

Sermon for 22 May 2011

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Amen.

At the end of this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus says something which, if we were to really think about it, is rather hard to swallow:

Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it.

We've heard this a hundred times, and if we approach it uncritically (as we are so often wont to do) it's a very comforting thought.

If, however, we were to pause a moment and consider this promise for what it seems to suggest, I think we'd quickly become troubled, because the fact is, it doesn't seem to ring true with our experience. To put it more bluntly, it might seem to us that either Jesus is lying or he is powerless to keep his promise.

Most of us are taught from a young age how to pray. We are instructed to address God the Father and to pray "in Jesus' name". If it's all about mechanics—about using the correct words—then, indeed, Jesus' words in today's Gospel must be false. But the words "in Jesus' name" do not constitute a magic formula, the unthinking repetition of which ensures that we get whatever we want. We may pray "in Jesus' name" to win the lottery and (perhaps it's just my own lack of faith) but it rarely seems to happen. We may make less overtly selfish prayers, tack "in Jesus' name. Amen." to the end of it, and still not see the prayer answered. We can pray for world peace or an end to hunger or for a loved one's recovery from illness or for an enemy to have a change of heart, and too often be left disappointed.

We've all heard the rather easy explanation that "God answers prayers, but sometimes it's with a 'no'" but look back at what Jesus promises: *if*

you ask anything in my name, I will do it. He doesn't say he'll provide an answer one way or the other, but that he will answer our prayers by giving us what we ask.

So, how do we approach this genuine theological problem. We must, I contend, stand firm on the assertion that Jesus is not a liar, nor is God powerless to keep His promise. The answer, I think, comes from a more fulsome understanding of what it means to pray "in Jesus' name" in the first place.

We know that these words are not a magic formula. There is, of course, nothing wrong with structuring our prayers the way we do, but perhaps praying "in Jesus' name" is partly positive and partly normative. That is to say, that to a certain degree we do express a reality when we pray "in Jesus' name". We are, as baptized Christians, *the body of Christ*, and when we pray "in Jesus' name" we affirm that reality. But at the same time, we can never as individuals honestly affirm that our

will is perfectly conformed to our Lord's, that we are fully capable of standing in the place of him who died for us and rose again, and so when we pray "in Jesus' name" we are also referring to an ideal to which we strive but will never reach in this life.

That being the case, we may not be praying "in Jesus' name" in a very important sense just because we tack a few extra words onto the end of our prayers. We may not fully know the will of God, and the intentions with which we pray may not perfectly conform to God's intentions.

All of this can be discouraging, but it is not meant to suggest that all our prayers are in vain. What it does mean is that there is an extra task each of us has when we are praying. We don't just ask for stuff we want or favors we want God to bestow on others, but for our will's to be conformed to Christ's, that we may know how to pray

aright, to, as one collect in the prayerbook puts it "ask only what accords with thy will".

When we pray without considering this necessary element of prayer, we run the risk of taking the name of Jesus in vain. Far worse than letting some swear slip is the pride which makes us think that we can use the blessed name of Jesus for selfish gain, not considering how great a privilege and a responsibility it is that we are permitted to pray in Jesus' name to begin with.

In the final analysis, it all goes back to trust: trust that God's will is to save his people, to bring them to the Father's house in which there are many rooms. When we trust that God's will is for the good, it becomes more natural for us to conform our will to his and to accept what we experience as setbacks or unanswered prayers as mysterious means for God's plan to unfold. When we have faith that God will set all things to rights for his people, we can begin to pray more fervently

and to see how he graciously answers us. There will always be disappointments, there will always be prayers which seem unanswered, but, as in every relationship, a foundation of trust will help us to maintain our hope that even in our own darkness God's light can shine and will ultimately illuminate all our experiences, showing us how God was working his purposes out all along.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, unto whom our needs are known before we ask: Help us to ask only what accords with thy will; and those good things which we dare not, or in our blindness cannot ask, grant us for the sake of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*