

The Hardest Saying of All?

Praying for Something in Christ's Name T

I've recently re-read F. F. Bruce's important book *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (1983, 1988). It devotes very short chapters to the sayings of Jesus, recorded in the Gospels, which have been considered *hard* – hard either for contemporaries who first heard them (eg. the Son of Man's – Jesus's – ability to forgive sins, Mark 2:10), or hard to modern ears (eg. hating one's parents, Luke 14:26; the “unforgivable” sin against the Holy Spirit, Mark 3: 28-9). Some others are difficult because they seem to be telling us about something that *never* happened (“This generation will not pass away before...”, Mark 13: 30).

But perhaps the hardest saying of all, which likewise can be related to things that have never happened, is one which is absent from Bruce's book: Jesus's claim that everything we ask the Father in Jesus' name will be granted (John 15:16). How many times have we, individually, and as a Church, prayed for peace in the world? And though some peace comes here and there, violent discord breaks out in other places on a frequent basis. How many people have prayed fervently to God, in Christ's name, for healing from chronic sickness - and no healing has come? Would not a good God *want* peace in the world, rather than strife and killing? This, for many, is a serious objection. Bruce's approach is very often that of looking at the context of the saying, Jesus' audience and their situation (or the context in the gospel, in which the saying is set); but context doesn't seem to help us much, here.

My view, after very much thought, is that Jesus was referring to those things which we might seek (perhaps seek to try to achieve ourselves) which are totally aligned to *his* will (for us, and for the world) (“Whatever you ask that is *my will for you, and the world*”); that seeking *his* will and his purposes (and denying our own) is *the* way to come to know a positive outcome to our prayers. A life divested of *my* ambitions and perceived needs (as opposed to Christ's) is, I consider, the route to real freedom, and true fulfilment of one's life and existence comes from this replacement. What is purely of *our own* fails – or at least, succeeds temporarily – but his will is ultimately beyond frustrating, and is eternal.

The fallen world is the *domain* of death (however you or I am led to that death), and it is the place of injustice, want, inequality and need; God did not plan this or create this, but he has devised a way to put everything right, if only we align ourselves, our wishes, to that way.

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