THE PROBLEM OF UNANSWERED PRAYER

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Category: Observations

I'm perfectly willing to admit to being out of the loop with Christian news in the UK and as I result, I've only recently learned about the project to build the Eternal Wall of Answered Prayer.

If you are unaware of it, this is a project to build a massive structure, in the Midlands (it will be higher than the Angel of the North) to celebrate answered prayers.

> *Eternal Wall will make hope visible to the nation on a huge scale. Each one of its million bricks will represent an answered prayer, contributed by individuals from all across the UK. The monumental piece of public art will be the largest database of hope stories in the world.*
>
> *From the project website*

Those who know me, won't be surprised to know that I'm not particularly impressed by this project. A proposal to build something which honours answered prayers, but which makes virtually no mention of the God who answers prayers, is never going to get me particularly excited. Not only that, but any building which claims the word "eternal" has just too much of a sniff of Percy Bysshe Shelley about it for my liking. I can also, not surprisingly, think of other uses for the money.

If you want to dig into the theology of the project, my friend Tom has written an excellent blog post which explores some of the aspects. However, I'd like to just pick up on one little inconvenient truth, that makes me question the wisdom of the project.

The whole point of this project is to celebrate answered prayer. (Just as an aside, I'm not convinced that we are called to celebrate answers - we are called to celebrate God - and we already have buildings for that purpose, they are called churches.) My problem with this is that many, probably most, prayers are not obviously answered.

Before you accuse me of heresy; I believe in a God who answers prayer. I've seen God work in remarkable - miraculous even - ways in response to people's prayers. I also know that he can answer prayers in less obvious ways; by changing us rather than our circumstances. I know all of that, I've taught it and I've written about it.

However, I also know that every day, thousands, if not millions, of people in this country cry out to God to change things; to save the life of a terminally ill relative, to rescue a failing relationship and so

on. And for the vast majority of these people, nothing happens. Loved ones cry out desperately to God, but people still die and hearts are still broken.

I'm sorry, but building walls and monuments is relatively easy. Engaging with the difficult and painful task of explaining why a loving, supernatural God is apparently absent when people need him most is far harder. Our society doesn't so much need a monument to answered prayer as a church who will get to grips with the mystery of unanswered prayers. If our theology and witness can't cope with this, then we don't have a lot to offer in the middle of a pandemic.

I know that the people building this monument mean well, but as far as I can see, it is a slap in the face for those whose most concerned prayers have not been answered - and that would be a huge proportion of the British population.

Just a couple of thoughts in closing. I've seen a number of people suggest that this building could be compared to a cathedral and that no one questions the value of cathedrals. The thing with cathedrals is that a distance of a few centuries allows us to forget the dreadful conditions that those who built them laboured in. Yes, they are wonderful objects today (Durham Cathedral is the best building in the world), but are they worth the suffering they caused during their construction? Their value is, at best, debatable. Likewise, others are suggesting that this project will create work for people in the construction industry. That is true, but a similar amount of money could create sustainable jobs, rather than just a one-off project.