New Blackfriars

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Comment: The Power of Prayer

I have a friend who is very anxious concerning the Covid-19 pandemic. She and her husband continue to take all the recommended precautions, but she remains frightened when it comes to the spread and effects of the disease. And she recently sent me a one-line email which read: 'Do you think that the power of prayer can heal sickness?'.

How should I reply to this email? How would you reply to it? My first thought was to say that prayer has no power at all. When it comes to prayer, considered as asking for things from God (petitionary prayer), the power is the power of *God*, not the power of some *instrument* that we might take us to have in hand when prodding God to do this or that. If we ask God to bring something about, we are not casting a spell which could compel God in any way. We are doing something that is very familiar. We often ask people to help us when we find ourselves in need of something. 'Can you give me a ride to the supermarket?' 'Please water my plants.' We can all make sense of sentences like these. We do not, however, suppose that uttering them *forces* anyone to do anything. When using them we are making a request, not using a 'power' guaranteed to get a result. And why should things be different when it comes to asking God to provide what we want?

So, what *are* we doing when we ask God for things that we want? What, for that matter, are we doing in general when we ask anyone for things that we want? In the human context we are usually *informing* someone when it comes to our desire while hoping that the person so informed will, given their abilities, provide us with what we are looking for. If God is omniscient, however, then God surely knows what we desire even before we do. So, why bother to ask God for things that we want? Because God can give us what we want, but cannot give us *what we ask for* if we do not *ask* for it. You cannot reply to an email from me that I have never sent. By the same token, God cannot give what we have asked for if we have not asked God for something.

God is the creative source of all that is good. And God's being that is not the result of a request. Everything other than God is a gift from God. So, even our praying is God's gift to us. Yet it still makes sense to ask God for things just as it makes sense to ask people for things, even though our asking people for things is also God's work in us. And why does it makes sense to ask people for things? Because we might realize that they are in a position to give us what we are asking for. By the same token, it makes sense to ask God for things that we want because God is in a position to give us what we are asking for, unless we are

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asking for what cannot possibly exist (like a square circle or the fact that Napoleon never died), or unless we are asking for what it is evil to ask for (like the destruction of the human race).

It cannot, of course, be that God can respond to a request as we can respond to someone who asks for something from us. I mean that if God does not exist in space and time, then God is not 'someone' alongside us who can acknowledge requests 'coming in' while *consequently* doing something to try to deal with them. God is not Santa Claus, or even Amazon. God *is* the Creator of the universe who knows the desires of our hearts even before we express them and can grant what we ask for if what we are asking for makes logical sense and is fitting for us to want.

It has been said that if God wills what God wills from *eternity*, then our asking for things from God is pointless. But what is it that God wills from eternity? Maybe more than we know. Yet it clearly seems to include a universe in which we are able to make genuine decisions and to have genuine effects. In that case, however, the notion of asking God for things makes as much sense as does starting to cook a curry or seeking directions from a friend. We do not pray so as to change God's mind. We pray because God has made us creatures that can ask for things from God which would not have been granted were it not for our prayers. As Thomas Aquinas puts it: 'We do not pray in order to change God's plan, but in order to obtain by our prayers those things which God planned to bring about *by means of prayers*'.

To be sure, our asking for things from God does not inform God in any way. But petitionary prayer does express our recognition that God is able to help us in various ways. And it is an obvious way of putting that *recognition* into *practice*. While God gives us much without our asking, it does not follow that it is unreasonable to ask God to provide what we *honestly* ask for as time goes by, *whatever* it is that we are asking for (whether 'peace throughout the world' or a friend surviving having contracted Covid). People sometimes complain of 'distractions' when praying. But that must be because they are not praying for what they *actually* and *honestly* want.

Of course, people often ask God for incompatible things. John might pray for a US presidential election to result in candidate X being in the White House, while Mary might pray for candidate Y ending up there. At least one of them is going to be disappointed, but so it often is when different people ask for different things from each other. 'No' is as much an answer as 'Yes' as far as requests are concerned. Yet we do not take that fact to suggest that making requests is a silly thing to do when it comes to expressing what we want. Neither do we think that uttering requests automatically guarantees that we shall get what we ask for. We do not think that to ask for something is to wield a tool of power (like a vaccine for a disease). Yet we can still make sense of asking for something we need from a source that is able to bring about

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what we are looking for. And, for this reason, and if God is the Maker of all things, to ask God for what we want certainly makes sense.

Christians will rightly say that this practice is commended to us by Christ (as in the Our Father prayer). But the friend who sent me the email referred to above believes that God exists without taking herself to be a Christian. I hope that she, and others like her, might appreciate what I have just been saying as I have not appealed to any *uniquely* Christian way of thinking.

Brian Davies, OP

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