

In recognition of this being World Psychometrics Day- I made that up, but humour me- I thought today we could pretend that we're attending a seminar and horror of horrors the facilitator has just said 'let's start with an icebreaker'. Rather than tell everybody your name and something interesting that happened to you on your way here today, I thought instead we could engage in a rôle playing scenario a little thought experiment to see what we can learn. So I'm going to describe a couple of situations, and then I'd like you to take some time to think of what your response would be. Before sharing it with the group. Don't worry, I'm not that cruel. But do have a think.

So.

Scenario one. Somebody has given you a mandoline: not alas one of those lute-like musical instruments but an apparently labour saving kitchen device, a plastic board with a blade in the middle, which will enable you to quickly and effortlessly produce perfectly sliced vegetables. You're just about to get dinner ready, so why not give it a try? The mandoline comes with a spiked holder to grip the vegetables while you're slicing them, but you're having trouble getting the carrots to stick to it, so you decide to just use your hand instead. It's a bit fiddly, but within a matter of minutes you have a neat little pile of perfectly sliced veg ready for the steamer. Oh but what's that pink thing in the pile? It's the tip of your thumb which you've also managed to slice off. And yes, now you notice it there's blood everywhere, it's surprising how a cut finger bleeds.

What do you do?

To give you a bit of time to recover and consider your response, I'll move on to the second scenario.

We're going to move into your bedroom, to your bedroom window in fact. You've not long woken up and joyously pull back the curtains to let the sun's early rays cheer your heart and instead are greeted with the sight of an enormous and repulsive spider that has taken up residence on the outside of your window and is busy covering your entire view with a dense sticky web. You're pretty sure it licks its lips when it sees you. As you are a whimpering arachnophobe this is just too much to bear so off you go to find a ladder to reach the window and most importantly somebody else to go up it- partner maybe a friend, though they'd have to be a really good one. You hold the ladder in place while they spring up to the top and brush

away the offending arthropod and its nefarious webs. Unfortunately they brush it straight on to you waiting below. You scream, let go the ladder, and down comes your rescuer, hard onto the ground. Happily they are still alive. You can tell this by the fact that they are letting out piercing screams. Now they've closed their eyes and gone silent, but they've only fainted because now they're screaming again. Seems they've broken their leg.

What do you do?

I would hope your answer would, after perhaps if you're being honest a little panicky headless-chicken impression would be 'call an ambulance'. That's got to be the thing to do. Perhaps in the slicing thumb off scenario you might put the tip in a plastic bag or some ice or whatever and then get your partner to drive you to A&E, that is if they haven't broken their leg in the interim, in which case, digit in the bag and call an ambulance.

What I'm happy to guarantee you won't do in either of those situations should they occur in real life or anything remotely like them, is stay exactly where you are and pray that God heals your finger or your partner's broken leg.

You wouldn't would you? You'd have to have completely taken leave of your senses, and you haven't. You'd call the ambulance. You wouldn't pray to God.

This is, I would have to say, precisely the right thing to do. Don't pray, call the ambulance.

And also, if you are the usual kind of practising Christian, entirely inconsistent.

Almost all formal worship will involve us praying at some point for those who are ill. When we pray informally we will pray for those who are unwell. Others expect Christians to pray for them when they are unwell, and will often ask us to do just that, particularly, though not exclusively, if we are in any sort of formal ministry. Praying for God's healing is what we do. But I think the thought experiments with which we started this morning should lead us to ask ourselves what are we expecting when we pray like this, what do we actually mean by healing, and ultimately what is prayer and what is its purpose.

The first thing we need to face, I think, is the reality that prayer for healing almost never has the effect we want it to have. To put it bluntly, it doesn't work, at least not as we want it to. And in our hearts of hearts even the most dedicated of us sort of know this to be the case because not only would we go for the ambulance rather than fall to our knees when we go tumbling off life's ladders, for less serious illness we also usually first try to treat ourselves or go to the doctor. It's only when a person is afflicted with something that nobody else can do anything about that we might think about praying. It's only natural, only human, in our anguish for ourselves and for others we will do anything, say anything that we think might help. But what then are we saying? That God is our second choice? That God only matters if we're desperate? That we don't want to bother God with the little things?

Well maybe. And maybe also even if we don't know it, we sort of instinctively know that 'pray and get better' isn't the way the world works. Of course there are those who will say that if you pray and you are not healed it means a) God wants you to be ill or b) you don't have enough faith / you're not praying hard enough / in the right way or c) that it is God's will that you should suffer, everything happens for a purpose and so on. People do say those things, but they are, bottom line, excuses for when reality fails to match cherished beliefs.

Still not convinced? Answer me this. In our world, who, overall, lives the longest, healthiest lives? The answer is, rich people. Do we think then that rich people are blessed by God more than poor people? You haven't been reading your Bible. Do we think rich people pray more than poor ones? It seems unlikely to me.

To accept this doesn't mean we don't have faith. Far from it. If you truly believe your prayers will cause medical miracles you *will* be disappointed and when you are disappointed you will either challenge your faith so seriously that you may well lose it, or you will so twist what you believe to take in the fact that it hasn't done what you expected it to do that you may as well not have faith in the first place.

Prayer for healing almost never has the effect we want it to have.

This is profoundly depressing- we cannot do something to ensure more good times come. But it is also profoundly liberating: the bad things that happen to us are not because of something we've done or how bad we are or because God is punishing us. Yes, all things ultimately will follow God's purposes: that's not quite the same thing as saying God wants you to suffer. The omnipotent, omniscient God holds creation in

being with his love but he's not micromanaging it. Just look at the world: it's clear he isn't. The God who holds all creation in being works in the world, not against it. Healing of body and mind happens through the things of this world- doctors, nurses, ambulances, medicines and medical procedures and so forth.

I'm not headed to a place where I'm going to say we shouldn't pray or that prayer is pointless, a waste of our time. Far from it. Prayer is the most important thing a Christian will do. It's what marks our good deeds out from mere philanthropy, it's what feeds us spiritually, it encourages us and others, it brings us closer to God and closer to truth, it helps us to understand our lives and the lives of others, good times, bad times and unbearable times, helps us to understand our lives in the light and context of our faith. We should, we must keep praying for the sick in mind, body, spirit and estate. It's an important part of all our ministry. But prayer is not something that if we say in the right way or with enough belief or often enough will make something happen, will make God change the world as we want him to. If that was the case, that wouldn't be prayer, that would be magic, and magic is a deceit of the devil.

It's quite, quite possible that if we stop thinking of God as an all-knowing all powerful parent who will right every wrong, a supernatural cavalry always riding the to rescue if only we know the right number to ring; if we can escape these ways of thinking of God we will love him more, more strongly, more deeply and more faithfully.