

Many you know my daughter, Ellie. Like all parents, I'm immensely proud of her. She is not an academic type, her skills and gifts lay outside the lecture room. But she is caring, vivacious and capable. Her ambition is to become a midwife. To become a truly effective midwife, she planned to qualify as a nurse and then convert to midwifery. Two years ago, she gained a place at the University of Leeds (much to all our astonishment) and set off on her dream journey.

This journey has been fraught with stress and disappointment. After much work and tears, Ellie handed in her final attempt at one of her essays. I prayed, really believing God was watching her, testing her and that once she had shown her tenacity, he would smooth her way to her goals. She failed. Two and a half years of her life seem to have been wasted. We didn't get what we prayed for.

Now, being thrown out of university is quite big, but it is not the crushing crisis that death, serious injury, illness, war or natural disaster can bring. It is small personal crisis. And Ellie's suffering will become a faint memory, a trip in her road of life.

In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we heard the story of Tabitha. We know a couple things about Tabitha. She was a widow and she was 'she was always doing good and helping the poor'. We don't know how old she was, we don't know how much she had suffered as a widow or how she had died, other than that she had become sick. We only know that she was greatly loved and her friends and family were distraught at her death; so distraught, in fact that when they heard that Peter, the famous man who was one of the disciples of Jesus, was nearby, they called for him to come. I wonder what their expectations were. Did they want him to pray for her soul or did they believe that he would bring her back? Similarly, how was Peter feeling? Was he being asked for comfort or to perform a miracle?

In actual fact, Peter sent everyone out, sat beside Tabitha and prayed. And in a way that mirrored Jesus raising Jarius' daughter, he commanded her to get up. And she did. His prayer was answered with a miracle, Tabitha was brought back to life.

I think we can all remember times when we have prayed and received what we asked for. Prayer has provided miracles large and small, and when they occur, they are magnificent in spirituality. As Matthew says in chapter 7 verse 7, 'Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.'

But we all know, this doesn't happen all the time. Any parent with a dying child will be praying with all their heart and all their soul, many also with deep faith and belief they will be heard. But God does not save everyone, he does not always give us what we pray for.

This doesn't mean that God doesn't hear, and that he doesn't listen and understand us. Our compassionate Father hears our voices and sees our needs. What we need to appreciate is that He has plans and although we are not necessarily aware of them and can't always understand them, he is fulfilling his plans. We have to trust him. How often have we heard 'If I hadn't..... whatever would not have happened? If I hadn't got lost I would never have met..., if I hadn't broken my leg, I would never have stayed behind and..... A couple of years after my son was born, I had a miscarriage. It was traumatic, but underneath all my feelings of loss, I remember thinking, 'Don't worry, you are going to have twins' and in few months, actually on the day the lost child was due, I found I was carrying twins. God had a plan. I had two beautiful daughters to annoy my beautiful son.

Now, I don't want to be flippant about this. Some very bad things have happened to some incredibly good people, many of whom have great faith and pray with devotion; those trapped in Mariupol, for example, must be praying for their safety and wondering why they are in such a terrifying position. The answer that God has another plan is not always consoling, especially if they cannot see the plan or the plan does not make their life better or more fulfilled. I do not know the answers here and cannot even begin to imagine their trauma. I do want to acknowledge that this happens.

So what is the point of praying if we don't always get what we pray for? What is the point of asking for something, if God has a different idea? Why don't we all just go about our lives and let God get on with his plans? It seems to me, that prayer is not a request service. Matthew, elsewhere in his Gospel says, 'Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.' Whatever God decides is our road, he is God, he will be at our sides and he will strengthen us.

To me, the reason for praying is very like the reason for a conversation; it is not one sided. Jesus taught us to pray, to ask for help. But we need to listen for the answer, be open minded to changes and challenges. He will be by our side, he will guide us and support us, but we have to listen and trust him. Like a conversation, prayer brings us closer to God, helps us understand him and his love for us. Our life with God is eternal and his plans go through our life on Earth to our life in heaven. The combined reading of Psalm 23 and Revelations 7 earlier shows us that God's care of us is earthly and heavenly. When we pray for help, He will listen with compassion. Perhaps what we ask for is our road, and we will receive our desires. If not, he will give us the strength and fortitude to continue the path we didn't want to take.

I have no idea what Ellie is going to do now, nor does she. The path she thought she was following has been closed. But there are other paths now. With prayer she will choose another way. God will give her confidence, he will put his arms around her and guide her to the route he has planned. Jeremiah says, 'Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.' And every time we recite the prayer Jesus taught us we say, 'your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'

Amen

Reader 1: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Reader 2: The one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

Reader 1: He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Reader 2: They will hunger no more, and thirst no more.

Reader 1: Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.

Reader 2: The sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat.

Reader 1: You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Reader 2: For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life.

Reader 1: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Reader 2: Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen!

Matthew 28:20 I Will Be with You Always Even Unto the End of the World.

Matthew 28:20 Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Joshua 1:9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

Psalms 23:2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.

Revelation 7:17 ...he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Jeremiah 29:11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Thessalonians 5: 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

Proverbs 3:5-6 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; 6 in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

Matthew 6:10 your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.