

Last time I preached to you we celebrated the fabulous event of Jesus' Transfiguration on the mountain, witnessed by Peter, James and John, with no less than Moses and Elijah standing by to lend weight to the scene. Moses represented the Law, Torah, and Elijah stood for Prophecy, the highest function in the Jewish hierarchy.

Today, in our Gospel we have no such glory to acknowledge and rejoice in. Jesus asks his followers what they would do in the unique circumstance of a friend coming to their door in the middle the night to ask for bread for his family; Jesus puts the question to the disciples how they would handle this rather bizarre request. The issue of whether he actually has the bread asked for is not even raised. But Jesus gives a response himself, that they would surely answer the request by being generous with the visitor, who may well have been a personal friend, who knows? But he puts his typical twist on the story by telling them they would be generous on the grounds that the weight of simple persistence would prompt them to go get the bread.

Well, this appears to be an appeal to our principles in an awkward situation; persistence in generosity is a clear and definite virtue. We could leave it at that, and applaud a good deed done.

But that isn't Jesus' point. Yes, persistence is the quality he is stressing to those followers. But note how he puts it, pulling the example right round to the disciples themselves when he tells them: "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." And he concludes the little story with a most strange remark:

“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

I call this strange because I can't help wondering how the issue of the disciples' evil got Jesus' attention, and it is a bit of a leap from feeding a friend at night when you are asleep in bed and are irritated to be waked up to do a good deed, to putting those men in the position of making application to the Lord on high, our Lord the Holy Spirit, the Holy Paraclete, the great Comforter that the Apostle John makes so much of in the Fourth Gospel — it's a bit odd, if you ask me.

I thought a lot about this issue these few weeks, groping for an answer that might prove helpful. Here's what I came up with. It is this: Jesus had the Holy Spirit as the issue he wanted to present to them from the start, from dealing with Luke's briefer version of the Lord's Prayer, as we call it, and ending with this exalted appeal to the highest authority. God the Holy Spirit: the ultimate answer to the simple question of what we pray for, or should, or might.

To me, the greater issue by far, washing out the friend's obstreperous demand, is what about us now? Jesus puts them and us in the position not of seekers after blessing, but of the ones who are asked whether they would get up in the middle of the night to do this good thing for a friend! Their own blessedness in doing that is not even mentioned. And then Jesus plunges into what he's wanted to deal with all along, what will happen if they have the nerve to become seekers, askers for help, the ones who knock on the door themselves. There's where I want to leave you this morning.

So, Prayer: that's the name of the game, the pleading with God the Holy Spirit. But first I want to offer you two sublime images from the world of the imagination, the very topic I wanted to raise with you today — knocking, asking, indeed pleading. is a

The first is a work of the well-known English painter of the 19th century, Holman Hunt, his hugely beloved painting of Jesus standing at the door to knock, a door, by the way, which lacks a handle, which means it can only be opened from the inside. The second an equally well know, equally beloved poem called “The Hound of Heaven” which I am confident many of you know as well as I do, by Francis Thompson, dated 1893, making the same point.

That point is this, and for God’s sake hang on to it, and I hope you will take it home with you if you forget all the rest: it is that we are not seekers after God, rather God by his own nature as our Father in Heaven is everlastingly is seeking us! Nothing here about bread for our children at midnight and whether it is convenient or not, whether we are persistent in our effort to follow what we know about God; on the contrary what we are offered is images that go so deep into our souls about the nature of God that we will never get over it while we have breath in our bodies. Now there’s a program for Christian living and struggle that belongs to every single human being alive!

Let me finish with a couple of lines from the poem of Francis Thompson, to make a final effort to reach your hearts before I let you go:

“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;

I fled Him, down the arches of the years;

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears

I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

Up vistaed hopes I sped;

And shot, precipitated,

Down Titanic glooms of chased fears,
From those strong Feet that followed after
followed after.
But with unhurrying chase
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
they beat — and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet —
“All things betray thee who betrayest Me.”
And so on for near 200 lines.