

PETITIONARY PRAYER:
A PROBLEM WITHOUT AN ANSWER

The problem I am submitting to you arises not about prayer in general but only about that kind of prayer which consists of request or petition. I hope no one will think that he is helping to solve my problem by reminding me that there are many other and perhaps higher sorts of prayer. I agree that there are. I here confine myself to petitionary prayer not because I think it the only, or the best, or the most characteristic, form of prayer, but because it is the form which raises the problem. However low a place we may decide to give it in the life of prayer, we must give it some place, unless we are prepared to reject both Our Lord's precept in telling us to pray for our daily bread and His practice in praying that the cup might pass from Him. And as long as it holds any place at all, I have to consider my problem.

Let me make clear at once where that problem does not lie. I am not at all concerned with the difficulty which unbelievers sometimes raise about the whole conception of petitioning God, on the ground that absolute wisdom cannot need to be informed of our desires, or that absolute goodness cannot need to be prompted to beneficence, or that the immutable and impassible cannot be affected by us, cannot be to us as patient to agent. All these difficulties are, no doubt, well worth most serious discussion, but I do not propose to discuss them here. Still less am I asking why petitions, and even the fervent petitions of holy men, are sometimes not granted. That has never seemed to me to be, in principle, a difficulty at all. That wisdom must sometimes refuse what ignorance may quite innocently ask seems to be self-evident.

My problem arises from one fact and one only; the fact that Christian teaching seems at first sight to contain two different patterns of petitionary prayer which are inconsistent: perhaps inconsistent in their theological implications, but much more obviously and pressingly inconsistent in the practical sense that no man, so far as I can see, could possibly follow them both at

the same moment. I shall call them the A Pattern and the B Pattern.

The A Pattern is given in the prayer which Our Lord Himself taught us. The clause 'Thy will be done' by its very nature must modify the sense in which the following petitions are made. Under the shadow—or perhaps I should rather say, in the light—of that great submission nothing can be asked save conditionally, save in so far as the granting of it may be in accordance with God's will. I do not of course mean that the words 'Thy will be done' are merely a submission. They should, and if we make progress they will increasingly, be the voice of joyful desire, free of hunger and thirst, and I argue very heartily that to treat them simply as a clause of submission or renunciation greatly impoverishes the prayer. But though they should be something far more and better than resigned or submissive, they must not be less: they must be that *at least*. And as such they necessarily discipline all the succeeding clauses. The other specimen of the A Pattern comes from Our Lord's own example in Gethsemane. A particular event is asked for with the reservation, 'Nevertheless, not my will but thine.'

It would seem from these passages that we are directed both by Our Lord's command and by His example to make all our petitionary prayers in this conditional form; well aware that God in His wisdom may not see fit to give us what we ask and submitting our wills in advance to a possible refusal which, if it meets us, we shall know to be wholly just, merciful, and salutary. And this, I suppose, is how most of us do try to pray and how most spiritual teachers tell us to pray. With this pattern of prayer—the A Pattern—I myself would be wholly content. It is in accordance both with my heart and my head. It presents no theoretical difficulties. No doubt my rebellious will and my turbulent hopes and fears will find plenty of practical difficulty in following it. But as far as my intellect goes it is all easy. The road may be hard but the map is clear.

You will notice that in the A Pattern, whatever faith the petitioner has in the existence, the goodness, and the wisdom of God, what he obviously, even as it were by definition, has not got is a sure and unwavering belief that God will give him the particular thing he asks for. When Our Lord in Gethsemane asks

that the cup may be withdrawn His words, far from implying a certainty or even a strong expectation that it will in fact be withdrawn, imply the possibility that it will not be; a possibility, or even a probability, so fully envisaged that a preparatory submission to that event is already being made.

We need not, so far as I can see, here concern ourselves with any special problems raised by the unique and holy Person of Him who prayed. It is enough to point out that if we are expected to imitate Him in our prayers, then, though we are doubtless to pray with faith in one sense, we are not to pray with any assurance that we shall receive what we ask. For real assurance that we shall receive it seems to be incompatible with the act of preparing ourselves for a denial. Men do not prepare for an event which they think impossible. And unless we think refusal impossible, how can we believe granting to be certain?

And, once again, if this were the only pattern of prayer, I should be quite content. If the faith which is demanded of us were always a faith in the goodness of God, a faith that whether granting or denying He equally gave us the best, and never a faith that He would give precisely what we ask, I should have no problem. Indeed, such a submissive faith would seem to me, if I were left to my own thoughts, far better than any confidence that our own necessarily ignorant petitions would prevail. I should be thankful that we were safe from that cruel mercy which the wiser Pagans had to dread, *numinibus vota exaudita malignis*. Even as it is I must often be glad that certain past prayers of my own were not granted.

But of course this is not the actual situation. Over against the A Pattern stands the B Pattern. Again and again in the New Testament we find the demand not for faith in such a general and (as it would seem to me) spiritual sense as I have described but for faith of a far more particular and (as it would seem to me) cruder sort: faith that the particular thing the petitioner asks will be given him. It is as if God demanded of us a faith which the Son of God in Gethsemane did not possess, and which if He had possessed it, would have been erroneous.

What springs first to mind is, of course, the long list of passages in which faith is required to those whom Our Lord healed.

Some of these may be, for our present purpose, ambiguous. Thus in Matt. ix, 22, the words 'Your faith has healed you' to the woman with the haemorrhage will be interpreted by some as a proposition not in theology but in medicine. The woman was cured by auto-suggestion: faith in any charm or quack remedy would on that view have done as well as faith in Christ—though, of course, the power in Christ to evoke faith even of that kind might have theological implications in the long run. But such a view, since it will not cover all the instances, had better not be brought in for any, on the principle of Occam's razor. And surely it can be stretched only by extreme efforts to cover instances where the faith is, so to speak, vicarious. Thus the relevant faith in the case of the sick servant (Matt. viii, 13) is not his own but that of his master the Centurion; the healing of the Canaanite child (Matt. xv, 28) depends on her mother's faith.

Again, it might perhaps be maintained that in some instances the faith in question is not a faith that this particular healing will take place but a deeper, more all-embracing faith in the Person of Christ Himself; not, of course, that the petitioners can be supposed to have believed in His deity but that they recognized and accepted His holy, or at the very least, His numinous, character. I think there is something in this view; but sometimes the faith seems to be very definitely attached to the particular gift. Thus in Matt. ix, 28, the blind men are asked not 'Do you believe in Me?' but 'Do you believe that I can do this?' Still, the words are 'that I can' not 'that I will', so we may pass that example over. But what are we to say of Matt. xiv, 31, where Peter is called *ὀλιγόπιστε*, because he lost his faith and sank in the waves. I should perhaps say, at this point, that I find no difficulty in accepting the walking on the water as historical. I suspect that the distinction often made between 'Nature' miracles and others seems plausible only because most of us know less about pathology and psychology than about gravitation. Perhaps if we knew all, the Divine suggestion of a single new thought to my mind would appear neither more nor less a 'Nature' miracle than stilling the storm or feeding the five thousand. But that is not a point I wish to raise. I am concerned only with the implications of *ὀλιγόπιστε*. For it would seem that St Peter might have had any degree of faith in the goodness and power of God and even in the Deity

of Christ and yet been wholly uncertain whether he could continue walking on the water. For in that case his faith would surely have told him that whether he walked or whether he sank he was equally in God's hands, and, submitting himself in the spirit of the Gethsemane prayer, he would have prepared himself, so far as infirmity allowed, to glorify God either by living or by drowning, and his failure, if he failed, would have been due to an imperfect mortification of instinct but not to a lack (in that sense) of faith. The faith which he is accused of lacking must surely be faith in the particular event: the continued walking on water.

All these examples, however, might be dismissed on the ground that they are not, in one strict sense of the word, examples of prayer. Let us then turn to those that are.

Whether you will agree to include Matt. xxi, 21, I don't know. Our Lord there says *ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν καὶ μὴ διακριθῆτε*, 'If you have faith with no hesitations or reservations, you can tell a mountain to throw itself into the sea and it will.' I very much hope that no one will solemnly remind us that Our Lord, according to the flesh, was an Oriental and that Orientals use hyperboles, and think that this has disposed of the passage. Of course Orientals, and Occidentals, use hyperboles, and of course Our Lord's first hearers did not suppose Him to mean that large and highly mischievous disturbances of the landscape would be common or edifying operations of faith. But a sane man does not use hyperbole to mean nothing: by a great thing (which is not literally true) he suggests a great thing which is. When he says that someone's heart is broken he does not mean that this organ is literally fractured, but he does mean that the person in question is in very great anguish. Only a windbag says 'His heart is broken' when he means 'He is somewhat depressed.' And if all Orientals were doomed by the mere fact of being Orientals to be windbags (which of course they are not) the Truth Himself, the Wisdom of the Father, would not and could not have been united with the human nature of an Oriental. (The point is worth making. Some people make allowances for local and temporary conditions in the speeches of Our Lord on a scale which really implies that God chose the time and place of the Incarnation very injudiciously.) Our Lord need not mean the words about the mountain literally; but at the very least they must mean doing some mighty

work. The point is that the condition of doing such a mighty work is unwavering, unhesitating faith. Indeed He goes on in the very next sentence to make the same statement without any figures of speech at all: *πάντα ὅσα ἂν αἰτήσητε ἐν τῇ προσευχῇ πιστεύοντες λήψετε*.¹

Can we even here take *πιστεύοντες* to mean 'having a general faith in the power and goodness of God'? We cannot. The corresponding passage in Mark,² though it adds a new difficulty, makes this point at least embarrassingly plain. The words are *πάντα ὅσα προσεύχεσθε καὶ αἰτεῖσθε πιστεύετε ὅτι ἐλάβετε καὶ ἔσται ὑμῖν*. The tense, present or (worse still) aorist, is of course perplexing. I hope someone will explain to us what either might represent in Aramaic. But there is no doubt at all that what we are to believe is precisely that we get 'all the things' we ask for. We are not to believe that we shall get either what we ask or else something far better: we are to believe that we shall get those very things. It is a faith, unwavering faith in that event, to which success is promised.

The same astonishing—and even, to my natural feelings, shocking—promise is repeated elsewhere with additions which may or may not turn out to be helpful for our present purpose.

In Matt. xviii, 19, we learn that if two (or two or three) agree in a petition it will be granted. Faith is not explicitly mentioned here but is no doubt assumed: if it were not, the promise would be only the more startling and the further (I think) from the pattern of Gethsemane. The reason for the promise follows: 'For where two or three are gathered together *εἰς τὸ ἔμῳ ὀνομα*, there am I in their midst.' With this goes John xiv, 13, 'Whatever you ask in my name, I will do this': not this or something far better, but 'whatever you ask'.

I have discovered that some people find in these passages a solution of the whole problem. For here we have the prayer of the Church (as soon as two or three are gathered together in that

[¹ Matt. xxi, 22: 'And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.']

[² Mark xi, 23-4: 'Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be taken up and cast into the sea", and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will.']

Name) and the presence of Christ in the Church: so that the prayer which is granted by the Father is the prayer of the Son, and prayer and answer alike are an operation within the Deity.

I agree that this makes the promises less startling; but does it reconcile them with the A Pattern? And does it reconcile them with the facts? For surely there have been occasions on which the whole Church prays and is refused? I suppose that at least twice in this century the whole Church prayed for peace and no peace was given her. I think, however we define the Church, we must say that the whole Church prayed: peasants in Italy and popes in Russian villages, elders at Peebles, Anglicans in Cambridge, Congregationalists in Liverpool, Salvationists in East London. You may say (though I would not) that some who prayed were not in the Church; but it would be hard to find any in the Church who did not pray. But the cup did not pass from them. I am not, in principle, puzzled by the fact of the refusal: what I am puzzled by is the promise of granting.

And this at once raises a question which shows how frighteningly practical the problem is. *How* did the Church pray? Did she use the A Pattern or the B? Did she pray with unwavering confidence that peace would be given, or did she humbly follow the example of Gethsemane, adding 'If it be Thy will . . . not as I will, but as Thou wilt', preparing herself in advance for a refusal of that particular blessing and putting all her faith into the belief that even if it were denied, the denial would be full of mercy? I am disposed to believe that she did the latter. And was that, conceivably, her ghastly mistake? Was she like the *διακρινόμενος*, the man of doubtful faith who, as St James tells us,¹ must not suppose that he will receive anything? Have all my own intercessory prayers for years been mistaken? For I have always prayed that the illnesses of my friends might be healed 'if it was God's will', very clearly envisaging the possibility that it might not be. Perhaps this has all been a fake humility and a false spirituality for which my friends owe me little thanks; perhaps I ought never to have dreamed of refusal, *μηδὲν διακρινόμενος*?

[¹ James i, 6-8: 'But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord.']

Again, if the true prayer is joined with the prayer of the Church and hers with the prayer of Christ, and is therefore irresistible, was not it Christ who prayed in Gethsemane, using a different method and meeting with denial?

Another attempted solution runs something like this. The promise is made to prayers in Christ's name. And this of course means not simply prayers which end with the formula 'Through Jesus Christ Our Lord' but prayers prayed in the spirit of Christ, prayers uttered by us when, and in so far as, we are 'in' Him. Such prayers are the ones that can be made with unwavering faith that the blessing we ask for will be given us. And this may be supported (though I suspect it had better not be) from I John v, 14, 'Whatever we ask Him according to His will, He will hear us.' But how are we to hold this view and yet avoid the implication (*quod nefas dicere*) that Christ Himself in Gethsemane failed to pray in the spirit of Christ, since He neither used the form which that spirit is held to justify nor received the answer which that spirit is held to insure? As for the Johannine passage, would we dare to produce it in this context before an audience of intelligent but simple inquirers. They come to us (this often happens) saying that they have been told that those who pray in faith to the Christian God will get what they ask: that they have tried it and not got what they asked: and what, please, is our explanation? Dare we say that when God promises 'You shall have what you ask' He secretly means 'You shall have it if you ask for something I wish to give you'? What should we think of an earthly father who promised to give his son whatever he chose for his birthday and, when the boy asked for a bicycle gave him an arithmetic book, then first disclosing the silent reservation with which the promise was made?

Of course the arithmetic book may be better for the son than the bicycle, and a robust faith may manage to believe so. That is not where the difficulty, the sense of cruel mockery, lies. The boy is tempted, not to complain that the bicycle was denied, but that the promise of 'anything he chose' was made. So with us.

It is possible that someone present may be wholly on the side of the B Pattern: someone who has seen many healed by prayer. Such a person will be tempted to reply that most of us are in fact grievously wrong in our prayer-life: that miracles are accorded to

unwavering faith: that if we dropped our disobedient lowliness and pseudo-spiritual timidity blessings we never dreamed of would be showered on us at every turn. I certainly would not hear such a person with scepticism, still less with mockery. I believe in miracles, here and now. But if this is the complete answer, then why was the A Pattern of prayer ever given at all?

I have no answer to my problem, though I have taken it to about every Christian I know, learned or simple, lay or clerical, within my own Communion or without. Before closing I have, however, one hesitant observation to make.

One thing seems to be clear to me. Whatever else faith may mean (that is, faith in the granting of the blessing asked, for with faith in any other sense we need not at this point be concerned) I feel quite sure that it does not mean any state of psychological certitude such as might be—I think it sometimes is—manufactured from within by the natural action of a strong will upon an obedient imagination. The faith that moves mountains is a gift from Him who created mountains. That being so, can I ease my problem by saying that until God gives me such a faith I have no practical decision to make; I must pray after the A Pattern because, in fact, I cannot pray after the B Pattern? If, on the other hand, God even gave me such a faith, then again I should have no decision to make; I should find myself praying in the B Pattern. This would fall in with an old opinion of my own that we ought all of us to be ashamed of not performing miracles and that we do not feel this shame enough. We regard our own state as normal and theurgy as exceptional, whereas we ought perhaps to regard the worker of miracles, however rare, as the true Christian norm and ourselves as spiritual cripples. Yet I do not find this quite a satisfactory solution. I think we might get over the prayer in Gethsemane. We might say that in His tender humility Our Lord, just as He refused the narcotic wine mingled with myrrh, and just as He chose (I think) to be united to a human nature not of iron nerves but to a nature sensitive, shrinking, and unable not to live through torture in advance, so He chose on that night to plumb the depths of Christian experience, to resemble not the heroes of His army but the very weakest camp followers and unfits; or even that such a choice is implied in those unconsciously profound and involuntarily blessed words 'He saved others, Himself He cannot

save.' But some discomfort remains. I do not like to represent God as saying 'I will grant what you ask in faith' and adding, so to speak, 'Because I will not give you the faith—not that kind—unless you ask what I want to give you.' Once more, there is just a faint suggestion of mockery, of goods that look a little larger in the advertisement than they turn out to be. Not that we complain of any defect in the goods: it is the faintest suspicion of excess in the advertisement that is disquieting. But at present I have got no further. I come to you, reverend Fathers, for guidance. How am I to pray this very night?