Dear friends,
Pray attention...

A few words about prayer; I offer this for two reasons: firstly, because over the years- and to the present- people have often spoken to me about their struggle to pray, and have asked for advice; and, secondly, because some interesting research shows that many people who are not accustomed to pray have begun in recent weeks to do so. Significantly, most of this prayer seems to be related to the current pandemic and takes the form of what we call ‘intercession’. The basic meaning of this term is to intervene on behalf of another. We might rightly understand this dimension of prayer to be sacrificial (as all prayer is); we are offering something from and of ourselves- “our” time and energy- for the benefit of someone else. We should also understand this as being a loving act; that does not mean that we necessarily have great feelings of affection for the one whom we are holding in prayer, but rather that the very act of prayer itself is a loving one. Indeed, Jesus is clear that we should pray for those who hate us.

There are many other aspects of prayer (though perhaps we should not over differentiate) but let us ponder intercessory prayer for a moment.

I remember a clichéd scene in the hoary old films that I used to watch on rainy Sunday afternoons when I was a child. There would come a moment of crisis- let us say, for example, a medical emergency in which a life hung by a thread; the doctor would come out of the sick room, gently closing the door, and, looking at the assembled persons, he would gravely say something like, “Well, I’ve done everything I can; all we can do now is pray.” Familiar? The thing that strikes me is that prayer in those situations seems akin to clutching at straws. All human resources have been exhausted, so we might as well look to a divine one. That is the antitheses of the Christian understanding of prayer. Our prayer of intercession arises out of a life lived in relationship with the one who initiates prayer in us, and desires to hear our prayers- a perfectly loving
Father who wants to provide for his children. Prayer of intercession is essential to our way of life; it is not a cul-de-sac we end up in, having explored every other avenue.

It is important to understand that Christians believe we are praying to someone, not an abstract "something". We are not seeking to extract some sort of benevolent reward from the universe, but rather to accept the dignity of engaging with the divine will, and become participants in the activity of God in the world; we are in fact seeking to unite ourselves with the will of God ("Thy will be done," being essential to Christian prayer, as opposed to-as is often said-, "My will be done"). It follows, then, that in order to continue to pray as Christians we must recognise the need for humility and trust. Anyone who prays will know that prayers are not frequently or obviously answered in the ways that we might desire or expect. We are brought face with the fact that, as we are told in scripture, God’s ways are not our ways. We are confronted with the limitations of our own sight. But if we persevere in prayer (as I hope and pray many of those who have begun to pray will do) we will find that our trust in God is strengthened, and our love for him increased.

Our intercessor, of course, is Christ. He entered into the world for that purpose, so it is to him that we offer our prayers (in the power of the Holy Spirit). Christians may also seek, and should seek, the intercession of other members of the Church family, on earth and in heaven - the name we give for them is “the saints”. It can be only be good to have others praying to the Lord on our behalf. It is good to have friends in both low and high places!

So, in conclusion, do not be downcast or demoralised by what you may perceive to be the weakness of your prayers;’ remember, the one who hears them knows all our weakness- indeed, he became as weak as a baby in order that the power and life of God might fill us.

With blessings and prayers
Fr Keith
Vicar