

Today's readings can be dealt with fairly quickly. We first heard the beloved story of how David was chosen to be the King of Israel. The Lord told the prophet Samuel to seek out a man called Jesse, who had many sons, and to select one of them as the next King of Israel. Samuel, Jesse, and Jesse's sons sat down and made a sacrifice to God. Then Jesse's seven sons were paraded one at a time in front of Samuel. Each time, Samuel heard the divine voice saying, "Not that one." When all seven had been rejected, Samuel asked, "Are all your sons here?" "No," said Jesse, "my youngest son David is out tending the sheep." So David was summoned. The Scripture seems to suggest that he was chosen on the grounds of his good looks, which makes the story seem like a male beauty pageant. However, David then went on to be the greatest king in Israel's history.

In the Gospel, Jesus told the story of the mustard seed, and then Mark explained the use of parables: "He did not speak to [the crowds] except in parable, but he explained everything in private to his disciples." The crowds got the Bible readings, as it were, and the disciples got the homilies that explained them.

Jesus' parables illustrate his effectiveness as a story-teller. Instead of the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus could have told the crowds, "You know, my message about the Kingdom of God here on earth is something that's small right now; only a few people are listening. But you just watch, in the future it will reach more people than you can possibly imagine." I picture that crowd rolling its collective eyes and saying, "Yeah, right!" and then forgetting all about it. Instead, Jesus said, "Think about a mustard seed. It's really tiny, yet when it is sown in the ground, it grows into a great shrub, practically a tree, so big that birds make their nests in its canopy." In those few words, we and the people who listened to Jesus have the mental picture of a tiny seed growing into a tree. As soon as you mention a seed, you introduce the idea of something that grows. Perhaps we Canadians might have used the image of an acorn growing into an oak tree, or a maple 'key' growing into a sugar maple. Jesus' stories (parables) were the best form of oratory; they were simultaneously down to earth and memorable.

My own theology, which you know well by now, is that Jesus told his listeners, and us, that the Kingdom of God has come near. His parables were all about how he envisaged the Kingdom. That brings me to something that seems at first glance to be unrelated. The May edition of the *Anglican Journal* carried an article that I have been mulling over. Entitled, *Are 'thoughts and prayers' enough?* it asked what good does to do offer thoughts and prayers to victims of tragedies such as a school shooting, the Toronto van attack, or natural disasters such as earthquakes, fires, and floods? It has become a reflex response for political and church leaders to express condolences to those afflicted – and indeed for us to do so in our Sunday morning prayers here at St. George's. But are these thoughts and prayers just a cheap way of seeming to be concerned without actually doing anything?

In response to recent school shootings in the US, students have organized protest marches calling for increased gun control, and also made their views clear to legislators, with the implication that they, the students, will soon be voters. They have taken action. I recall that our parish raised significant money several years ago to help recovery efforts following a hurricane in Cuba, in response for pleas for help from the Cuban church. In response to the mosque shooting in Quebec City last year, our parish sent letters of solidarity to the two main Muslim organizations in Milton, and the Milton churches prayed with our Muslim brothers and sisters in joint vigils. All these actions represent tangible ways of complementing concern for the victims and their families.

But all too often, we are helpless actually to do anything in the face of tragedy. In the van attack in Toronto, back in May, there was no need to offer help by way of medical supplies, and it is hard to think of a way of protesting to change the law to help prevent similar atrocities. So did the prayers that I offered in church the following Sunday, when I happened to be the prayer leader, do any good, or were they a waste of oxygen?

I think that their value lay in the idea that there are three implicit participants when we pray for other people – those we pray for, God, and ourselves. I take the position that we do not (or should not) offer prayers to tell God what to do, or to try to change the divine mind. That is why when I am prayer leader and speak about those who have asked us to pray for them, I use some formula such as, “We ask God’s blessing on all these people, asking for healing where that is medically possible, and asking God to comfort those whose conditions medical science cannot help.” I realize that this position is not entirely Biblical. God’s mind was reputedly changed when Abraham negotiated with God as to how many righteous people would be needed to save the city of Sodom from destruction (Genesis 18). Luke justified persistence in prayer through stories about a persistent friend who came asking for help at midnight (Luke 11) and a widow who persistently petitioned an unjust judge for justice (Luke 18).

So what is really the point of praying for other people? In my own mind, the most important aspect of prayer is to alter our own perceptions. As the theologian Kierkegaard wrote over 100 years ago, “Prayer does not change God; it changes the one who prays.” This is why we pray, for example, for the people in Yemen who are suffering from famine. The principal problem is not that the international community is unwilling to donate supplies. It is refusal to allow food supplies into the country. Although we pray that the hearts of those responsible will be softened, the main benefit (in my opinion) of focussing on the plight of hungry people in Yemen is to soften our own hearts to respond to the needs of the hungry in our own communities, where we can make a difference, as well as those in faraway places. It is the thought of being too hard-pressed to work effectively because of hunger, or the plight of children going to bed hungry, that motivates me to contribute each week to our food banks.

In short, “Our thoughts and prayers are with you” is not the end of the story. Rather, it points to the beginning of a longer journey in which prayer inspires us to put our faith into action. Praying for the needs of others (what the Bible calls our neighbours) brings them into our own consciousness. Some of those neighbours we can help in a practical sense; for others, we do not have the tools to help them. But in each and every case, prayer for others can help us to see the humanity in other people; it can help us to recognize them as neighbours, whether they live close by or far away.

*Are thoughts and prayers enough?* No, definitely not, but they are a starting point, provided that they inspire us to put faith into action. Jesus himself recognized that the Kingdom of God has to start small, that a great tree can grow from a tiny mustard seed. But this positive outcome is not certain. Many seeds do not make it to maturity, as Jesus noted in another parable about whether or not seeds fall into good soil. In our tiny parish of St. George’s, we wonder about our future. Has the seed of the Kingdom of God in this place fallen into good soil? Look around. Do you see good people, good soil here, or do you see only rocks and thistles? In a hopeful metaphor, it was Jesse’s youngest son, the shepherd boy who was too insignificant to be invited to the sacrificial meal, who was selected by God to be the King of Israel. Maybe our parish is not too insignificant to grow the seed of the Kingdom of God.