

Why should I pray?

One of the questions I was asked during the discernment process as I explored my call to ordination in the Church of England was this: “Would you pray for a parking space and why?” At the time I was working as a librarian at Warrington and Halton hospitals. One day every week I was based in Halton and never once did I pray for a parking space, there was no need, parking was ample. The rest of the week, however, I was based in Warrington and I used to work late on a Wednesday, which meant arriving at 12pm and staying on until 8pm. Every Wednesday, without fail, I would pray for a parking space! I wonder what your answer would be: would you pray for a parking space? Would your answer change if the question was now: “Would you pray for rain?”

This morning we are looking at the question: “Why should I pray?” There are of course various kinds of prayer: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, contemplation, intercession, and petition. One option would be for us to go through each of these and ask: “Why should I offer adoration?”, “Why should I praise God?”, “Why should I offer thanksgiving?” and so on and so forth. Rather than do that here, I would encourage you to take a look at the *Catechism* from *The Book of Common Prayer* in which does this succinctly. Another option – and the one we’re going to do – is to focus on prayers of intercession and petition because it is those kinds of prayer that many of us wrestle with and will be asked about by friends and family. The types of questions which run along these lines: “Why should I pray if God knows what will happen?” or “Why should I pray if God has decided in advance what will happen?”

Recently I’ve been reading Robert Jenson’s *Systematic Theology* which comes in two volumes and he has some interesting things to say which are helpful when it comes to the question before us this morning. I am not saying that Jenson would agree with what I am

saying, but as I have wrestled with his writings these are some thoughts which have sprung forth and which I hope are fruitful as we explore the question of why we should pray. As we seek to answer this question there is no avoiding metaphysics, but we need to make sure that we have a baptized metaphysics and this may mean re-thinking some of our categories.

The first thing that is necessary is to reshape our understanding of how the world works around the five Cs: **creation**, **creator**, **creature**, **creativity**, and **covenant**. What follows is a series of summary statements describing how these relate with each other to frame future discussion and reflection. Here goes...

Creation refers to everything that is created by the **creator** and which is inhabited by **creatures**, of which *human beings* are one example and *time* is another. The **creator** is distinct from **creation** and relates to **creation** by way of **covenant**. This means **creation** does not simply *exist*, instead it exists *with intention*. There is a *purpose* or *direction* to **creation** namely the *eschaton*, or **new creation** with each functioning respectively as the Alpha and Omega points. Whilst the **creator** is distinct from **creation**, nonetheless the **creator** is active in **creation** as **creator** thereby opening up the possibilities of infinite **creativity** which become actualised through history and which we call *providence*.

This means we can draw a straight line with the word **creation** at the beginning and **eschaton** or **new creation** at the end. Then the line in between can be labelled **providence** which we can define as God's ongoing activity in **creation** through **time**. There are two approaches that we can take when we think about **providence**: either God is involved with what happens or God is absent. For some, God's creative act was a one-off event. God got everything up and running and then left things to run their course in accordance with various natural laws. In this model intercessory and petitionary prayer is about asking God to intervene and break the laws of nature for our

benefit. That is one approach. Another is to see God present and actively involved in creation. This is what the paragraph above ends up: the **creator** is active in **creation** as **creator** thereby opening up the possibilities of infinite **creativity** which become actualised through history and which we call *providence*. In this approach, prayer is our participation in providence. But we'll get to that in a moment. Just by way of interest, Rowan Williams said this in a conversation with Gregg Garrett which is wonderful:

'It oughtn't to surprise, but if we are serious about the doctrine of Creation, creation isn't something God did a long time ago. It's something God does now as we're speaking. You might say that occasionally in the pulpit: "God is creating the world now". And now. And now. Therefore God is not absent from the world, because it is the divine energy that is throbbing in every moment.'

So we have the 5Cs in one hand, providence in another, now we need to grow another hand as we turn briefly to the question of **time**. Traditionally it was understood that past, present, and future are not successive for God as they are for us. The divine eternity is an "eternal now" that embraces our temporal past, present, and future comprehensively, holding them together in God's knowledge all at once. We might liken time with the trinity – the three in one and one in three – such that our past, present, and future are not three but one. One modern development has been to view eternity as distinct from time but not separate from it such that eternity is a transcendent, transhistorical dimension that runs along in tandem with time while yet being immanent within it and I'd point you to George Hunsinger if you want to follow that up.

For our purposes this morning I think we need to grasp that **time** is a creature, it is part of God's creation and it makes creation possible. Without time there would be nothing since the beginning and ending would be simultaneous so time provides structure thereby allowing God's history to occur. Since time is created by God, God is not

subject to time nor limited by it, *all of time is present to God all of the time*. What we can do is differentiate between **God's time** and **created time**. These are separate but nevertheless created time is included – taken up if you will – into God's perfect time. As creatures we experience time as a sequence, but for God time is one, nonetheless God is involved in created time and his involvement is by way of covenant.

Covenants by nature are relational and loving, as such God's will is non-coercive. God does not compel his covenant-partners to obey, they must freely choose. Covenants include promises and the promises of God's covenant with creation is the *eschaton*, as such the *eschaton* can be said to exist in the promises of God's covenant. God freely calls the future into being through his promises and yet we must respond in faith, through prayer.

Where does intercessory and petitionary prayer fit into all of this? How can we respond when faced with questions such as "Why should I pray if God knows what will happen?" or "Why should I pray if God has decided in advance what will happen?" The starting point is that when it comes to God's will, "it is not that God has *already* decided...He *will* decide and so has decided; and *has* decided and so *will* decide; and so *decides* also within created time" (STII: 177). I take this to mean that God has not decided whether to answer your prayer until you ask it since it has not been asked before and until it is asked, God has not been faced with the possibility of saying "Yes" so in a sense God's answer is determined in the eternal present of any one moment.

The future is being created in the present which in turn has been created by the past. In any one particular moment God is freely calling forth new possibilities, and inviting us to respond, thus as we listen in prayer, we discern God's creative voice and as such prayer is our involvement in divine providence. There is more, however, since prayer is a two-way conversation. Not only are we to listen, we are

to speak since we are co-creators with God encouraging God to do something creatively new.

This is what I think Rowan Williams is getting at when he says that prayer is transformative. He says: “when we pray, we are part of a divine action which is bringing the whole creation where it should be.” Creation is heading towards the eschaton and our prayers ought to be orientated in that direction, praying in the future as it were. Nonetheless we are expected to pray for a parking space too, or even rain!

Here is Jenson to whom I give the last word:

‘prayer...is simply the reasonable thing to do. For the process of the world is enveloped in and determined by a freedom, a freedom that can be addressed. What is around us is not iron impersonal fate but an omnipotent conversation that is open to us. We can meaningfully and sensibly say, “Please let it rain,” because rain will or will not happen in spontaneity with whom we can and may discuss or even argue the matter. And we can make such an address in hope and trust, for it is the crucified and risen Jesus whose Spirit is this freedom of all events’ (STII: 44).

Actually, I’ll have the last word! Why should I pray? You should pray because prayer changes things! As someone once said, “When I pray coincidences happen but when I don’t, they don’t!” Prayer changes things. What are you waiting for? Pray! Amen.

Reading

Barth, K. (2004) *Church Dogmatics* III/2. London: T&T Clark

(2004) *Church Dogmatics* III/3. London: T&T Clark

Hunsinger, G. (2000) "Mysterium Trinitatis: Karl Barth's Conception of Eternity". Pages 186-209 in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Jenson, R. W. (1999) *Systematic Theology: Volume 2 – The Works of God*. Oxford: OUP.