

Ask and you will receive

Genesis 18: 20–32

Colossians 2: 6–15

Luke 11: 1–13

I suspect most of you will share my enthusiasm for the Spice Girls. And so you will be familiar with the lyrics of their 1996 debut song, Wannabe. This is what they sang:

So tell me what you want, what you really, really want

It is possible they did not realise that they were quoting from Jesus of Nazareth, who, 2000 years earlier, had addressed a very similar question to a blind man in Jericho:

what do you want me to do for you? Luke 18:41

On another occasion, at the pool of Bethsaida in Jerusalem, Jesus asked a similar but rather more specific question”

Do you want to be well again ? John 5:6

Now these questions matter in the context of today's gospel because Jesus makes some pretty extraordinary, extravagant claims:

- ask and it will be given to you;
- search and you will find;
- knock and the door will be opened.

This is quite a problematic offer! If we interpret Jesus's words absolutely literally and out of context, and then what he appears to be saying is that if I want a mysterious benefactor to send me £1 million and then it will happen. Or if I want Nuneaton Borough to win the FA Cup that too will happen. All I have to ask in the right way, to use the right formula. I think there are Christian preachers who seem to suggest that – not, by and large in the Church of England! I am not going to suggest that.

Strangely enough, the clue to what Jesus really means really does lie in the Spice Girls' words: 'tell me what you want, what you really really want'. I believe that what Jesus is offering to do is to fulfil our deepest needs, not our shallow, immediate, superficial desires. When he offers to give us what we ask for there is a real challenge: to know what our deepest, most profound desires are.

And we won't know what our most profound desires are until we actually become the kind of people Jesus wants us to be. Until our lives are orientated towards him, focused on him. Perhaps it is John who hits the nail on the head when he records these words of Jesus:

whatever you ask for in my name I will do. John 14:13

Perhaps it is not surprising that shortly after making this promise Jesus prays that his followers may be one and 'that they may be in us'. This idea of union with God runs strongly through John's Gospel. It is John who makes so much of the image of the vine. Jesus likens himself to a vine and us to the branches. The sap that runs through the trunk of the vine is the same sap that runs through the branches. The branches are completely one with the rest of the vine and can have no existence without it.

Paul is making the same point in the letter we heard a few minutes ago to the Colossians. He uses procession of images:

- we are rooted and built up in Christ;
- we are buried with him in baptism;
- we are raised with him to faith
- we have come to fullness in him.

In his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor1:26) and the Philippians (2:6) he uses yet another image, that we have the mind of Christ. And if we have the mind of Christ it becomes much clearer how it is that we will ask God for what he already wants to give us. God will give us what we ask because we ask what he wants to give us. If that is what Jesus means then the business of praying is not like pressing buttons on the slot machine to get what we want. The business of intercessory prayer, asking for what we

want, is a long process of learning what God wants to do for us, of discovering Gods will for us.

And that is an important insights in our understanding of the story of Abraham's prayer. It appears as if he is bargaining guard down, as if God was some kind of celestial car salesman. But what is really happening is that Abraham is exploring the depths of gods love and compassion. He thinks he is sticking his neck out by asking God to spare sold him if there were 50 good men there but he did but that really is what God wants to do. But Abraham would like Sodom to be spared if they were 45 good men there and so he tries that out on God and again gets a positive response. He is discovering that's what he wants for Sodom is also what God wants. Abrahams prayers are answered because he wants what God wants.

It could not be anything else. Pressing the button and getting the sweetie is called magic. Magic it's about manipulating supernatural powers. That is not the Christian faith. The Christian faith is about like a growing relationship with a God who loves us and wants the best for us. Growing in faith is about bringing our wills into line with his will. And that means that when we have gone a considerable way along that journey, then responding to the commandments, take up our crosses and following Jesus, is no longer a difficult one. In fact, John himself tells us this in his second letter:

 this is what the love of God is: keeping his commandments,
 nor are his commandments burdensome
 because every child of God overcomes the world.

John 5:3.

So perhaps at sometime this week you might want to find a little space, a little time, to be quiet with God and to hear him asking you:

 what do you want me to do for you?

And perhaps you might like to give your answer.