

## Witney Way Pentecost 2011

### PETITION or INTERCESSION

Canadian Bishop John Baycroft suggests five “...*ingredients of prayer ... adoration, penitence, petition, thanksgiving and dedication*”; forgive me if I just ask you to help me with *petition*, or intercession.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2007, little Madeleine McCann went missing whilst on holiday in Luz on Portugal’s Algarve coast; every parent’s nightmare. The priest there gave them great support, and people around the world prayed for her safe return. That was four years ago and ... *nothing*. Have the prayers been heard, wasted, or mis-directed?

On 13<sup>th</sup> October 2010, 33 Chilean miners were successfully brought to the surface. The same priest preached a sermon saying that it was the answer to the prayers of people around the world. “*No it wasn’t*”, it was the result of engineering technology and the dedication of the rescue team, psychologists and medics.

Five weeks later, on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2010, 29 miners were declared dead in New Zealand after the second methane explosion ripped through their mine. There is no doubt that a similar number of unknown people would have been praying for a miracle; but again, “*No*”... In fact on January 27<sup>th</sup> this year, the coroner stated that even after the first explosion, “... *there was never any hope of rescuing them alive.*” Perhaps we prayed for the wrong things; perhaps instead of rescue, we could have prayed for their state of mind, calm, patience, peace, understanding, mutual support, and despite all, knowledge of God’s love.

How are we to pray for the victims of the natural disasters in Australia, New Zealand and Japan? How is God answering our prayers?

Sunday by Sunday we read out an ever lengthening list of people who need our prayers. What are we asking God for? In some cases, recovery, in some cases a peaceful end to a tortured life, for some, peace of mind, or fortitude to accept their problems. Because we don’t *all* know *all* the people on the list, we add our collective thoughts to those who *do* know them.

Archbishop William Temple is reputed to have said, “*If you talk to God, you are praying; if He talks to you, you have schizophrenia*”. Now I have no doubt, he *did* say it, but equally I have no doubt it has been taken out of context; after all many people hear voices when no-one is there, and are diagnosed as suffering from psychosis. But that is not to say that God isn’t “*talking*” to us, helping us, guiding us, and “*answering*” prayers in non-verbal unexpected ways.

When I was leaving teacher training college, the first position I applied for was at Salisbury Choir School, responsible for maths throughout the school; eight boys in a class, money and equipment no problem. I was offered the job *and* a position singing tenor in the cathedral choir; in fact everything I could have asked for. What I *did* ask for, was 24 hours to consider it. The next day I went for an interview at a humble secondary modern school in Bath, as fourth in the maths department. I took that

position. “*Why?*”, because despite the pros. and cons., it was Divine Guidance or an answer to prayer; no voices, just certainty.

But how do I know that I hadn’t just been talking to myself? How do I know that my decision was not the result of nature and nurture, of hopes and fears, of past experiences and future plans? I don’t.

Jesus was always praying, talking to his Father, both in public and in private, and He taught *us* how to pray and what to say. “*Yes,*” I can hear you say, “*But He also told us to ‘ask, and it will be given to you.’*” Maybe this was not to be taken literally, but asking for those things which are necessary for us to live a Christian life.

Prayer is a natural inclination, and permeates all cultures and religions. Scientists now *know* the spot in the brain where our spirituality is centred; it glows under MRI when we pray or meditate. And how often do so-called “non-religious people”, turn to prayer when they or a loved one are in trouble?

Archbishop Temple also said, “*When I pray, coincidences happen, when I do not pray, they do not happen.*”

So, when I am chatting with God, as I do a lot, I remember three things:

**Faith.** “Prayer is the assurance of the *possibility* of God’s intervention” (Anon)

**Hope.** “*Without prayer, there is no hope.*”

(Pope Benedict VIth at an Ash Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> February 2008 celebration.)

**Love** Prayer is a conversation with someone you **love**; God.

“... and the greatest if these is ...”

What do you think?

Howard Brayton