

Online Address, 14 December 2022, Church of Scotland Geneva

Text: 2 Kings 4: 1-7 (taken from Good News Translation):

¹ The widow of a member of a group of prophets went to Elisha and said, "Sir, my husband has died! As you know, he was a God-fearing man, but now a man he owed money to has come to take away my two sons as slaves in payment for my husband's debt."

² "What shall I do for you?" he asked. "Tell me, what do you have at home?"

"Nothing at all, except a small jar of olive oil," she answered.

³ "Go to your neighbours and borrow as many empty jars as you can," Elisha told her. ⁴ "Then you and your sons go into the house, close the door, and start pouring oil into the jars. Set each one aside as soon as it is full."

⁵ So the woman went into her house with her sons, closed the door, took the small jar of olive oil, and poured oil into the jars as her sons brought them to her. ⁶ When they had filled all the jars, she asked if there were any more. "That was the last one," one of her sons answered. And the olive oil stopped flowing. ⁷ She went back to Elisha, the prophet, who said to her, "Sell the olive oil and pay all your debts, and there will be enough money left over for you and your sons to live on."

What are we actually asking for when we pray to God ? God Himself must receive literally millions, if not billions, of Prayers every day. Prayers for forgiveness, Prayers for the state of the world, Prayers for others, Prayers for oneself by people the world over. If we think of these as akin to some kind of list of requests, then we might be forgiven for not knowing where to start with them all, if we were in God's place.

However, that isn't the approach which Elisha takes in the Good News version of the passage we read today from 2 Kings. When the widow came to Elisha, she was faced with the very real and very unpleasant

prospect of having her two sons sold into slavery to recover a debt left behind by her recently deceased husband. She brought her case to God, through His prophet. Elisha heard her account and then asked her, “What shall I do for you ? Tell me, what do you have at home ?”

The widow does not appear to have hesitated in telling him what she had, namely a small jar of olive oil. In a response reminiscent of some of Jesus’ later miracles, feeding five thousand with the fish and loaves available for example, Elisha sent the widow away to pour out the olive oil into individual jars, miraculously managing to fill enough to sell, earning enough to pay off her debts.

In practice, through Elisha God worked with the widow. That was the result of the Prayer. She did not pray as a means of spelling out her despair. She did not simply offload the problem onto God – “Oh well, I’ve prayed to God; now He can deal with it.” Elisha asked what could be done for her but he also told her what she should do.

Obviously, we can’t solve all of our problems ourselves. You or I may pray for peace in Ukraine or for salvation from climate change but the chances are that we’re not going to achieve either goal on our own. However, that isn’t the point. We all need God’s power and grace. After all, if we really could fix everything ourselves, why would we bother praying to God and bothering Him in the first place ?

The real point is that we need to engage God in Prayer, to come close to Him and hear His call. We need to know that He cares and that He will act. We also need to consider what our role is in the world. We can’t do everything but we can do something. If we listen to God and follow Him, no matter how small our contribution, He will be the one to work the miracles. We trust in Him to provide the healing and the solutions which we can’t see ourselves but we also listen to find what the steps forward are which we should be taking.