

I know it's that time of a Sunday morning when all you really want is to be lulled gently out of slumber in a specially sonorously Anglican way, so please don't feel you have to actually engage with the question that, in a few moments time, will start this sermon. It is a rhetorical question, and the answer will surely follow as comfortably predictably as Mouths shewing forth praise follow the Lord opening our lips so no ripples will thus form on the silky smooth surface of our praise.

Here goes. What have the following things in common?

Repeatedly clicking the mouse when your computer has frozen. A cold spoon on your neck when you have a nosebleed. Crossing your fingers. Olive oil in the pan to stop pasta sticking. Copper bracelets for arthritis. Hoping it will go away if you ignore it. 'Close door' buttons on a lift. Gin and a hot bath in a kitchen sink drama. Obedience training for a shiba inu dogs. Talking to your satnav. Squirrel-proof anything, dog tranquillisers, a computer running Windows when you have something urgent to do, bird-warning bells on a cat's collar, trickle-down economics, orange squash with milk, plastic knives, hair of the dog, treatments for snoring that don't involve violence, buying a lottery ticket, eating carrots to improve your eyesight, drinking coffee to sober up, taking vitamin c for a cold; any product in an Innovation catalogue and / or bought on Ebay; smaller class sizes, decades of evangelism, anything that contains the word reform; abstinence, feng shui, homoeopathy, thermostats, and dieting.

No need to put your hands up, because I wouldn't be able to see you anyway. What the items in this list have in common, of course, is that they are all things that do not work. The list could, of course, go on indefinitely- hope always triumphs over experience in the human heart- but before we stop and close the list to newcomers, there is one more I'd like to add, one more DOA dud, soggy damp squib, dead duck lead balloon blank-shot chocolate teapot which I guessed given the circumstances probably deserves to have its entry on the list of things that do not work marked, paraded and fanfared, and that special case entry is prayer.

Prayer, brothers and sisters, does not work.

That, I know, is not really news. If you've ever snuffled around the fringes of medical journals you will know that there have been any number of studies worldwide looking to test the medical effects of praying. Healing is probably the most common

thing prayed for but alas. When studies are well designed and rigorously performed and analysed- that is, not just my sister's pastor says, but, when, say, neither physician nor subject know they're being prayed for, with a big enough sample etc. etc. When such studies are performed, the results all point to the same thing. Aspirin works. Antibiotics work. Valium works. Prayer doesn't.

Praying might make you feel quite a lot better: there is pretty good scientific evidence that religious people are happier, healthier and longer lived than their atheistic companions, so it's not all bad news today, but however happily religious you are it doesn't make a blind bit of difference: when you pray, it doesn't work.

And although you might prefer this not to be true, I'd hazard a guess that there's probably a part of you that knows from experience that this is almost certainly true and is not a conspiracy of enlightenment science in the pay of Satan: you will almost certainly have your own empirical studies to point to you the truth: all those times when you prayed for something and it didn't happen. That's not because you didn't have enough faith or didn't pray hard enough or hadn't been to church for a month. It wasn't anything you did or didn't do. It didn't happen, because prayer doesn't work. And not just you. Some of the greats of the Bible: when they prayed, it didn't work either. So King David prays desperately that God will save his sick child, but the child still dies. Tobit and Sarah ask God to let them die: but they are very much alive and kicking when the story reaches its denouement.

There is but one conclusion we can make: prayers may be answered, but praying doesn't work.

At least- and I'm sure you're tiny bit relieved to hear me say that- at least it doesn't work in the way we usually mean when we say something works.

When we say something works what we generally mean is if I do 'this' then 'that' will happen. If I press this button, the radio will come on; it works. If I press this button and Magic FM comes on instead of Radio 3 it means Wei-Wei has discovered how to make the radio work. If I take this pill and my headache goes away, it works. That is what we mean when we say something works. If I press this button and nothing happens or if I take this pill and my headache stays the same then we say it doesn't work.

Let me quickly say I'm not gunning for the usual 'prayer didn't work' cop out which is something along the lines of it *would* work if we prayed for the things God wants rather than what we want. Yes, we might sometimes pray for dodgy stuff like getting a parking space or passing the I I plus but how can healing or world peace or any of the other things we most often pray for, how can they be wrong things? Unless we've completely misunderstood this whole Christianity thing, they can't be wrong. And they still don't happen.

But that's still expecting prayer to work in the way other things do: if I press this button I will get a parking space, if I do this, God will do this. Which is pretty much treating prayer as a charm or a spell no different from eye of newt and toe of frog... a charm of power if not trouble.

But despite the more optimistic claims of those bitten by the bug, there is no such thing as 'the power of prayer' : no power we can tap into, latch on to and bend to our will : there is only the will of God.

Now, hopefully by this point you might be yearning to send me a trolling email demanding 'If you don't get what you ask for, what is the point of praying?' Why are we being urged to pray without ceasing? Why is a church a house of prayer? Why do monks and nuns bother? If you don't get what you ask for, what is the point of praying? The point is that it builds up a relationship with God.

It is the Spirit welling up inside us that makes us pray. Please don't think I'm saying 'prayer doesn't work so don't pray'. Our sick friend may be healed, they may not; but without the Spirit moving through us we would never be moved to pray for them. Even when we're asking God to heal or to bring peace we're not praying in order to get something (honestly) we're praying because we're like sunflowers tracking the sun across the summer sky, turning to God: and we can no more not pray than the flower can not open when it is caressed by the hot fingers of the sun.

When we pray, when we worship, the Spirit prays through us, we are, if you like, channels for the Spirit.

Yes, even when we are praying an Anglican Service of the Word. Actually, *particularly* Church of England worship and other such formal liturgy. Yes it's repetitive, yes, it's written by someone else in what is almost a foreign language. But that means that however much it may affect us, we can't choose for it to be all about us, our

obsessions, our skills, our mood, our emotions and our needs. When we move all that ego-obsessed guff out of the way, the Spirit flows.

Prayer doesn't work if you want it to do or get things for you. It's not about doing 'a' and getting 'b'. The process of asking for those things, the process of bringing it to the Lord, that works to an immeasurably more important result: it brings us closer, to God. Closer than the air we breathe, the Spirit praying through us, bringing us closer, intimately close to God.