

We often hear of wonderful answers to prayers where God has done great things. but there is another side to prayer that raises one of the most frequent questions that come up from the congregation as we start this series of providing some form of answer to questions we collected earlier in the year. This is one of commonest questions that most of us face some time in our lives. We pray, fervently, believing, repeatedly. But nothing happens. And it can devastate us. It affects us deeply. It affects us emotionally because it leaves us in pain, a pain we need to process. It affects us intellectually because it raises questions that need answering and it affects us culturally because God's people, the church, has been less than honest about these things.

This experience of God not answering is that of the Psalmist in our reading. He is going through a crisis, a really bad time and has prayed to God, but nothing happens. He feels abandoned by God. His opening line shows the agony he feels of being forsaken by God. He was brought up to believe that God listened to the prayers of the righteous and blessed them so why was he not blessed. His fellow believers scorned him. Like Job's comforters they suggested the problem lay with him, lack of faith, sinful life. But the Psalmist looks around and sees that more often it seems the wicked who prosper and the righteous who suffer. The church through the ages has often fallen into the same trap of telling people how great God is, how many great things he has done and that if you pray then God will do all you ask. But it isn't so. We are not so keen to talk about times when there seems no answer. Just reading the Bible as a whole will show us how often people do not get the answer they are expecting from God. How frequently people continue to struggle, and God is silent. The culture of the church does not reflect the Biblical experience in reality.

There are some good simple reasons why God may not be responding to our prayer: We can find many of them in the letter of James, who wrestles with this question more than most and we can deal with them very quickly.

It could be because we doubt God James 1:6

Because we took matters into our own hands and didn't wait James 4:2

We have the wrong motives – selfish? James 4:3 O lord won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz

Or because our pride gets in the way – humble trust in God. James 4:6

But Isaiah adds it could be because of unconfessed sin Is 59:2

Or because it is not the right time or place. Is 55:8-9

But we can also be deaf to God's answer – which could be No, Yes, wait, or you do something.

But we can assert we have avoided all these and still God is silent.

'But where is God?' we question. Some people get answers to prayer. So our frustration raises questions: Is God silent? Is God hidden from us? Is God unfair?

The Psalmist comes to a point of transition. That God has heard his prayer. All commentators agree. The Psalmist hasn't got an answer – certainly not the one he wanted but he comes to experience that God is there in the silence, God's love is still with him in all his troubles. God goes with him through all his trials. 'I may not understand you, but I love you' is his tone. And it leads to two results – he praises the God who is there with him and he has great hope for the future in a very upbeat finish to the Psalm.

Let's look at things from God's point of view for a bit. God created everything but every time he made a choice he limited his options of what else he could do, a self-limitation. Just like the sculptor who chips away at a block of stone. Each time he chooses a cut, it limits what else he can do. So God made choices about the way the world worked. All creation was dependent upon God for it's being. But it was an ever changing creation full of possibilities and uncertainties, that was part of its glory. It wasn't a mechanical toy, it was an organic process of becoming. And perhaps his greatest choice was to create a being who would be free to love him. It was a choice but also a risk. God loved his human creation would his human creation freely love him back. Yet we know the answer, the human creation may sometimes show love to God but also went its own selfish way. So God does reveal himself and answer the prayers of one man – Abraham and as promised his descendants who will bless mankind. It carries through to Joseph who found that even after much suffering God turned it all into triumph. But as his people settled in Egypt God falls silent for 400 years. Nothing. But God heard the cry of his people and answered them. Through Moses he acted with miracle after miracle. First the plagues, then parting the sea then feeding and watering his people. God wasn't hidden he showed his presence in the column of cloud that glowed as fire by night. God was fair, he showed people the right way to

live and gave the instructions to Moses. And what did God's people do? They moaned about the miracles, They wanted more miracles – they were putting their faith in miracles rather than in God. Even as Moses is getting the rules for living fairly, they are building a golden calf to worship. Being present, acting spectacularly and being just is not enough. The people still choose not to love him. God continues to send messages of his love through several hundred years of prophets. Some of the people respond for a time but it doesn't last. They don't really know and love him. So God is silent for another 400 years. God however still burns with a passion to love his human creation. Isaiah 63:9 says In all their distress, he too was distressed. What is God to do? God does a new thing. He comes down among us – present in human form. Jesus, God's son shows us the presence of God alive in our world and God experiences what we experience as humans. Jesus shows God present with us. He is not silent. Follow me he says, pray like this he says. God is not hidden there is a new intimacy with God – call him daddy. If you have seen me, you have seen the Father. There are miracles but Jesus is sparing with them. Not all the lepers are healed – miracles are to point towards God not just an answer provided by a magic show. And there is the justice of God brought about by the Son. I lay down my life for you.

And God himself experiences what the psalmist describes. In the garden Jesus prays let this cup of suffering pass from my hands – but the prayer is not answered. On Good Friday he echoes the words of the Psalmist **My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!** The details of the Psalmist's sufferings are the details of Christ's suffering in crucifixion. The agony of suffering and the silence and absence of God are absorbed into God himself. And God can understand us, sympathise with us and comfort us in even the worst experiences we face.

Then everything changes. We can see it ourselves from a different perspective now. Just as Joseph found God has the ability to take disaster and suffering and turn it into victory. Jesus is resurrected and after a scattering of appearances to his disciples and a period of waiting by them, there is the new experience of the Holy Spirit. Not God lobbing miracles from Heaven but a living presence in us. Not speaking through some random bearded old man but speaking in our hearts. And in the New Testament, the moans and groans of Israel are silent. Instead they realise that times of trial can be times of growth. In Acts 4 the church is suffering persecution so prays for boldness to speak out about Christ. What happens? The persecution gets harder, so their boldness increases the more. Paul has a thorn in the flesh – some physical problem but when his prayer is not answered he realises it is so the grace of God may shine through. It is the experience of the Psalmist. The rejoicing is not that God did what we told him but that he heard our prayer and by faith is with us as we go through all that life has for us. The pastor Samuel Rutherford said 'Grace grows best in winter'. The experience they have of God being with them in all situations, even in the silence gives them great joy and great hope for the future just like the Psalmist. One day God will finally triumph.

But there is something else as well. Jesus said to his disciples **As the father sent me so I send you.** We are the ones to make God visible on earth, we are the ones to speak for God today, we are the ones to act out God's justice and fairness in our lives today. So when God seems silent to others we are to be the ones not to offer false advice – *try praying harder, confess your sin etc* – but to bring the presence of God and the voice of hope to those who are struggling

Charles Smith was a dapper English Christian gentle man in all senses of the word. His wife had been in a home with dementia for the past few years but visited by him most days. He had been called to the home because she was now seriously ill, and then sent home again as she was peaceful and there was nothing he could do. They promised to phone him to come back when she was dying. He returned home and phoned to let the church know. I don't know where the vicar was so it ended up as a rather raw curate went round to see him, waiting alone. I prayed with him but it didn't seem right to leave him alone. So we sat in silence. There was nothing to say. So we sat in companionable silence for some three hours waiting for the phone call. You may not believe it but I don't think I'd been silent for so long in my life before. It didn't seem awkward but we were both aware that really we were three for God sat quietly with us, in the midst. Eventually the phone rang and he wanted to go to the hospital on his own, so I let him for the waiting was over and at her funeral we sang a hymn then new to me: O love that will not let me go. We will have it as our song after the service and you can follow the words as your prayer or join in if you know it. God may be silent, but he has heard our prayer. He may not answer the way we want but he is still with us, in whatever we are going through. We trust by faith that he has heard us. We have his Spirit in us and his presence within the human body of Christ.

O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee.
I give thee back the life I owe,
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.

O Light that follows all my way,
I yield my flick'ring torch to thee.
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
that in thy sunshine's blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee.
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and feel the promise is not vain,
that morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee.
I lay in dust, life's glory dead,
and from the ground there blossoms red,
life that shall endless be.

Reflection on a silent God

I asked for strength that I might achieve; He made me weak that I might obey. I asked for health that I might do greater things; I was given grace that I might do better things. . I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life that I might enjoy all things. I received nothing that I asked for, all that I hoped for. My prayer was answered, I was most blessed.