Matthew 7:7-12
Ask, Seek, Knock

Our daughter, Rebekah, is 25 now - but she still knows how to wrap me round her little finger! I won't hear anything from her for a few weeks – and then a text arrives. It usually just says, "I love you, Daddy". And I know that when she calls me Daddy, she has usually run out of money and is building up to ask me to lend her some. So I wait 20 minutes and then the phone call comes…and invariably, the money is transferred into her account within the hour!

It is, at the same time, both really annoying and really comforting: annoying because she has far more disposable income than me and if she stopped going on so many spontaneous foreign holidays, she would be able to afford the necessities in life. But it's comforting, too, to know that she still feels that she can ask me for things and that, if I am able, I will always help. Sometimes the answer will be Yes and sometimes No - but, in the asking, we are able to build our relationship.

That's what Dads do, right? And it's good to celebrate Dads today, on Fathers Day.

And good for us to remember our Father in heaven, and his perfect love for each one of us, and how he is always there for us when we need him. Our Father in heaven wants nothing more than to be in a relationship with us. He loves talking with us, being with us, just hanging out with us. AAnd he loves it when we want to spend time with him too.

I was at B&Q recently to buy a few bits and pieces, and there was a Dad there with his young son: the son was maybe 5 or 6. And the Dad was carrying a big box, a big heavy box and the young son was helping him carry it. Well, of course, the Dad was taking all the weight, doing all the lifting, providing all the strength required for the task. But the little boy just wanted to be involved in the process: he wanted to model his behavior on what his Dad was doing and wanted to be engaged in the task, even though he didn't have much to offer other than just being there, and being a companion to his Dad.

I watched them and it made me think about how we are when it comes to being partners with God in the work of his Kingdom. We want to be engaged in the process of building the Kingdom, we want to be involved, and we want to do what we see our Heavenly Father doing. But the reality, of course, is that it is God's Kingdom, and he is the one doing all the heavy lifting, he is the one taking the weight, and we are partners with him by being present and engaged. But the weight of the work is not ours to carry.

At the heart of the Christian experience is to be comfortable in our relationship with our heavenly Father, knowing that we are weak and frail and that he is the strong one who will always be there for us. God is our strength because we are weak. God carries the weight of our burdens, because we are not able to do that.

And that's the thinking behind the Gospel passage that we've just heard read to us this morning. God knows our weaknesses and he wants to help us through that and give us his strength to overcome the difficult circumstances of life. And in this passage, we are invited to pray to God, to talk with God, about all of our needs and desires, and allow him space and time in our lives to respond.

Now, before we get into what Jesus is saying to us here, we need to be absolutely sure what he is not saying because this is a passage that is so easy to misunderstand.

Have a listen to verse 7: Jesus says this, "Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

Now that sounds amazing, doesn't it? All we have to do is ask – and God will give us whatever we want! It would be great, wouldn't it, to have a God who was like a Genie in a Lamp, who could grant us any wish that we desired, whenever we asked for it. And it does sound from this verse that this is how God is: "Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." God-On-Tap – how amazing!!

And you might be amazed at how many Christians believe that to be true and how many churches are teaching that kind of theology; a sort of 'Name It and Claim It' theology.

When I was Vicar in Stratford in the East End, there was a huge Pentecostal Church nearby that was really into that kind of theology. And I remember one young man coming to my house one day, asking for food because he had run right out of money and had a mountain of debt. And why did he have so much debt? Because the preacher at the church had said in a sermon that Christ came to cancel all our debts and that we should stand in that truth and have faith to rip up our Credit Card Bills and believe that they would be paid off. Well, the young man did that – but the miracle didn't quite take place!

It is absolutely wrong to see this verse as a 'Name it and Claim it' type of theology. We really do need to read these words in the wider context of Scripture and what we know about how God acts in our lives.

We can illustrate this by thinking about Psalm 37:4, which says this: "Seek your happiness in the Lord, and he will give you your heart's desire". Now, when we consider the words of Jesus in the light of that Psalm, it takes on a very different meaning. Jesus is not saying, 'Just ask for whatever you want and I will give it to you'. Instead, in the light of Psalm 37, God is saying to us that the driving motivation in our lives should be to seek our happiness in the Lord. And, as we find our happiness in a relationship with God, then our desires in life will change and the things we pray for will change and our desires will become more aligned to the desires of God.

God won't give us whatever we want – we need to align our will with his, and then we will pray for the right things.

Praying in the name of Jesus is not some sort of magic spell through which we can gain anything we want. Praying in the name of Jesus is a desire to see the world like he does, a desire to want the same things that he does, for ourselves and others, and then to ask God for those things in accordance with his will.

Prayer is an intimate relationship, not a magic trick.

And that is stressed by Matthew in the way he phrases this verse because in the Greek, when he writes "Ask, seek and knock", he does not write these words as one-off actions but a continual activity. What Matthew writes is this: "Keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking" - and that suggests the development of a dependent relationship rather than saying a one-off prayer in the expectation that God will just give us what we want in that moment.

Prayer is the active pursuit of God over a period of time, not a series of one-off requests. God wants us to keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking. And then, as our relationship with God changes over that period of time and our intimacy with God grows deeper and we begin to ask for the things that God desires to give, then Jesus' words in verse 8 come true for us: "Everyone who keeps on asking will receive, anyone who keeps on seeking will find, and the door will be opened to those who keep on knocking".

God knows what we need, what other people need and he will respond by providing for our needs. As Jesus goes on to say here: "Would any of you who are fathers give your son a stone when he asks for bread? Or would you give him a snake when he asks for a fish? Bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, will your Father in heaven give good things to those who keep on asking him!"

God will give to us what is good for us, not necessarily what we want…

But this does still leave us with one other issue to think about, which is this: Why is that when we sometimes pray, it seems that God isn't there and isn't listening? Should we just give up at that stage?

Well, I don't think we should ever give up praying. It is the basis of our relationship with God, so far too important. What this passage shows us quite clearly is that God is always there to hear our prayers but that there are different levels of accessibility.

Let's think about the wording again: Ask, Seek, Knock. Each of these three words suggests a different spatial distance between the person praying and the God who hears. And I think this is really important if we are to develop persistence in prayer.

First, Jesus says, "Ask, and you will receive". That sentence suggests that both parties are in close proximity with each other and that a conversation is already going on between them. Sometimes, it is like that with God: we feel close to him and the conversation is ongoing and it feels like the most natural thing in the world to just ask him for something.

But then Jesus says, "Seek, and you will find". That sentence suggests a distance between both parties and that the person making the request has to be more proactive in actually finding God. Sometimes, it is like that in our relationship with God. Perhaps we have to seek out his will before we ask for something. Perhaps we have moved away from God and need to return to him before we ask. Either way, some proactive effort is required of us to bring about the intimacy needed.

And then, thirdly, Jesus says, "Knock, and the door will be opened". That sentence suggests that God is somehow hidden from us and that we must formally ask for access to him. And that too can be the case in prayer where we really do need to be reminded that we are in a relationship with our Father but that, also, our Father is the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Creator and Ruler of the Universe.

So underpinning each of these three sentences is something about where we stand in our relationship with God. The promise he makes is that he will always be there for us and will always hear us - but we must first consider our own proximity to God and how that will impact where we need to ask, seek or knock.

Prayer is such a privilege – but it is a conversation, an intimate encounter with God and it is the bedrock of our relationship with him. God is always there for us, he will always hear us. But the question this passage throws up for us is about self-examination. Are you in a position to ask, or do you first have to seek, or even knock?

If we are proactive in pursuing God in a manner appropriate to where we currently are at, then our prayer lives will be transformed and our relationship with God will grow deeper and deeper as each day passes.