

22nd April 2024

Vicarious

vic·ari·ous

[vɪˈkeːrɪəs, vʌɪˈkeːrɪəs]

adjective

*performed or suffered by one person as a substitute for another
or to the benefit or advantage of another*

Many years ago, I looked after John when he was very sick, to allow his wife, Sara, to have a break. This profoundly Christian man was a teacher in a Church-run lay-education centre. He had told me that he had lost his ability to pray. "I am in a desert," he said, "and my prayers are dry. There is no God to take heed. I have no prayers." I had no idea how to respond.

His pastor and friend came to visit. When he was leaving, he told me that John had also told him about his prayers being dry. "I told him this was OK," he said, "because it happens to us all, me included. I reassured him that he needn't be distressed by having no prayers to offer. Because I, and lots of others, were saying his prayers for him." This was *not*, you will note, people praying *for* a sick man. But people *praying his prayers* for him when he couldn't pray himself. Here was a release from pressure, anguish, distress and a sense of failure for John. Here was a man, fearful in his Godless desert, being met in his need and offered reassurance.

Thank God for "vicarious prayer". There are people who pray for me, and I'm grateful for that. But I also know people are *praying my prayers* for me, just as people did for John, when I have no prayers to offer myself.

In 1926, Mahatma Gandhi wrote in *Young India*,

*Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul.
It is a daily admission of one's weakness.*

Here was prayer that was Gandhi's "longing of the soul", but it was even more important when an "admission of one's weakness" was overwhelming. When I am in my Godless desert and *my* prayers are dry, I know there are vicarious prayers being offered that are also mine. How can this be? I have absolutely no idea! But I know that it happens.

My prayers are not dry today, for I am not in John's desert place. But I may be again, and that's when I'll need vicarious prayer once more. For I know the peace it brought to John in his desert times all these years ago, vicarious prayer – to which, in humility, I added some prayers of my own.

A prayer for today

Prayers ... mine and those of many others ... becoming one ... thankfully! Amen

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