

Gen 18.20-32, Ps 138, Col.2 6-15, Luke 11.1-13

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit.

Paul offers what he sees as a timely warning. Of course, one of the challenges of the early church was the rise of Greek philosophy. It had its appeal, and not always consistent with the new community of faith.

As a bit of a philosopher, I am not entirely with Paul here, but I get what he is saying. It is, perhaps, sophistry rather than rigorous Socratic dialogue that is the danger.

We spend far too much time, I feel, listening to public debate, especially in the world of politics. It is hardly Socratic in its style, characterised as it is by a lack of logic, by mendacity and a desire to score points, win arguments and reinforce one's own prejudices rather than use such exchange in the pursuit of truth.

Even what claims to be theological debate and discussion can suffer from the same weakness.

But what of God's logic? I hold to the view that God, and God in Christ, is not only the purveyor of truth but the essence, the personification of truth. .

That's why we are given that strange parable who would not offer a snake when a child asks for a fish, a scorpion for an egg, and, in Matthew's version, a stone for a loaf of bread.

It is even more odd, at first glance, that it arrives in the context of a lesson in how to pray. Jesus' disciples, having observed the teacher at prayer, ask him how to pray. And he offers the shorter version of the Our Father, a dot-point model of the kind of prayer we should make.

Its form, its words even, are embedded in our tradition as THE prayer of all prayers. Glory to God, whose will should be done, a request for our daily needs, for forgiveness and the invocation to be the same to others.

Note there is no dot point that says 'and when you want anything, just pop a note under God's door and it will happen, by some miraculous gift.

And then comes the parable of the persistent neighbour, who asks and asks, who won't relent.

Persistence is the character of his unrelenting pleading, as should ours be. But then we hear what appears difficult for any preacher – a short passage of scripture that doesn't ring true to the experience of anyone

who has asked God for something. Simply, it doesn't always work that way, and we all know it, the reality of unanswered prayer.

A closer reading, better but not terribly deep, I think, tells a different story, not one of a fickle God who gives in after constant badgering. I cannot imagine our God in that pattern, a sort of drop in, intermittent God prone to our persistent nagging, fading in and out of our lives, almost as a matter of whim.

Many of you will know that small and priceless gift of Soren Kierkegaard who said:

Prayer does not change God; it changes the one who prays.

So why does Jesus add to the lesson on prayer with these verses - For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who seeks, finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. , when we

Read it again and nowhere does our Lord suggest that what we receive will necessarily be what we ask, that all who seek will find, that the door which will be opened promises to take us where we want to go.

But persistence is a must. Look at Abraham who asks and asks about God's intentions for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the end, he gets God's answer.

And look again at the final verse: How much more will the Father give the gift of his Spirit to those who ask?

In our persistent prayer we become closer to God. Our prayer is conversation, it is listening, it is intimacy. If we immerse ourselves in God's presence, we find ourselves deeper in the heart and the will of God. The gift of the Spirit, enriched by our own faithfulness, our submission, will open us to God's response to our questions and to our needs.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian and martyr, dispels the notion of a God who fills the gaps in our lives. Instead, this is a living and constant presence. The gaps are important; they intensify the pain that is an intense part of being human. In that space, we share with the God-man Jesus the same tension of the man praying in Gethsemane.

If it be your will, take this cup from me. But in the outcome, Jesus becomes more intimate with the God in whom he prays as the answer becomes clear. As did Bonhoeffer, praying constantly for release, for reunion with his fiancé both denied him by Hitler's hangman.

Abraham gained a much clearer understanding of the nature of God from his persistent questioning.

And this is how prayer, sincere, authentic and persistent prayer will change us, bringing us closer to the divine with whom, in whom we become increasingly unified by honest interrogation of the mind and will of God.

In the liturgy of the communion, there is a small prayer that is usually offered in a very low and inaudible voice. As the drop of water is added to the wine, I pray 'In the mystery of this water and this wine, may we share in your divinity as you share in our humanity'.

It is a mystery of the sacrament as we desire to become one with Christ in all his human travails and so in his oneness with God, he in us and we in him.

Karl Barth, a mentor of Bonhoeffer, said that God doesn't have to make humanity small to make himself big. We know that God's dimension is huge beyond our comprehension, but God wants us to meet him face to face. When you receive the bread, given by God, that is Christ's own body. Look at him eye to eye, stand level as you are embraced in his love and grace.

And greet him in prayer as one who seeks to become one with him. What he offers is his own self. We shall seek and find, we shall ask and receive. The door is open to us.

And be ye thankful.