

JOHN HOUGHTON**What happens when we pray¹**

The practice of prayer as presented in Scripture and as experienced by Christians through the centuries presupposes a belief that God knows about, cares about and can take action regarding the matters being prayed about. How does the 'faith story' of the events in question relate to the 'scientific story' of those events? I explore the analogy of a spiritual dimension to assist in understanding how God works in relation to our prayers and certain problems associated with such an analogy. I then briefly consider further related questions: does God know the future, are there limitations to prayer and can prayer be tested?

Keywords: prayer, George Muller, spiritual dimension, Flatland, models of God, God and time, healing, prayer test, providence, miracles, divine action.

Praying for rain

An important way in which we connect with God's activity in the world is through prayer. In this article I consider ways in which we can try to understand that connection, both from our side and from God's side.

What happens when we pray? Do we believe God listens to our requests? Do we believe God can do anything about them? Our attitude to prayer is bound to be influenced by what we believe about the way God acts in the world, which in turn is influenced by our scientific view. If we are Christian believers, the way we pray affects the way we live. In addressing, therefore, the subject of prayer, we are addressing a matter of rather basic practical importance.

I should explain first that I do not consider myself an expert on prayer. I am not a particularly pious person by nature and the discipline of prayer does not come easily to me. I sometimes envy those to whom prayer seems so natural and who without seeming difficulty spend an early morning hour each day in prayer. But I am a practical person and I want here to address real issues not just theoretical ones. So, despite my inadequacy, we need to squarely address this question of what we think God does when we pray.

Those who are not believers see prayer, particularly prayers that ask for something, as wishful thinking. Although prayers are not always answered in the way requested, the believer will insist that they have been answered;

Correspondence on this topic would be welcomed—editor.

¹ This article is based on one of the Templeton Lectures given in Oxford by John Houghton in November 1992. They are to be published by Lion Publishing in May 1995 under the title 'The search for God: can science help?'.

a valid answer so far as he is concerned can be 'No' or 'Not yet'. No wonder, to the sceptic, praying appears to be something of a con! Because of this problem, some believers do not feel comfortable with 'asking' prayers; they feel that prayer should be confined to praise, worship, adoration, repentance and the process of acquiescing or aligning ourselves with the will of God. But is that an adequate view?

Because I am a meteorologist, I am often asked what I think about praying about the weather—for instance, praying for rain. If I believe that forecasts of tomorrow's weather are possible because it is dependent on processes in the atmosphere which can be described scientifically, how can I also believe that prayer can have anything to do with it? My answer is that I believe that it is entirely appropriate to pray about the weather as it is about anything else that is of concern to us. But I also, as a scientist, believe that the movements of the atmosphere follow scientific laws and that, through further scientific work, weather forecasts can be improved.

It is helpful to speak of two stories, the 'scientific story' (the one that is appropriate to weather forecasting) and the 'faith story' (the one that relates to my prayers). These two stories are complementary to each other, the existence of the 'scientific story' in no way invalidates the 'faith story'. Our view of God should be big enough for us to believe that He can provide for consistency and reliability in both stories at the same time². Let us try and work out these ideas as they apply to our prayers.

Examples of prayer

Examples of prayer which abound in the Bible and in the history of the church are familiar to us and I will not elaborate on them, except for one relatively modern example which has been particularly well documented. That is the experiences of answers to prayer of George Muller³ who was born in Prussia in 1805 and came to live in England in 1830. Here he settled as the minister of a church in Bristol from where he carried on a variety of Christian enterprises which had influence world-wide. His most well-known work was for the orphans in and around Bristol, for whom, beginning in 1834 he set up a number of what became known after his death in 1898 as Muller's orphanages.

In setting up the orphan homes in 1834, Muller records that his reasons for so doing were not just to provide for the material and spiritual wellbeing of the orphans but also 'that God may be glorified in so furnishing means as to show that it is not a vain thing to trust in Him'⁴ He determined right from the start of the enterprise that he would not appeal directly or indirectly for funds or for other help but would rely solely on asking God. At no stage did he or others make known outside a small

² I expand the idea of two descriptions and of 'double consistency' in my book 'Does God play dice?' IVP 1988, chapter 10.

³ For a biography see, A. T. Pierson 'George Muller of Bristol' Pickering and Inglis 1972.

⁴ Loc cit p. 121.

trusted circle of coworkers the state of the finances or the detailed needs of the orphanages. A summary annual report was all that the donors or the public were allowed to see. During the first sixty-four years of the orphan homes until Muller's death in 1898, over 10,000 orphans had been cared for and very close to £1 million (about £100 million in today's money) had been sent for their support⁵—all in answer to prayer.

A. T. Pierson in his biography mentions a number of features that characterize Muller's record of these years in his Journal. Firstly there were experiences of frequent and prolonged financial straits. Often they were reduced to a single pound, penny or nothing. Faith was kept in lively exercise, but was always rewarded very often at the last minute. 'Not once or five times or five hundred times but thousands of times in these 60 years' writes Muller 'have we had in hand not enough for one more meal either in food or in funds, but not once has God failed us, not once have we or the orphans gone hungry or lacked any good thing'⁶.

Secondly there is constant emphasis on 'reliance on the unseen God and nothing else'. He regularly exercised extreme caution lest there should be any careless betrayal of pressing need to the outside public. Several examples illustrate this well. In 1847 at a time of great need, in case it could be construed as an appeal for aid, the regular annual statement was withheld⁷. In reply to a supporter who urged Muller to send him details of what was needed for work, again at a time of great need, Muller replied he could not tell him 'as the primary object of the work in my hands is to lead those who are weak in faith to see that there is reality in dealing with God alone'⁸. Further we are told that friends who asked for information about whether their gifts had come at a particularly opportune time were not given the information but merely referred to the statements contained in the next annual report⁹.

Thirdly there is the constant experience of the working of God upon the minds, hearts and consciences of contributors to the work so that needed funds were forthcoming¹⁰. Referring to Muller's Journal, Pierson writes 'It will amply repay one to . . . trace the hand of God touching the springs of human action all over the world in ways of His own, and at times of great need, and adjusting the amount and the exact day and hour of supply, to the existing want. Literally from the earth's ends, men, women and children who have never seen Mr Muller and could have known nothing of the pressure of the time, have been led at the exact crisis of affairs to send aid in the very sum or form most needful. In countless cases, while he was on his knees asking, the answer has come in such close correspondence with the request as to shut out *chance* as an explanation,

5 Loc cit p. 298.

6 Loc cit p. 79.

7 Loc cit p. 80.

8 Loc cit p. 164.

9 Loc cit p. 338.

10 Loc cit p. 79.

and compel belief in a prayer-hearing God'. Not surprisingly Pierson also comments on Muller's growing boldness of faith in asking and trusting for great things.

I have chosen to describe the experience of George Muller because of the scale of his enterprise and also because of the careful records which he kept of his experiences of God's answers to prayers. I do not doubt the accuracy of his accounts; he was clearly meticulous in the way he kept records. Many Christian believers and Christian workers over the centuries have similar stories to tell although perhaps not involving work on such a scale or being so carefully recorded. On a very much smaller scale of faith, although I believe of similar kind, I can recall several occasions when some of us involved in setting up a Christian enterprise in Oxford, the North Oxford Overseas Centre, in the 1960s and 1970s had similar experiences. Necessary resources were provided through what seemed to us remarkable answers to prayer.

Five summarising points

What does the Bible teaching and our experience regarding prayer add up to, particularly in the context of our considerations here? Prayer is, of course, such a personal and complex experience, it is bound to be difficult if not impossible to delineate its boundaries. Let me, however, attempt to make some summarising points.

(1) Firstly, if I am a Christian believer, prayer is an expression of my relationship with God. It is the means whereby I, as one of God's children, communicate with God as my Father; how He speaks to me and I to Him. Because of this close relationship prayer is never far away. It is an attitude of mind through which I continually attempt to discover the will of God and act upon it.

(2) Secondly, prayer involves a lot of asking—asking for things personal to me, for 'daily bread', for forgiveness, for healing in all senses of that word, for strength to overcome temptation and to face problems. The asking will also involve things concerned with God's work in the world, for His kingdom to come and His will to be done—for instance, for other people and their needs and relationships, for national and world problems.

(3) Thirdly, prayer must not be confused with magic. It is not just 'rubbing the lamp' and making wishes. The answers to my requests may not be what I expect or would like. God answers similar prayers by different people in very different ways. We need to realise that the centre and purpose of prayer are not to get what I want, but to provide a means of aligning my will with God's will and to couple my poor efforts at serving God with His substantial energy and strength.

(4) Fourthly, basic to the exercise of prayer is the exercise of faith. There is no point in praying if we do not believe (however shaky that belief may sometimes be) that God has detailed knowledge of, that He cares about

and that He can take action relating to, the matters I am praying about. Faith also presupposes an attitude that God knows best.

(5) Fifthly, answers to prayer are most commonly mediated through the actions of other people.

A scientific analogy

So far I have tried rather briefly to describe the Christian experience of prayer in order to set the scene for my task in this article which is to relate this part of the 'faith story' to the 'scientific story'. Before addressing this task further, however, I want to introduce a scientific analogy or model which I have found very useful in helping us to think about the way God works in the world. In this analogy we think of God being present and operating in another dimension which we could call the spiritual dimension. It is an analogy I have enlarged upon in my book 'Does God play dice?'¹¹.

Before coming to this particular model of God's work in the world, I want to say a little about the place of dimensions in our understanding of physics. We are familiar enough with the three dimensions of space—north-south, east-west, up-down, for instance. We are also aware of the dimension of time. For instance, in our description of the universe, because of the finite (though large) speed of light, we observe the distant galaxies as they were thousands of millions of years ago. The further away they are, the further backward in time we observe them. Space and time are thus linked in our view of the universe. The great contribution to Physics made by Albert Einstein in 1905 in his theory of relativity was to demonstrate how space and time are linked together in the basic physical description of things. A particular formalisation of this link was made by the Polish physicist Hermann Minkowski in 1908 with his introduction of four dimensional geometry—three dimensions of space and time. Physicists now talk of space-time which integrates the time dimension with those of space in such a way that there is no preferred space direction and no preferred time. This space-time model has been enormously successful and has revolutionised almost every part of physics; modern physics would be inconceivable without it.

Models, like this one of space-time in which we are invited to imagine time as an extra dimension, are not just aids to understanding physics or other branches of science. Models are also part of the stock-in-trade of the theologian. Religious language constantly employs analogies or models. For instance, Jesus in his parables introduced 'models' of the kingdom of heaven. It is like a man sowing seed, like a grain of mustard seed, like treasure hidden in a field, like a merchant in search of fine pearls, like a net gathering fish, and so on. Parables, metaphors and analogies abound in the New Testament and in the parlance of the modern preacher. So I

11 John Houghton 'Does God play dice?' Intervarsity Press 1988 chapters 4 and 5.

believe it is in the best possible tradition for us to pursue scientific models to help us in expressing religious ideas.

Before addressing the religious analogy we need to understand what we mean by a dimension. Thinking in more than three dimensions is not possible for most of us, so to aid us in this let us begin by trying to imagine life in a two-dimensional world. In a fascinating book called *Flatland* written in the 1880s, a mathematician Edwin Abbot imagines such a world having only two dimensions. The inhabitants of the world are confined to move on a plane, and indeed have no knowledge whatever of anything outside that plane. They experience north-south and east-west but cannot begin to conceive of up-down. For them the third dimension does not exist.

The inhabitants of Abbott's two-dimensional world are beings whose outlines are mathematical figures: straight lines, triangles, squares, pentagons and so on to circles. A being's class in Flatland society is determined by the number of sides the being possesses. The lowest class are the needle-shaped straight lines; they are the women of Flatland—remember the book was written a hundred years ago! The highest class are the circles with an infinite number of sides; they are the priests of Flatland. Abbot describes in detail how the different classes recognise each other and keep out of each other's way; the book was, in fact, written as a satire on class.

Towards the end of the book, a sphere from the three-dimensional world of Spaceland appears, and attempts to explain to one of the two-dimensional beings of Flatland what it means to possess another dimension and be a sphere. The sphere passes through the plane of Flatland several times, appearing first as a point followed by a small circle, a larger circle, then a smaller circle again before it disappears—a process completely inexplicable and magical to the Flatland inhabitants. The sphere then demonstrates that it can see into the interior of Flatland houses, rooms and cupboards and even into the innards of the Flatland beings themselves, without passing through the doors and windows—again utterly mysterious to the Flatlanders. Finally, the incredulous Flatlander is taken out of Flatland by the sphere from Spaceland and given a vision of the three-dimensional world. However, on returning to Flatland he is completely unable, either through his attempts at description or through mathematical analogy, to persuade any of his fellow Flatlanders to give any credence to his new-fangled ideas. To them everything in Flatland is complete; there is nothing they perceive in their everyday life which cannot be described in two-dimensional terms. To imagine any other than a two-dimensional framework for their existence seems impossible and unnecessary.

In a similar way we often have great difficulty imagining anything outside our material four dimensional world of space and time. But let us, by analogy, imagine God to be in another dimension—we call it the spiritual dimension—additional to the four-dimensional world we can see, touch and handle. Going back to Flatland we recall that the sphere outside Flatland is aware of all parts of Flatland; all events in Flatland are

transparent to him. Further he can enter and be present in Flatland anywhere he pleases. So we can imagine God being outside the material universe yet being all-seeing and all-knowing regarding events within it, and having the ability to be present anywhere within it. In theological terms, God is both transcendent, that is apart from the universe, and immanent, that is present within the universe.

The analogy is helpful to us in thinking about the question 'Where is God?'. But notice that I have suggested that the spiritual dimension is additional not just to the three dimensions of space but to the four dimensions of space-time. I have done this deliberately because the analogy is also helpful to us in thinking about God's relation to time. Time, as we have seen, is an integral component of the material universe. In the same way that we have thought of God as both transcendent and immanent with respect to space, I believe that we can also think of Him as transcendent and immanent with respect to time. In other words, He is both in some sense outside time and also in a real sense present within the time of our universe.

To add a further dimension in the way we have suggested is to add something very substantial. Just as three-dimensional objects are solid compared to two-dimensional ones, the model suggests that heaven, where God is, with its extra spiritual dimension, is a place of greater solidity than the material world we know. C. S. Lewis pursues a similar analogy in his book *The Great Divorce*¹², in which he pictures inhabitants from hell arriving at the outskirts of heaven. Compared with the solid people from heaven who go to meet them, they appear as shadowy phantoms, transparent to the brightness of the place and pained by the roughness and sharpness of the solid objects around them, even of the blades of grass on which they walk.

A further point can be made about the way in which dimensions interact with each other. A world of two dimensions is completely contained within a world of three dimensions. In addition, many of the constraints of the two-dimensional world are removed by the addition of a third dimension. Our model therefore suggests that the structure of heaven with its extra spiritual dimension contains the four dimensions which make up the material world. Further, many of the limitations and constraints which are imposed on events and movements within our space-time are removed by the addition of the spiritual dimension.

Limitations of the analogy

Although for the purpose of our analogy and because of the limitations of our imagination we may imagine the spiritual dimension as an extra dimension of space, we need to realise that it is only an analogy or model which helps us to think about reality. It is bound to be extremely limited in its description of that reality. As with all analogies it must not be overplayed; especially must this be the case when we are attempting to

¹² Collins, Fontana Books 1946.

describe God. Hilary of Poitiers, a fourth century saint puts the point well 'There can be no comparison between God and earthly things', he writes, 'but the weakness of our understanding forces us to seek certain images from a lower level to serve as pointers to things of a higher level. Hence every comparison is to be regarded as helpful to men rather than suited to God since it suggests rather than exhausts the meaning we seek'¹³.

Although, therefore, having found a helpful model relating to God we may feel that we can understand him a little better, in no way have we confined him by that model. Rather we should feel that our thought and imagination are being stretched to think of him in new ways which enhance his greatness and the mystery which surrounds him.

Applying the analogy

Let me try to explain how I believe the analogy or model of the spiritual dimension can help us understand what happens when we pray. We shall then consider some of the many problems and questions which are inevitably raised by the idea and practice of prayer.

Our prayers go to God in the spiritual dimension. He is able to take them outside the dimensions of our world and to use them to influence events in our world at different points of space and time. So far as we are concerned these events constitute the 'faith story' associated with our prayers. In responding to our prayers, therefore, God is not constrained by space and time in the same way that we would be in responding to action by others. God has freedom to act at many different times and places—in the past as well as in the present and in the future. 'Before they call I will answer'¹⁴, God says to his people.

Let us take an example from the story of George Muller. On the 9 March 1842 the situation at the orphanage was completely desperate, resources being completely exhausted¹⁵. Prayers were made for provision. The morning post came with no relief. However, at the latest possible moment, a letter at first wrongly delivered arrived with a gift for £10 from someone living in Dublin. The answer to those morning prayers began some days before in Dublin, it involved the donor, the postal service and various modes of transport culminating in the arrival of the cheque at the crucial moment. Thousands of similar instances occur in the Muller story.

As a particular result of this view, consider a problem sometimes experienced by a person who wants to pray, say, at the end of the day about an event which he knows has occurred during that day. The outcome of that event, although unknown to the praying person, will already have been determined. Does prayer after the event make any sense? Realizing that prayer is communication with God who is not constrained as we are

13 Quoted by T. F. Torrance in 'Space, Time and Incarnation' OUP 1969.

14 Isaiah 65 v. 24.

15 A. T. Pierson loc cit p. 179.

by time, we can say that such prayer is entirely appropriate. In saying that, we need also to say, of course, that were the outcome of the event already known to the praying person, it would in no way be sensible to pray for a change to that outcome; prayer cannot alter events which in our time frame have already occurred.

We have been considering the 'faith story'. How about the 'scientific story'? We argued earlier that God is big enough and clever enough to maintain at the same time the consistency of both 'faith' and 'scientific stories'. But we are bound to ask the question as to how God is able to do this. In particular how can God allow for the freedom of action which we possess as human beings and which we believe is part of God's intention for us? This question I have addressed elsewhere¹⁶; let me here make three brief points. First, we have little understanding as yet regarding how our own consciousness and freedom of action are related to the scientific description of the processes occurring in our brains; this is currently a very active area of research. Until we have clearer insight regarding this question we cannot expect to gain much understanding of the somewhat parallel question of how God's action might be related to the 'scientific story'¹⁷. Secondly, there is the new scientific perspective which has arisen from the realisation that most processes in the world are complex, non-linear and most probably chaotic. As a result, we find that our ability to predict the future is much more limited than had been thought, not only in practice but in principle. John Polkinghorne has frequently written about the large potential which he sees in the flexibility and openness of chaotic dynamics. It 'helps us to see,' he writes 'where there might be room for divine manoeuvre, within the limits of divine faithfulness'¹⁸. While not wishing to underestimate the value of this new perspective, however, I would wish to emphasise that it cannot provide anything like the whole story. To think of God operating in the margins or being limited to restricted manoeuvres is not an adequate picture of his activity. Thirdly, I believe we need to view God's activity from a much more complete standpoint; in particular how God's activity is related to time is a key consideration which I address in the next section.

Before coming to that, however, there is a further question we are bound to raise regarding the 'scientific story': is scientific consistency always maintained or, on occasions, is the natural order of things disturbed? In a particular case of an 'answer to prayer' associated with significant events in the 'faith story', would a scientist with access to all the facts recognize anything unusual or inconsistent in the 'scientific story'? The person who prayed may describe the events as 'miraculous', but would 'miraculous' be a correct description of the 'scientific story'? We, of course, in practice

16 John Houghton 'The search for God; can science help?' Lion Publishing, 1995, chapters 6 and 7.

17 This parallelism is discussed by Arthur Peacocke (1991) 'God's action in the real world' *Zygon* vol. 26, pp. 455-476.

18 J. Polkinghorne, 'Science and Providence' SPCK 1989, p. 31.

never know enough to rule out that possibility. But, in most cases the significance in the 'faith story' arises from the actions or choices of particular people or from unusualness in the timing or in the sequences of juxtaposition of events, not so much in the events themselves. Significance or unusualness in the 'faith story' does not necessarily imply unusualness in the 'scientific story'. Not that I am saying that miracles in the scientific sense cannot occur. But I am arguing that, as praying people, we should normally be looking for the unusual and the 'miraculous' in the structure of the 'faith story' rather than in the 'scientific story'.

Very frequently, the agents in the 'faith story' are people. Stories like those of George Muller are built around the cooperative actions of many people. In order to effect the answer to prayer, God influences the minds and the actions of people. Often these are people who themselves pray and, to a greater or lesser degree, can be said to be in tune with God and His purposes. 'Faith stories' are built up through the thoughts and activities of many people cooperating with God in His work in the world.

In His choice of agents, however, it would seem that God is not limited to those who are consciously in tune with Him. The provision of resources, for instance, for the Muller orphanages involved not just the donors but all those who took part in the transmission of the gifts. Examples abound in the Bible of God making use of those who are not conscious of a role as one of God's agents. The prophet Isaiah sees Cyrus, king of Persia, as one raised up by God to bring to an end the captivity of Israel¹⁹. In the New Testament, Jesus described those responsible for his arrest and crucifixion as unwittingly carrying out God's purposes²⁰; a theme taken up later by the leaders of the early church²¹. The crucifixion of Jesus is presented as the supreme example of God's ability to transform great evil and seeming tragedy into even greater good. This continual process of transformation is central to much of God's plan for human beings.

Our attempt to apply the analogy of the spiritual dimension raises a number of particular problems which we now consider.

Does God know the future?

We have seen that in response to our particular requests in prayer God sets up chains of events which may begin years before the particular request is made. In illustrating this with the model of the spiritual dimension (in what some might feel a somewhat cavalier manner), we have assumed that, for God, all constraints of time have been removed and that past, present and future are all transparent to him and available for his action. Although we may find the model helpful, such a picture of God's activity raises a number of basic problems of conception. We mention two of these.

¹⁹ Isaiah chapter 45.

²⁰ Luke 22 v. 22; John 19 v. 11.

²¹ Acts 2 v. 23

Firstly, time is so much part of the framework in which we operate it is virtually impossible to imagine any operation which excludes it. Although scientific thinking since Einstein has recognised that time is relative in the sense that it can be different for different observers, none of that has removed the vital difference between 'before' and 'after' in any given framework or the reality of cause preceding effect. Secondly, if God knows the future, as we have tended to assume in the application of the model, is not the future therefore determined? What has happened to human freewill? Is that an illusion?

Theologians and philosophers have for centuries struggled with these questions and with the problem of how God is related to time²². In their discussions they have differentiated between God outside time and God within time. Our model of the spiritual dimension illustrates God in both of these.

Let us first look at God's immanence with respect to time—that is God within time. Christians believe that supremely God entered time in the person of Jesus. As a man Jesus, before his resurrection, was clearly subject to the limitations of space and time. Although he possessed remarkable insights and there are hints that on occasions, he had a clear view of future events, his own death²³, for instance, and Peter's denial²⁴, there are other occasions when he either expressed ignorance of the future²⁵ or prayed for it to be changed. 'May this cup be taken from me' he asked in Gethsemane under the stress of impending crucifixion²⁶.

But it is only in God incarnate in Jesus that we meet God within time. Although the Hebrew writers of the Old Testament thought of God as eternal and timeless²⁷ (the name I AM²⁸ used of God suggests timelessness) they also thought of him as closely involved with their day to day existence. He could show favour or be displeased²⁹, he could change his mind in response to human behaviour or request³⁰—all characteristics of someone present and active within time. It has been pointed out, for instance by Paul Fiddes³¹, that in order for God to share in human experiences and to experience suffering in the way that both the Old Testament and the New Testament affirm³², it is necessary for God to experience time in a sequential way (ie 'before' and 'after') and the

22 See for instance, N. Pike 'God and timelessness' Routledge and Kegan Paul 1970 and W. S. Anglin 'Free will and the Christian faith' Clarendon Press, Oxford 1990.

23 Matt 20 vv. 18–19, Mark 8 v. 31, Mark 10 v. 33.

24 Mark 14 vv. 30 & 72.

25 With respect to his own future return—Matt 24 v. 36.

26 Matt 26 v. 39.

27 E.g. Psalm 90 vv. 1–4.

28 Exodus 3 v. 4.

29 E.g. 1 Samuel 15 v. 10, Genesis 6 vv. 6 & 8.

30 E.g. Jeremiah 18 v. 8, Jonah 3 v. 10, Hosea 11 v. 8.

31 'The creative suffering of God' Clarendon Press, Oxford 1988 pp. 91–100.

32 E.g. Genesis 6 v. 6, Hosea 11 v. 8, Hebrews 2 v. 18, 4 v. 15.

possibility of change which that implies. The experience of God within time, alongside us human beings is one that is central to our Christian faith.

But it does not do justice to the biblical view of God or to the tradition and experience of Christians to speak only of God within time. As our model suggests God is also outside time just as he is also outside our framework of space. Being outside time is more difficult to imagine than being outside space. What do we mean by it? It is, I think, being able to see something *all at once*. We can perhaps get some idea of it by thinking about the way we view a beautiful landscape or a fine picture. We may look for some time at some of the parts that make up the landscape or the picture, but to really appreciate it we need to view it as a *whole*. The passage of time is not involved in such viewing except in so far as we know we cannot hold on to it; reluctantly we have to move on.

Perhaps the nearest we can come to experiencing timelessness is in those comparatively rare flashes of inspiration when, for instance, the solution to a complex problem we have been thinking about for weeks comes to us in a moment. Although not apparently going through the sequence of argument, we feel convinced in that moment that we have hit on the solution. Roger Penrose³³ cites some examples of such moments of inspiration experienced by mathematicians, pointing out that it is often the apparent aesthetic character of the solution, its beauty or its elegance which provides the inspirational appeal of the solution-in-a-flash. Artists experience similar inspiration. A striking example is provided by Mozart's apparent ability to experience and appreciate, at the moment of composition, a lengthy piece of small music all at once. 'My mind seizes it as a glance of my eye a beautiful picture or a handsome youth', he writes. 'It does not come to me successively, with various parts worked out in detail, as they will later on, but in its entirety that my imagination lets me hear it.'³⁴

To picture God outside time is not to imagine him as static or uninvolved but as seeing creation—its complete span of space and time—as a whole. The purpose-making, the planning, the unfolding of the drama with all its interconnected parts, combine to make up that whole.

We may find it just about possible to conceive God within time and even of God outside time, but thinking of God as both together really is difficult. Immanence and transcendence together pose a larger problem for us than either on their own. Not surprisingly, however, that is not the only problem we have in the conception of God! God comes to us in many ways and forms. Another problem of conception, just as old as the one regarding time, is that of how can God be ruling the universe in heaven, yet also present in the person of Jesus and also working in the world through his Spirit—the problem of God's immanence and transcendence with respect to space (not a dissimilar problem to the one concerning God's relation to

33 R. Penrose 'The Emperor's New Mind' OUP 1989 pp. 541–547.

34 Quoted by R. Penrose loc cit p. 547.

time we have just been considering). To assist in overcoming this problem, the doctrine of the Trinity was developed—God manifest in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In our scientific language, the Trinity is a model of God which helps us in our thinking about him. In a similar way we have a dipolar model of God with respect to time. John Polkinghorne³⁵ talks of God ‘being’ (God outside time) and God ‘becoming’ (God within time) as the two poles of the model. Not that it is a new concept. It is reflected in words spoken well before the Christian era by the prophet Isaiah who presented God as ‘inhabiting eternity’ and dwelling ‘in the high and holy place’ but also dwelling ‘with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit’³⁶.

We need now to return to the question with which we began this section, ‘Does God know the future?’ We have suggested that God being outside means that he can see time as a whole. That implies that God being outside time means that he can see time as a whole. That implies that God can see the future as a whole. It does not, however, imply that for us or for God-within-time the future is determined³⁷. The nature of the freedom which we as God’s creatures have been given and the whole idea of God-within-time mean that God has limited himself³⁸ in order to allow us that freedom and in order to experience with us the pain, the suffering—and the pleasures—of our human existence.

Are there limitations to prayer?

In the light of our discussions so far let us now attempt to address the issue as to whether there are limitations to prayer, limitations either in what we ask or in our expectations regarding what we can receive. Because we believe in God as great and all-powerful we perhaps feel that our faith should be sufficiently large to enable us to believe that there are no limitations. Can we ask for things clearly outside the normal scientific order? After all, Jesus talked of mountains being moved³⁹ and reminded his disciples that ‘with God all things are possible’⁴⁰. When it comes to asking, just as a child may ask a parent, the nature of prayer is such that there need be no limitations. But what about our expectations in reply to our requests? Our perspective here is determined by our knowledge of the life of Jesus and by our knowledge of the experience of others as well as of our own experience.

It is notable that Jesus, despite the latent power which was available to him, frequently resisted the temptation to interfere capriciously with the natural order for demonstration purposes⁴¹. Apart from miracles of healing,

35 J. Polkinghorne, ‘Science and Providence’ SPCK 1989 chapter 7.

36 Isaiah 57 v. 15 (Authorised Version).

37 W. S. Anglin *op cit* p. 80–81 argues that God’s foreknowledge does not imply that future events are determined.

38 See P. Fiddes *op cit*.

39 Matthew 17 v. 20.

40 Mark 10 v. 27.

41 Matthew 4 vv. 1–11.

miracles in the sense of events outside the normal scientific order are surprisingly rare in the life of Jesus. The turning of water into wine⁴² and the miraculous feeding of crowds on hillsides in Galilee⁴³ are the main examples. Although in these events Jesus was responding to a clear need, they also have something of a unique character about them in that they were seen as signs⁴⁴ providing authentication of the person and the message of Jesus. Well attested records of such events are also rare in the history of the church through the centuries and in our experience today.

Although, therefore, as part of the dialogue we have with God in prayer we may ask for similar events today, our normal expectation will not be that God will act in this way. As we emphasized earlier, the Christian will be looking for evidence of God's activity in the normal circumstances of life, not so much in the 'scientific story' but in the 'faith story'. The Biblical writers in both Old and New Testaments emphasize God's provision for us through his normal activity⁴⁵.

In some events, seeing consistency in the 'faith story' as well as in the 'scientific story' will be relatively easy. This is not, however, always the case. The Christian believer is often faced with circumstances which seem difficult to understand. Sometimes, taken from almost any point of view, they appear wrong. Prayers do not always seem to be answered. It is on these occasions that the sceptical scientist, to whom this 'faith talk' appears in any case as wishful thinking, if not nonsense, is at his most critical. Belief in an overall consistent plan hardly seems supported by the facts. Several points need to be made about this very real problem.

First, it is important to remember that, while in the scientific description we are dealing with impersonal things, in the 'faith' description we are confronted by a personal God and concerned about a relationship in which trust is a vital element. A child will trust a parent even though he does not understand; it is the sort of trust which is the basis of faith. Secondly, we are bound to realize that our knowledge of God's overall plan is inevitably extremely limited. A junior infantry officer engaged in a battle may be puzzled by his particular instructions; he will possess very limited knowledge as to where his part of the action fits into the overall strategy of the battle. In a similar way, if I am a participant in God's plan, there cannot fail to be an element of mystery about where my small world and limited capability fit into it. God being so great, his plan will be grand and comprehensive far beyond the limits of my imagination. A third point is that it seems that the larger the faith and the deeper the commitment, the greater is the degree of understanding.

42 John 2 vv. 1-11.

43 John 6 vv. 1-13.

44 For instance the signs in John's gospel.

45 E.g. Psalm 104, Matthew 6 vv. 11, 26, 30.

Prayers for healing

We turn now to consider prayers for healing. Many of the prayers of people who met Jesus which are recorded for us in the gospels are asking for healing. It featured strongly in the ministry of Jesus and has always been a concern of the Christian church. Christian missions have been pioneers in bringing medical aid to all parts of the world. Many of our prayers today for ourselves or for others are also concerned with health and healing. We need therefore to ask how we can expect God to act in response to such prayers today.

The first point to make here is just to state that most healing today occurs through medicine. I remember a colleague of mine telling me that his son had just been ill from pneumonia. Years ago, he said, we would have been praying over the boy for weeks; now, thanks to antibiotics he is completely better after two or three days. Penicillin, he said, is worth an awful lot of prayer!

A remark like that, however, expresses a completely false dichotomy. It suggests that prayer and medicine have nothing to do with each other. The same dichotomy is sometimes presented by those within the church (where in recent years there has been a renewed interest in 'miraculous' healing as part of the church's ministry) who contrast 'miraculous' or 'faith' healing, which is seen as the work of God, with the application of medicine which is seen as a human activity. Such a view is not only misleading, it is at variance with a belief in God as creator and sustainer of the natural order. Medical means, being derived from God's creation, are very much the works of God. Doctors therefore often see their role as one in which they are cooperating with God. Even more is this the case as they increasingly realize the importance of treating the whole person. They cannot be concerned only with the body and its biochemistry. Complete healing involves the whole person—body, mind and relationships with others, including I would argue relationship with God. Such complete healing is often evident in the healing ministry of Jesus⁴⁶. The Christian community should therefore be working together with doctors to provide a more complete healing ministry and our prayers for healing should address all the resources God has provided for the purposes of healing. Some of the most striking modern 'miracles' are those in which both bodily and spiritual healing have occurred together.

The Prayer Test

An important question, which a scientist when confronted with prayer is immediately likely to raise, is whether answers to prayer can be tested. If so, can we thereby demonstrate the reality of God's work in the world? Can an experiment similar to an experiment in science be carried out to see if prayer works? Sir Francis Galton, a scientist who was particularly

⁴⁶ See, for instance, Mark 2:1–12; John 5:1–15; John 9.

interested in human intelligence and who lived towards the end of the last century, attempted such a test by looking at the mortality statistics for royal personages and clergy. Since, he considered, these were the people most prayed for, they might be expected to live longer than others. He found no statistical effect and concluded that prayer was an ineffective superstition. There are two main problems with such testing of the efficacy of prayer.

Firstly, it is not possible to set up simple tests of the response to prayer requests. Answers to prayer do not come in the form of a simple mechanical-type response. As we have seen they may not be what we either want or expect. If they were simple and automatic, we would be dealing not with prayer but with something more like magic—a power to exercise control over the course of nature. The reason is that prayer is not a mechanical device, it is the activity of a relationship.

We can compare our difficulty in testing prayer with the problem of applying scientific tests to our normal human relationships. As C. S. Lewis points out⁴⁷, the response to requests in the context of our day to day dealings with each other is often also complex. Even if we get what we ask for it is not necessarily easy to prove a causal connection between the asking and the getting. Relationships cannot be tested by asking questions which have simple yes/no answers.

Secondly, the type of evidence which might be produced regarding answers to prayer is unlikely to be convincing to those who want to remain sceptical. Look at the sort of examples of answers to prayer which I described earlier involving what appear to be remarkable coincidences in the way resources were provided for a Christian enterprise. I would want to argue that, in the case of Muller's enterprises, the sheer weight of evidence over the years adds up to something substantial. However, although the individual instances are striking and there are many to put together adding further strength to the case, the sceptic can always argue that coincidence and unusual healings do occur on occasions when prayer is not involved. Further he can always query the quality and veracity of the evidence; for instance, just how rigorous was Muller in practice in keeping financial information within the house? Unless therefore the sceptic is prepared to look on a broader base and assess the whole consistency of the 'faith story' (and that presupposes some sort of relationship or a predisposition to a relationship with God exists) he may well not be convinced.

The problem of proof is illustrated well by events in the life and ministry of Jesus, where we find two quite different types of situation. Some of the miracles are to be seen as signs⁴⁸ authenticating who he was. In other cases, especially in some of the healings, Jesus gave strict

47 C. S. Lewis 'The efficacy of prayer' in Fern-seed and elephants Collins Fount Paperbacks 1977.

48 For instance the signs in John's gospel.

instructions that there should be no publicity⁴⁹. When some of the leaders of the day asked him for a sign or a miracle, Jesus did not oblige⁵⁰. He knew that they were not really serious and commented that if they failed to believe Moses and the prophets, they would not believe even if confronted by someone risen from the dead⁵¹. In contrast, however, people in need who came believing he could help them found their need met⁵².

Although, therefore, simple scientific tests are bound to be somewhat flawed from the start, prayer can be tested in the much more complex way that the partners in a relationship test the genuineness of that relationship. A particular prayer request may involve an individual Christian or it may involve the Christian community. The testing of answers to that request will usually be of a nature that is personal to the individual or the community. Even to make the prayer presupposes some sort of relationship, so the answers to it may be difficult to explain to others outside that relationship. It is, however, the positive results from such tests which enable the relationship to grow.

In the words of the Lord's prayer, we are encouraged to pray for God's kingdom to come and for God's will to be done⁵³. In other words in the exercise of prayer we are cooperating with God—and God invites us to so cooperate—in his work in the world of overcoming evil in all its forms. John Polkinghorne⁵⁴ employs the example of resonance (oscillations in step with each other) to illustrate prayer at its most powerful—when God's will and our will are tuned together in mutual resonance. A challenge to us therefore is to be more willing to cooperate and to be sensitive to the alignment of our wills with God's will so that our prayers can be more effective.

Summary

In conclusion, let me try to summarise some of the points I have made in the latter part of the article.

(i) I have stressed God's transcendence and immanence with respect to both space and time; he is both outside and within space and time. In response to our prayers God is able to act without being constrained by space and time. I have employed various analogies, in particular the analogy of the spiritual dimension to help us in thinking about God's activity.

(ii) God often works through people as his agents.

(iii) We should look for unusualness in the 'faith story' rather than in the 'scientific story'.

49 E.g. Mark 5 v. 43.

50 Matthew 16 v. 3, Luke 23 v. 8.

51 Luke 16 v. 31.

52 Luke 4 v. 38, 5 v. 13, 7 vv. 1–6, 18 v. 42.

53 Matthew 6 v. 10.

54 J. Polkinghorne, 'Science and Providence' loc cit chapter 6.

analogy of the spiritual dimension to help us in thinking about God's activity.

(ii) God often works through people as his agents.

(iii) We should look for unusualness in the 'faith story' rather than in the 'scientific story'.

(iv) God has limited Himself in order to allow us freedom and to be involved with us in all parts of our lives, including our pain and suffering.

(v) Prayers for healing should address all resources available for healing, including medical resources.

(vi) The possibility of 'scientific' proof of the results of prayer is bound to be limited because prayer is a relationship; the tests we apply must be appropriate to a relationship.

(vii) In prayer we are cooperating with God in his work in the world. The transformation into good of events and of human actions is a central component of this.

Prayer, therefore is a tremendous privilege and an exciting challenge. I have no doubt at all that we completely underestimate its value and effect. As the poet Tennyson wrote 'More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of'⁵⁵. Talking about prayer and trying to understand it, however, does not move us very far forward. What really matters is doing it.

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55 Alfred Lord Tennyson 'The passing of Arthur'.