

12th September 2021

Petitions

“Almighty God, who hast given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplications unto thee; and dost promise, that when two or three are gathered together in thy Name thou wilt grant their requests: Fulfil now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants, as be most expedient to them.”

The Book of Common Prayer, Morning Prayer, ‘Prayer of St Chrysostom’

Far be it from me to argue with the compilers of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, but I think they may have misinterpreted St Chrysostom’s morning prayer. If not, then St Chrysostom was a bit off the mark.

In the recent weeks I’ve signed several petitions, from exploitation of Amazonian rain forests, through protection of green space in the village of my upbringing, to a local petition about a planning application. Petitions allow us to focus on a common cause and present a voice to decision-makers that otherwise might not be heard. E-petitions allow us to place our concerns before our Government. You can ask your MP to present a petition to Parliament that asks for a change in the law or government policy. After 10,000 signatures, petitions get a response. After 100,000 signatures, they’re considered for Parliamentary debate.

But is St Chrysostom right when he suggests that when “two or three” offer a petition, God “wilt grant their requests”? “Grace at this time with one accord”, I understand. Common cause, purpose and focus for our prayers, in families, prayer groups, public worship, national days of prayer and the like, I genuinely appreciate. But do we *really* believe in a God who will fulfil “our desires and petitions” because lots of people are praying for the same thing at the same time? Is a petition offered to God by 100,000 people more effective than my individual prayer?

The saving grace for me is the final phrase of St Chrysostom’s prayer: “as may be most expedient for them.” Prayer isn’t subscribing to a parliamentary petition. It’s an awareness of issues, an engagement with the purposes of God and an understanding of how God and humanity might go on together. I humbly suggest, therefore, that the tone of our prayers should *not* be the presenting of petitions but an attitude which says with our Lord, “Not my will, but Thine be done.”

A prayer for today

No words or petitions today, Lord. I’ll just wait till I get my attitude right. Amen