

where they do spend considerable time in prayer – often, actually those who are elderly and housebound. And that's something that I respect, and am very challenged by. But I think the 'imposter syndrome' for me is that how often it is in Christian work that I can squeeze out prayer, out of my life.

Yeah.

[6] *You write about St Paul versus the 'Super Apostles', as he calls them, who've criticised him unmercifully, and as far as we can tell, unfairly. He defends himself pretty forcefully, largely by saying they're denying the Gospel of Grace. What does the 'Gospel of Grace' mean exactly?*

DW: I think it means, for me, God's extravagant generosity that reaches out first to me, and doesn't love me because of my Christian work or abilities. The 'Super Apostles' that Paul refers to when he writes to the Corinthians are the people with great suits and great hair and great teeth. They're the preachers who have an anecdote for every occasion, whose worldwide ministry sales of their books are in the hundreds of thousands, who appear on certain brands of Christian TV all of the time. And the trouble is that you often look at that and you think, well, God's blessed them, because of their commitment, their obedience – at least, sometimes they give that impression. But in fact the Gospel of Grace is the one that reaches out to us in our weakness. Paul perhaps wasn't the most convincing of preachers

– his rhetoric wasn't very good. He was a 'sick charismatic' at times, that is, he had a thorn in the flesh, which he prayed about – and God didn't seem to do anything about it. But it's in our weakness that God's Grace loves us, transforms us, works with us. One of the most extraordinary things about my experience of God is the way that God uses me when I'm at my weakest, rather than when I'm at my strongest. And I think for me that's the Gospel of Grace.

You talk about Paul's 'thorn in the flesh', and we don't know what it was, do we?

DW: We don't. We've no idea. Wouldn't it be great to have something more to the Bible than just what we've got. A kind-of 'Ask Paul the questions that you really want to ask!'

[Laughter]

[7] *Well he kept praying to have it taken away again and again and again. And, as far as we know, it wasn't. I wonder whether our Voices felt that it's important to persevere with prayer?*

Diane: **Oh yes [laughs] and that's partly because I think it's a habit. It's something that you learn to do by doing it. And because I don't think prayer is always about having an immediate answer, and some of it is more about your exploration and holding of an issue, than it is about a writing-on-a-wall response.**

Dani: **Oh absolutely. Sometimes we get answers to our prayers but we don't recognise we get answers. And**

that's the difficulty. So sometimes you're intent on praying lots - when you've actually already got the answer. So the trick is, I believe, is to listen. To have those moments to listen, in quietness.

Julian: **I think it's very important to persevere with prayer, but inevitably, with lifestyle and 21st century life, you go through times, weeks, months even when the prayer doesn't happen, and then you suddenly feel guilty and you get on with it, and then you discover that it's a really nice thing to do, and then you persevere for quite a while, and then something gets in the way. So yes, it is important to persevere, but I think it's important not to beat yourself up over it.**

Persevere, but don't beat yourself up about it.

[8] *I think this feeds into the question of how much and how often and how effective prayer should or can be, which you write about under the title of The Slot Machine of Faith God. Could you quickly explain that for us?*

DW: Many people think about God as a bit of a slot machine, in the sense that if you put enough prayers in the top, and pull the handle, you've got a better chance of getting the answer. And I think there's a difference between perseverance in prayer and just mindless superstition. John Wesley talked about this a great deal: he talked about don't bore God with endless petitions. That's different from perseverance. God's not going to respond to us simply if we have 57 prayers all said one after the other, rather than just one. It's the

heart that's important. And also, God is not an automatic machine. God's a person. And so, in conversation with someone, in relationship with someone, you don't get your own way by simply repeating the thing over and over and over and over and over again. There's a sense in which, with a person, you work together to come to some agreement – to come to some kind of way forward. And so the way that we view God has not got to be this automatic slot machine. That's not who God is. God ultimately is personal. And our prayer is about a relationship.

Very good, thank you.

[9] *The last section of this session looks at the statement: it's not how you pray, but who you pray to. Looking at the Lord's Prayer, you say the image of God as Father has been at the core of Christian spirituality. True as this is, I wondered if the opening words, "Our Father", were a problem to any of our Voices.*

Diane: **As a feminist I would say yes, "Father" does have problematic overtones for many people, and not everyone has a positive relationship with "Father". But in its cultural context it would have been richer, and would have held together an understanding of a parent, an overarching, caring being – so in that sense that isn't a problem.**

Dani: **I think you have got to be confident in who you are and what you are. And therefore these – I find them as distractions. I think it's not necessary to believe that God is anything other than a father, which**