

*Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.* St. James 1:27

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Thoughts and prayers.

There's lots that we could say about the casual way in which we throw off those words 'thoughts and prayers'.

Politicians sometimes like to use them when speaking to those who are going through tragedy and crisis.

Maybe we sometimes do the same; maybe genuinely struggling to find the right words to say when those we care about are facing great struggles.

But our Epistle this week reminds us that words will have very little meaning if they're not backed up by actions; and that goes as much for our relationship with God as it does for all the other relationships that fill our lives.

Words are cheap, as has often been said; and as young children we learn very early when we can and when we cannot ignore what our parents are saying; when they mean what they're telling us and when they're don't mean it.

This week is, as you know, the Fifth Sunday after Easter, which for more than a millennium has been called Rogation Sunday.

This coming Thursday the Church commemorates Ascension Day, the fortieth day after Easter Day; the day on which we celebrate Christ's triumphal return to the heaven which He had left that He might become our Saviour; where He now sits, as we say in the Creed, at the right hand of the Father, continually interceding on our behalf; awaiting that day when He will fulfil His promise to return again in glory.

And because scripture speaks of the ascended Christ interceding on our behalf, that is, speaking our prayers in us and with us, this Sunday, and the three days that follow this coming week, all focus on the question of prayer, taking their name from the Latin word *rogare*; which means to ask or request.

Now, as we know, Rogation Sunday is, of course, the traditional day in which the soil and the seed of the new growing season would be blessed, acknowledging our dependence on God to bring a good harvest to fruition.

But Rogation Sunday is about a lot more than just asking God to bless the soil and the seeds; because, whether we realise it or not, our prayer life is a lot like trying to grow a garden.

What I mean is this:

No matter how much hard work we put into our efforts, our good intentions at this time of year won't amount to very much if we don't make any effort through the long days of summer to help those seeds to grow.

If we just assume that a good harvest will magically come just because we wish it to, without being committed to the hard everyday work that gardening requires, then, as we can all imagine, we will be sadly mistaken.

And our prayers are much like that: if I somehow think that I only have to ask and God will magically make it all come to pass, then I'll likely end up sadly mistaken.

There are perhaps two common misunderstandings about prayer, which we all face from time to time.

First, prayer is never just a matter of letting God know what's going on in the world, in our neighbourhood and our church; in the lives of our families and friends.

As Jesus reminds us, God already knows our needs even better than we know them ourselves.

In fact, Christian prayer is about being reminded of what God already knows; it's about helping us to remember, not about helping God to remember.

And secondly, Christian prayer is not about trying to convince God to be gracious and loving. Because, as we are reminded over and over again, God is love, and we will not make him love us more by our prayers, so matter how urgent or sincere they may be.

In the end, prayer is about embracing God's will, not about bringing him around to ours.

So we always pray, as Jesus prayed in the Garden, "Thy will be done."

And just as the seeds that we plant must send down roots, so too in our spiritual lives we must send down spiritual roots by prayer; in the language and imagery of this week's Epistle, prayer is the business of bridling our tongues; teaching us to seek those things that God knows is best for our souls and turning from those things that will lead us to unfruitful things.

Jesus, as Mary first imagined on the day of the Resurrection, is a gardener who works in our souls.

So at the heart of all our prayers must be the commitment to do what God calls us to do and be what God calls us to be; the commitment not just to speak our prayers but to live out our prayers in word and deed.

In the end, we may just discover that God has all along been giving us the answers to all our prayers; and that answer may very well depend on what he's calling us to do.

*Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.*