Prayers vs. Wishes

One of my favorite episodes of the Twilight Zone is “The Man in the Bottle.” An older couple run a pawn shop and are down on their luck. The caring shop owner gives a woman some money for an old bottle that is seemingly worthless, much to the irritation of his wife. Suddenly a genie comes out, and to their amazement he offers them 4 wishes.

Skeptical the first wish is that the glass counter that had broken be repaired, and voila, their wish is granted. Now knowing he’s real, they put thought into the next two wishes.

They ask for money and it rains down from above. Unfortunately for them most all of it is lost when the tax bill comes.

Having one wish left, the man gives it thought and asks for unchecked power where no one can overrule him. He finds himself suddenly as Adolf Hitler - in the bunker - at the end of the war.

His last wish? That all go back to as it was. And so it is granted, and the couple share a smile and laugh as they look at their cracked glass counter, suddenly not bickering and miserable but happy.

It’s important for us to remember prayer is not a wish. This does not mean we cannot ask God for things - for petitionary prayer is what we often do. But what does mean is that just because things don’t always work out or are answered in the way we hope at first does not mean God is silent. Rather, perhaps a bit like in that “Twilight Zone” episode, perhaps when we don’t get everything we want right away in the way we want, we can get to a better place spiritually.

In our readings this week, there is a lot of asking. Abraham is having a conversation with God about sparing Sodom; and the disciples ask Jesus how to pray and we are given the Lord’s Prayer, and then Jesus speaks on persisting in prayer.

However, one of the things that is clear is that God answers, but it’s not always the answer we want. So, does this mean that God is ignoring us when prayers seem to go unanswered? So what gives? How do we come to terms with “thy will be done?” and try to understand what to think when it seems our prayers aren’t quite being answered?

As a starter, we have to remember God knows what He is doing. In our first reading from Genesis, the Lord says He will go down and investigate the cry that has come up to him, and in the previous verses God says to Abraham he will reveal his plans to him, both for the destruction of the city which is part of his justice, and that also He will bestow undeserved blessings on Abraham and his family. God wants to instruct Abraham in the ways of righteousness and justice. Sometimes we want things a certain way or think we can see clearly what will make us happy or someone else happy, when in reality we can’t see as far down the road as God can. We pray for this relationship to

work out and God has something else or someone else in store for us; we pray to get the job but don't see an even better job is about to soon open up; we pray for something difficult to go away, but maybe look back and see that experience taught us life lessons and made is stronger.

Secondly, God listens to us and journeys with us, but it's important for us to persist like Abraham so we know God better and more deeply. Note Abraham hems and haws a bit and so what emerges is what seems like a man negotiating with a used car salesman, Abraham asking the city to be saved if there are just 50, 40, 30, 20 and 10 righteous people. In reality, Abraham is most concerned about his nephew Lot who lives in Sodom; Lot and his family do escape though, reminding us how merciful God is. And in Jesus Christ, we have God's response of love and mercy; He takes upon our sins; He journeys with us; and He shows us love and forgiveness. The Father did not take the cup away from Jesus in the garden, but He sent angels to comfort Him, and even though the Son did not fully understand the Father's will, in the end He saved the world and was raised up. We should not take silence or perceived silence as a sign of God's indifference; rather we can look to the Eucharist, the Cross, and be reminded God is with us step by step and loves us more than we can ever imagine. By persisting in prayer we come to know and trust in God more deeply, in particular becoming aware of Gods love and mercy for us.

Third, sometimes a person prays for something, but they need to do a bit of work for the grace to get through. A person may pray that a neighbor moves or their boss or coworker is transferred or their kid doesn't get a certain teacher, but be so full of anger; a person may pray for a relationship to work out but have their own addictions or demons they first need to address; or pray for better relationships with a family member, but be caught up in a lack of forgiveness or bitterness in their soul. Sometimes we have to do a little bit of work, maybe getting introspective and clearing the ground so to speak for God's grace to land in our soul.

Fourth, sometimes God says "not yet." I know I'm not a good waiter and am extremely impatient. But think of growing up. I'd ride my bike around the block but had to wait a bit to ride further. My parents setting some boundaries for me wasn't them being mean; rather I just had to prepare a bit and get older so I'd know the trails and where were the safer places to go. Sometimes we want something so bad, but we just aren't ready for it yet and need to grow or mature in our faith for the time to be right.

Fifth, remember God respects free will. We all have people we pray for but sometimes these people are making bad life choices. While part of us may wish God could just "fix" the person, God wants that person to freely chose the right path. God never forces anything; even at the Last Supper Jesus reaches out to Judas to dip his bread in the cup with him, but Judas 'heart is closed. I know when I'm praying for someone to make some changes, I don't pray for God to "fix" them, but that they would come to know God's love and how to respond to it, and the Holy Spirit might grant them more wisdom to see the consequences of their actions or decisions.

Lastly, sometimes God wants us to work with Him. Abraham is persistent; he does not give up. And neither can we. It's why it's so important to persist in prayer; so we come to know God's love and will. But also why we persist in our actions. Let us not forget our actions make such a difference in helping others. On our part, we pray for help or for others, but when we take the initiative too and seek help for ourselves when we are going through something tough, when we own up to our mistakes, when we do not give up on people and persist and telling them "I might not agree with your choices but I love you and am here for you," and when we do not give up on evangelizing and trying to change this world for the better, we join with God and make a difference.

God is always seeking us out, and wants such great things for us and has such great plans for us. May we trust in God, knowing that we might not understand His will, but when His will is done, the end result will always lead us to happiness and peace.

Have a blessed week!

Fr. Paul