

The Power of Need

Marilyn Vos Savant is the smartest person in the world, at least to hear the Guinness Book of World Records tell it. She writes a column in Parade magazine where she fields reader inquiries and challenges that range from word games and math teasers to requests for arcane information. Some questions, however, defy even her formidable intellect. She recently published a selection of these.

"Didn't Louise XIII have any furniture? Everybody's heard about his son's furniture, but what about him?"

"When a jack-in-the-box plays 'Pop Goes the Weasel,' why does a clown always pop out instead?"

"Do you think daylight-saving time could be contributing to global warming? The longer we have sunlight, the more it heats the atmosphere."

"I've observed a flock of geese flying in a 'V' formation. Is that the only letter they know?"

They taught us in school that there is no such thing as a stupid question, but these samples strain conventional wisdom. The redoubtable Ms. Marilyn, at any rate, admitted that she hadn't even tried to solve such riddles as, "When I dream why don't I need my glasses to see?"

Despite such silly queries, questions remain a staple of human discourse. A lot of serious communication lives in the rising inflection at the end of a sentence. This may explain why the Gospels contain so many questions – over one hundred of them in Mark alone. Some of them Jesus asks: "Who do you say that I am?" "What were you arguing about on the way?" Some of them come from his opponents: "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders?" Some of them Jesus, like Marilyn, refuses to satisfy: "But he kept silent and did not answer." "But Jesus made no further answer."

The one question that Jesus always answers – and always with a "yes" – is the request for help. My colleague Kathy Maxwell points out in her doctoral dissertation that supplicants in Mark's gospel almost always come off looking good. "These," she asserts, "are the people who are healed; these are the people with faith."

Powerful people, by contrast, find frustration in the presence of Christ. They come with agendas to execute, with power-bases to protect, with official knowledge to dispense. They never request anything from Jesus, and even when they ask a question it is usually to elicit a predetermined reply. But the supplicants come with other things – leprous lesions or hemophilia or corpses or demon-ravaged sons. And they don't ask in order to defend their turf or show off their learning or please their constituency; they ask in order to receive. And they do.

So what is your question for Jesus? What is your empty-handed, open-hearted, top-of-your-head, bottom-of-your-heart supplication to the one who promises to hear? Maybe the most important question ever asked is the one Jesus asked the blind man, the one he asks us all: "What do you want me to do for you?"

Help, I need somebody!
Doug