

God on Mute – Week 3 – Brian Griffiths

Why aren't my prayers being answered

First of all, I would like to thank all those who fed back to me after the first sermon in our Lent series. I have had some very positive emails and comments from people for whom this theme of unanswered prayer has really chimed because they are going through a really tough time in their lives. I do hope that we will all continue to think deeply about prayer this Lent. I would also like to thank all those who rang up or stopped me in the street and asked me about Rowena. She underwent surgery to fit a pacemaker/defibrillator in Croydon Hospital last Thursday and is a bit battered and bruised, but recovering well at home after the procedure. Thanks for your good wishes, cards and 'e-cards.'

In this, the third sermon in our Lent series, we will look at the question 'Why' – "Why does a loving God allow terrible things to happen?" - 'Why does it seem that my prayers go unanswered?' – 'Why is God letting this happen to me?' My guess is that most of us in St Francis' and St Mary's have asked this question at some time. Is this a question Jesus ever asked? Our gospel reading this morning comes from Mark Chapter 15 and describes the last minutes of Jesus suffering on the cross. We read:

At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

That cry of Jesus comes directly from Psalm 22. I wonder was Jesus simply reciting that psalm as a prayer or was it really a cry from his heart? Did he feel that God had abandoned him as he hung from that cross? There was no immediate answer to his cry. The bystanders mocked Jesus saying:

'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.'

There was no immediate miracle. Elijah didn't suddenly miraculously appear and Jesus wasn't going to survive the cross. There was no word from heaven. In this moment Jesus made it plain for all time the need we have for explanation. Why is this happening to me? Why does it appear that you have distanced yourself from me? Why have you abandoned me? Pain, disappointment, confusion or a sense of abandonment cause us to ask God the ultimate question - 'Why?' It is perfectly right to ask that most fundamental question 'Why.' 'Why, when I try to do good do bad things happen to me?' Frustratingly, when we think we need it most and often at a really low point in our lives, there is no answer to 'Why?' There are Good Friday seasons in all our lives. No one is immune to this.

You may wonder who Pete Greig, the person who wrote the book 'God on Mute' is. He's a best-selling author, pastor and the person who launched the 24-7 Prayer movement which has reached more than half the nations on earth. He and his wife Sammy are also the Senior Pastors of Emmaus Road Church in Guildford. This is such a large congregation that they meet on Sundays in a big theatre – the Yvonne Arnaud. Pete devised the 'Prayer Course' which aims to help people learn to pray effectively. You may well ask 'So why did someone for whom prayer is so central write a book called 'God on Mute?' Why did he put together 'The Unanswered Prayer Course?' It was a very dramatic and traumatic time in his life that prompted him to really grapple and wrestle with his faith and ask the question 'Why?' 'Why are my prayers seemingly going unanswered?'

He goes into this in some detail in the book and in the video those of you in the home groups may have viewed on the first sessions. I'll just summarise what happened for us now.

Pete and Sammy Greig were happily married with young children and a strong Christian faith. One day Sammy started having seizures and it was discovered that the cause was a brain tumour the size of an orange. After many tests it was decided to operate to remove the tumour. Unfortunately, the side effect of the surgery was that Sammy was left with epileptic fits which happened with frightening regularity – every two or three days. All of this prompted Pete to address the painful reality of unanswered prayer. He asked questions like 'Why doesn't God heal Sammy?' – 'Is the problem my unbelief?' 'Is it a matter of spiritual warfare?' 'Why doesn't Jesus do what he did 2000 years ago?' 'Is it his will for Sammy to suffer?' 'Why would he want such a thing?'

In the book there are 15 possible reasons why our prayers go unanswered. I'm not going to go into all 15 unless you want a really long sermon!! However, Pete Greig concluded that unanswered prayer can be attributed to three fundamental reasons - God's World, God's Will, or God's War.

God's World - Miracles must be the exception rather than the rule because our world is infinitely complicated. God's Will - The will of God is often far darker and more painful than we imagine for reasons we can't immediately understand. God's War - Spiritual warfare is real. Sometimes we need to stop fighting against God, and start fighting with him against the enemy of our souls. It is this last aspect of spiritual warfare that I would like to consider in this sermon.

In the book, one incident is recounted that Pete Greig was convinced was like a war. Pete, Sammy and the children were out for a weekend in the car when suddenly Sammy was seized by a violent epileptic fit. They swung into a church car park. The seizure got worse and Pete prayed intensely focussing his prayer on the power of Jesus' blood. Gradually the spasms got less and less, eventually subsiding all together. However, as soon as he stopped praying, the fits started all over again – much more intensely. Pete prayed again – even more vigorously – really calling out loudly to God. It was as if God responded this time and the fit subsided and calm was restored. He writes that when he prayed for healing that day in the car it was a real battle. His theory is that God said 'Yes' and Satan said 'No.' For him, it was spiritual warfare and that sometimes we should get angry about our unanswered prayers and stand and fight!

In our first reading today from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Paul gives us an image of the Christian being armed for battle. The letter to the Ephesians is known as one of the 'Captivity Epistles' as Paul wrote it while he was imprisoned. You can imagine Paul was watching the uniformed guards when he was inspired to write the words we heard today. Paul urges Christians to:

'Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.'

In the face of unanswered prayer and when life hurts, it is easy to focus on negative thoughts and to give up – to give up the fight of faith that Paul urges us to confront. God has given us a whole array of armour with which we can use to fight against the dark forces that would make us lose faith. We have seen how Jesus cried out a verse from Psalm 22 whilst he was on the cross. Like any lament this psalm turns from darkness to light at the end. The psalmist realised that even in the darkest of times there is hope and writes:

***Stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.
From you comes my praise in the great congregation;***

***my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live for ever!***

You may have heard of the book 'The Screwtape Letters' by C S Lewis. In essence this book is a series of letters written by Screwtape who holds an administrative post in Hell, and acts as a mentor to his nephew Wormwood, an inexperienced and incompetent tempter. In the letters selfish gain and power are seen as the only good, and neither Screwtape nor Wormwood can comprehend God's love for man or acknowledge human virtue. In a letter about a time when people can no longer sense God's presence and his purposes have stopped making sense, Screwtape has this to say:

'Sooner or later God withdraws, if not in fact, at least from their conscious experience. He leaves people to stand on their own legs – to carry out from the will alone duties which have lost all relish. Our cause is never in more danger than when a human – no longer desiring but still intending to do God's will – looks around upon a universe from which every trace of him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken and still obeys.'

In other words, someone who asks why but still finds faith and hope. Someone who stands, even in the darkest times and still finds faith and lives in hope

Here's a prayer entitled 'Help Me Stand' based on our Ephesians reading that I would like to conclude with and maybe we can make this our personal prayer when we are tempted to give up on prayer

*Lord, help me to stand today.
Temptations and trials abound
When life hurts, I get confused, suspicious and critical
I put on the belt of truth
When life hurts, my relationships suffer - especially my relationship with you
I put on the breastplate of righteousness
When life hurts, I either get really lazy or I make myself really busy
I put on the shoes of the gospel
When life hurts, I let down my guard and leave myself exposed
I take up the shield of faith
When life hurts, my thinking gets negative and I question everything
I put on the helmet of salvation*

When life hurts, I'm a coward

I take hold of the sword of the word

Lord, it doesn't feel very 'finished' down here.

I don't feel very finished.

See me kneeling - help me stand.