

TO REIGN OR NOT TO REIGN?

"God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform"! That was certainly true of one of our daughter's Sports Days. Most young children are excited on such an occasion; seven-year-old Lynne and her School friends were no exception. However, when we arrived at the school, with the field beautifully marked and laid out for the event, it was to find enormous black clouds directly overhead. And if that was not enough, there was an even more ominous gathering of storm clouds over to the west, with a wind blowing so strongly in our direction that the willows in the field below us were bent almost double.

Lynne's school was a church school. No suggestion was made that the problem be committed to prayer. And I suppose that if the organisers had stopped everything and called on everyone to pray for clear skies, there would have been surprise and general embarrassment all round. Laughter, too, perhaps. The problem would not necessarily be with the children (many have a wonderful simple faith in God!); it would have been the adults. You can picture the scene for yourself. As rain drops begin to fall, the announcer calls on the crowd to join with him in prayer for clear skies...?

No! Rather, because so few expect God to work in that way (or, possibly, too frightened to lay their faith on the line in case such specific prayer isn't answered?) what we in fact heard was a very different announcement over the loud hailer. "You can see from the coming storm that we will not get through the programme. So we intend to rush through as many events as possible before the storm breaks!" The proposal was clearly accepted as perfectly reasonable. Certainly one that was in line with most people's perceived acceptance that nothing could be done to alter 'those facts'.

Three of us, sitting together amongst that large gathering of parents, often prayed together. So I said to Jill and our friend Janie, "Let's ask God for clear skies right now." I thought I had spoken fairly quietly, but a lady sitting next to me overheard my suggestion and chipped in: "I gave up praying for that sort of thing years ago; it never works!"

For our part, I told her, our experience in Africa had shown us a God who actually delights in answering prayer. We believed in the power of prayer; so we would pray in faith for the miracle needed to enable the children to enjoy the afternoon. Nothing ventured, nothing gained!

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After two or three minutes the rain drops from the heavy clouds over us stopped. A short while later I looked up and saw that the willow trees were now bent over in the opposite direction! The clouds above us, and the storm following, moved off in that direction. A moment or two later the sky cleared. The remainder of the sports afternoon was bathed in warm sunshine. All the events on the programme were completed. Then, as the last presentation was made, the clouds returned; this time we had to run for cover! Most of us were drenched! But the children's joy was complete. "To God be the glory, great things He has done!"

Should it really surprise us that God cares for us on a personal level? No one was deprived of rain; only the timing was altered! Such incidents have become known. When good weather is essential for special events (like Diocesan events at Lamport Hall, or Church summer fetes) people have asked us to pray for good weather and been thrilled (indeed amazed) at having rain-free, or beautiful sunny, or even wonderfully hot, days for those events.

Should such things surprise us?

"The British Isles gets the weather the people deserve"! Could that be true?

None can be unaware of how pessimistic, even downright negative, the majority of the people of Britain are when discussing the weather! When a special event is planned, we often hear such comments as: "It's always cold and miserable then!" Or, "What will we do if it rains? Where will we then hold the event?"

Someone will be sure to cap that comment with one of those sweeping generalisations heard when the weather is discussed: "we no longer have the long hot summers we had when I was a child"...

The reverse is equally true. If better than average weather is experienced, people say "it won't last"; or "you mark my words, we will pay for this"! (and prophesy doom and gloom as a result)

I sometimes begin to think the British get the weather they expect and deserve!

It's true, isn't it? Few people act as if they believe anything can be done to alter the weather. Certainly few believe it seems to me, that prayer (and therefore God) can change it!

How short people's memories are! The British nation was called to prayer in 1940 when their army had been driven back on Dunkirk by Hitler's lightning invasion of the Low Countries. With no escape, and their backs to the sea, the whole nation

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prayed for those men. And then, do you remember what followed? Against all the odds, the Channel was "as smooth as a millpond" and the smallest of boats made it across to help in the dramatic rescue of the British Task Force. Without the miracle – and most accepted it was – the losses would have been appalling. Against all the odds, the great majority returned to fight another day.

Where is that faith in prayer, in a God who is able, in Britain today? The Scriptures challenge us about this state of affairs, and about the negative and unbelieving attitudes we so often adopt – often without being aware of what we are doing!

Look at something the Bible teaches. The psalmist reminds us of the close, individual and personal relationship God has with each one of us: "You made all the delicate inner parts of my body, and knit them together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! It **is** amazing to think about. Your workmanship is marvellous – and how well I know it. You were there while I was being formed in utter seclusion! You saw me before I was born and scheduled each day of my life before I began to breathe" (something the pro-abortionist lobby needs to consider?). "How precious it is, Lord, to realise that you are thinking about me constantly! I can't even count how many times a day your thoughts turn towards me. And when I waken in the morning, you are still thinking of me..."!

If God is so intimately involved with every moment of our lives then surely He is willing, where it is right, to bring about change – in even the smallest detail – in the lives of those He loves? Yet despite the truth of all this, the tendency is to laugh it all off. We believe, simply by failing to do anything, that there is nothing we can do to change the circumstances surrounding our lives – be it the weather, or a headache, or whatever. Be honest! Are you, if only occasionally, negative or pessimistic about such things? It is certainly often true of me. Particularly at times when my faith level plummets for one reason or another! If *your* answer is "yes", you too may have a spiritual problem. Think about it...

It has to do, for want of a better description, with what one might label as a "mind-set". Some people seem to be critical of everyone and everything? Criticism becomes such a habit that eventually the person is oblivious to what he is doing and becomes a 'pain in the neck'. It is avoidable because, in part at least, it results from the person's on-going negative, unforgiving, (yes, sometimes even hateful) attitude towards an individual or individuals; or is brought about by events or circumstances connected with that person's life.

Now the same kind of "mind-set" can apply to our attitude to the weather. Just as we have to do something positive to deal with a critical or carping spirit, so we need to be positive over attitudes about the weather; to put a guard on our lips; to say

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nothing unless we have something positive to say. But there is still more to it than that. Once we become negative and critical about the weather (or anything else for that matter), that critical or negative attitude doesn't stop there. It insidiously begins to permeate, as a "mind-set", every other area of our lives. It might be our daily complaints about government, the hole in the ozone layer, the Church, the vicar, a member of the family or erstwhile friend, our anger over straightened circumstances, or about any number of issues. If you find that difficult to believe, spend a little time observing the faces, the words used – and the spirit in which they are said – of those involved, for instance, in present-day politics, or those involved in television interviews!

And it goes much deeper than that. Jonathan Miller wrote: "nowhere else is the cult of misery so entrenched and nowhere else is so much pleasure taken in a zeitgeist of gloom. The British are not merely miserable, they are brilliant at it...it cannot be coincidental that two of the biggest television hits, 'One foot in the grave' and 'Inspector Morse', both revolve around characters who have elevated woe to an art form." He concludes, "If we can be conditioned to misery, why can we not condition ourselves to take a more balanced view: to exalt in achievement, rejoice in success and value those things about Britain which remain good...?" In his article Miller quotes Laurie Taylor – professor of sociology at York – who says, "It's all part of what Norman Tebbit called the culture of negativism. We've turned grumbling into an art form".

If that negative or critical spirit in an individual is not checked, the subject eventually becomes so embittered that he loses friends, and much else besides. So we know it is important to lovingly show the person what he is doing to himself. Then it's up to the subject to start changing that "mind-set" – not only by biting his tongue every time he is about to say something critical, but by thinking of something good, positive or complimentary to say in its place!

Surely the most important thing of all is to see that a negative "mind-set" effectively denies God's control or ability to bring about change – whether it be in respect of a person, situation or circumstance. Let me repeat that. Intended or not, we effectively deny God's ability to bring about change! Now you and I can only change that "mind-set" when we acknowledge that there is nothing we can do about it; but God can! When we positively turn that person or situation over to God, we ask God to bring about whatever is needed.

Before reaching that stage, however, we have to ask ourselves the question: "Do we actually believe God can bring about such change, or perform such signs?" And because that faith level can be so mercurial, we have to review the question continually. It reminds us to look to God, not to ourselves, to bring about whatever

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is needed.

It is very important to note that this has nothing to do with the power of positive thinking, nor has it anything to do with autosuggestion. It has everything to do with the acceptance of, and belief in, God's promises to us as contained in Scripture, and that *with Him* "nothing is impossible".

"Oh yes! God can do signs and wonders, or work miracles," we may be willing to admit. Yet, isn't it true, that the areas in which we have the greatest difficulty concerning them is when it has to do with just the ordinary, everyday things – like the weather, or a cold, or a headache, or regular monthly menstrual pain or PMT?

Some find it easier to think of God getting involved in such miracles as 'walking on water' or 'raising the dead'.

"Stop your doubting and believe", Jesus said to Thomas. On another occasion He said to his disciples: "Ask" (literally "go on and on and on asking", the original Greek implies) "and you will receive". James, one of the disciples, wrote: "you do not have, because you do not ask"!

It's easy to illustrate why doubt and unbelief can have such a crippling effect. It's important to recognise the mercurial nature of our believing and doubting. Our human nature being what it is, we find ourselves – if we recognise the syndrome – waging an almost constant battle with those negative attitudes that so easily rise to the surface. No sooner do we think we have got our act together – and we really begin to believe in, and trust, God to undertake – than a new set of circumstances presents itself. In a flash our doubts, and consequent failure to trust God for the solution, take control of us once more.

Probably one of the most dramatic illustrations of this – with equally devastating consequences – is the story of the people of Israel standing with Moses on the threshold of the Promised Land. Of all people, they really had no excuse for what was to follow.