Back to church Sunday 2015

10am 27th Sept

Matt 7:7-12

One of my sayings is that if you don’t ask you don’t get. Many times it is actually true. When I was a curate a friend of mine, Alan, was a chaplain to West Ham FC. I was living in Dagenham at the time and he said the local team Dagenham and Redbridge, bastions of the football league, don’t have a chaplain. I was quite interested in it but I didn’t know who to ask. Eventually, I just phoned up the MD and simply said, “do you want a chaplain?”, and he said, “what’s a chaplain?”. I said, “West Ham have got have one” and he said, “we’ll have one!”. So every other week I would go to the amazing Victoria Rd stadium and be entertained in the directors box (more of a cabin) and eat haute cuisine – tomato soup, shepherd pie and a pint. A fellow clergy said, how did you do it? I said, I just asked.

If you don’t ask you don’t get. I guess some of you are hear today because someone else asked you to come. Perhaps you wouldn’t have come otherwise. I want you to know that you are very welcome and that we are honoured you have come! I also want to honour the ones who have done the asking, as often we are very reluctant to ask people anything. We often feel we are being cheeky or presumptuous. But in our relationship with God, he doesn’t want us to feel that way.

The passage we had read is one of the most famous of Jesus sayings.

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

Are you in need of something in your life that you’ve been asking for?

Are you seeking for something in your life to make sense of things?

Have you been knocking on the door of some opportunity but it won’t open?

Jesus says you WILL get a response.

You will receive, you will find, the door will be opened.

Jesus encourages us to be outrageous in our requests, for genuinely felt needs (the example he gives is bread or fish.

But the next thing to note that it is about **persistence**.

In the original language, the idea of persisting comes across a lot stronger. It’s in what is called present imperative tense, which could be translated better “*keep* on asking, *keep* on seeking, *keep* on knocking”.

Are you someone that gives up easily? Have you given up praying, or going to church or even given up on God? Our father says KEEP ON. He hasn’t given up on you.

I like watching a Channel 4 show called the Catch about trawler fishing. One particular boat is an old rust bucket which is always breaking down. On one occasion they lost all the nets and fishing gear, worth £100k, in the bottom of the sea. Most would give up, but this man sailed all the way back to port, picked up a big hook, sailed all the way to the fishing ground, dragged the big hook on the seabed up and down, up and down, searching all day. Eventually, amazingly, he retrieved all his gear. Persistence pays off!

Have you got a long-standing need? Are you looking for an answer? Is that door still not opening? Jesus urges us to *keep* on asking, seeking and knocking. That’s the first point.

Secondly, we have to realise that we have a good Father, who is more generous, more willing to give than we are to receive.

**9**‘Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? **10**Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? **11**If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

Before go any further, perhaps you might have noticed the phrase, “because you are evil”, grating on you a bit. Isn’t that a bit harsh? Firstly, it’s how they spoke in those days – often using extremes to make the point. Secondly, we aren’t perfect, especially compared to God! We are all flawed human beings. John Ortberg, puts it like this:

*IN CERTAIN stores you will find a section of merchandise available at greatly reduced prices. The tip-off is a particular tag you will see on all the items in that area. Each tag carries the same words: AS IS. This is a euphemistic way of saying “These are damaged goods.” You’re going to find a flaw here. These items are not normal. We’re not going to tell you where the flaw is. You’ll have to look for it. So when you find it – and you will find it – don’t come whining and snivelling to us. No returns. No refunds. No exchanges. If you were looking for perfection, you walked down the wrong aisle. If you want this item, there is only one way to obtain it. You must take it as is. When you deal with human beings, you have come to the “as-is” corner of the universe. EVERY PERSON COMES WITH A LITTLE TAG: There’s a flaw here. A streak of deception, a cruel tongue, a passive spirit. So when you find it – and you will find it – don’t be surprised. If you want to enter a relationship with this model, there is only one way. “As is.”*

But even us, “as is” persons know to give good gifts to our children. We wouldn’t play games with our kids and give them something nasty instead of what they need, would we? We wouldn’t give a stone instead of bread, or a snake instead of fish.

Jesus says, how much more, will God give good gifts to those that ask him, not because we deserve it, but because he is gracious. And two of the biggest gifts God gives us help us with the two most pressing issues we as individuals face – that is our past, and our future. God gives us through Jesus two gifts

For our past he gives us forgiveness

For our future he gives us eternal life

Let me tell you a story.

Once there was a woman who lived in a caravan on a site. She was living fine until one day the manager of the site changed the rules. From now on you would have to pay for your rubbish. The woman couldn’t afford it so instead of paying, she started hoarding her rubbish instead of leaving it outside to be collected. Before long her caravan was getting full up, and the smell was there too. After a few months it was impossible. There was no room to move. The manager said you can’t do that, it’s against the rules, you have to leave. She was desperate. The bags of rubbish stood as a constant reminder of a miserable past. The future was bleak, too, with no possible escape from her circumstances.

One day the owner’s son came to visit. He was appalled at what he found. He listened to her story and was incensed. He was very angry with the manager. He said he would clear out the caravan himself. It took days get rid of it all – hundreds of sacks of smelly rubbish. Finally the last bag had gone, the caravan was clean and the woman felt an immense burden had lifted.

Not only that, the owner’s son said you stay forever in this site. For nothing. The woman’s life was transformed and for the first time in many years she had hope.

Some of that is based on a true story. But what it illustrates is exactly the gifts God wants to give us.

For some the past is something we’d rather forget, yet it crowds out our lives like so much rubbish. For others when we think of the future we only have one word in our mind: fear.

Jesus can sort out both of these things.

For the past there is forgiveness and letting go which enables to start to get our lives back together.

For the future there is eternal life which starts now and leads into eternity so we can have hope.

These gifts are made possible by the death of Jesus on the cross which we will remember in a moment as we break bread and drink wine.

You have come here today because someone asked you. But perhaps you’ve also come because you want to ask God something. He wants you ask, to ask outrageously, persistently and expectantly. And he will answer!

Amen