

Background and Commentary

Background

Robert's work was written as an entry to an RE writing competition organised by a local authority SACRE in the West Midlands. In its category it won first prize. The work was written in school but also as a project that Robert worked on in his own time. He had plenty of opportunity to draft and re-draft the work ironing out any mistakes making it possible for him to submit the work in a finished form he was happy with. In the competition guidance it was suggested that entries should be between 300 to 500 words in length. The subject could be anything related to religion or belief. The particular question Robert chose to write about was one of ten questions that were put provided as suggestions in the competition guidance.

Commentary

For a person of his age Robert shows a high level of sophistication. Instead of giving a simple "yes" or "no" answer to the question his main response is to say that prayer is not a waste of time but that in some sense prayer is helpful and effective. What makes this piece of writing so exceptional is the way in which he expands on his answer and with great clarity expresses and defends his views. He gives concrete examples to explain what he means. He explores situations in which he believes prayer can be effective but also where he thinks prayer is ineffective and is a waste of time. He also expresses his thoughts about the nature of God to support his central argument. His understanding of God is a subtle one. He doesn't believe in a God who does whatever humans may ask satisfying their greed or as he puts it, "our every wish". His likening of this kind of God to a fairy godmother who grants our wishes shows not only a developed and sophisticated idea of God whose ambition for humanity goes beyond material possessions or our egotistical desires. It also shows his ability to express himself in a vivid and imaginative way using an effective analogy. His idea that prayer may be a "comfort" to a person, that it may in a sense give a person a "positive outlook" and that it may also be particularly rewarding when undertaken with others shows a good level of psychological insight.

How might the work be improved?

The view of many is that prayer does not just provide psychological comfort and strength. Many would wish to say that in addition to the comfort, guidance and positive outlook that Robert writes about they believe that because they pray wonderful, mysterious and extraordinary things happen which otherwise wouldn't happen. By this they do not mean that prayer gives them the benefits of having quality time with God or a sense of well-being. What they mean is that good fortune comes their way and they believe that God is the cause of that good fortune. Given the word limit and perhaps the more contentious aspect of this claim it is not surprising that Robert did not share his thoughts on this view of prayer which goes to the heart of why many believe prayer is not a waste of time. Is prayer not only psychologically effective; is it directly effective in non-psychological ways in people's lives? Are claims of this kind which are made about prayer true? Does God really engage directly in the lives of individuals making things happen which otherwise wouldn't happen? This claim which is important to many people who say that prayer is not a waste of time provides another challenging area of thought that Robert might be encouraged to explore, think about and share his views on.