will O Lord, then don’t do what I ask, and don’t give me that for which I pray. As Jesus ended his prayer in the garden, “Not my will, but thy will be done.”

Certainly Jesus did not want God to spare him the cross if his Father knew the cross was what was best. Certainly, Paul would want to keep the thorn in his flesh if that’s what God wanted for him. Our problem is that we don’t always know precisely what God is up to, and yet God wants us to ask him for things in faith. We don’t know what will come of the current pandemic and shutdown. We don’t know what God is up to. But what we do know is that whatever God is doing, it is what we want him to do.

In the meantime, we pray for the things we know are pleasing to him, for our daily bread, forgiveness, deliverance from evil, these things. We pray that our friends would overcome their sicknesses, that our government would secure peace and harmony. But when we ask these things, we are not asking, we are never asking God to change what he has already decreed from the foundation of the world to happen.

Some think it would be great if God were their genie in a bottle. I don’t think they have thought that through. Remember the saying “be careful what you wish for”, well if God were a genie it would be “be careful what you pray for”. Prayer would become dangerous. If God would change his will and do what he knows to be wrong because I prayed...I don’t think I would ever pray again! But because you know that God will not say yes to a request that would ultimately harm you, you can boldly approach in prayer and ask in confidence and peace for the concerns of your heart, and God will grant it, according to His Good and Gracious will.