

## PERSISTANCE IN THINGS OF GOD    OCTOBER 21, 2007

Once again as we read the prescribed scripture, we come face to face with another parable of Jesus, the great story teller. Here we have a judge who feared no one, neither God nor man. In all likelihood, he had been appointed by Herod or the Romans to hear petty cases. These judges were known to be corrupt and very open to bribes for favourable sentences or decisions. In other words, the more money you were willing to pay, the better your chances to win.

Into his court comes a widow. The term widow in Jesus' day was equivalent to saying the person was very poor. With everything stacked against her, she pleads with the judge to vindicate her against her adversary. She knows that she has neither money with which to bribe the judge nor power to bully him. All she has is her capacity for persistence. She comes back every day determined for justice. Finally, she wore him down: he granted her plea not because he had any sense of justice, but simply to be rid of her. Her persistence had been her weapon against this corrupt judge.

This parable reminds us of another of Jesus' stories also in Luke's Gospel. This one follows Jesus' response to one of his disciples who asked Jesus to teach them to pray. The response of Jesus to this request was our beloved Lord's Prayer.

After this prayer was taught, Jesus goes on in chapter 11 verse 5 to tell another parable. This time, he asks: which of you who has a friend will go to that friend at midnight, knock on his door, and ask him to lend you three loaves of bread as you have just received company and you have no food in the house. Would your friend shout at you to go away and stop bothering him as he and his family are in bed and he can not get up to give you anything?

Jesus says that even though the man does not want to get up, he will get up and grant his request as the man repeatedly knocking at the door is his friend.

Then Jesus says these wonderful words: "I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks will it be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for fish will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

As we read these two similar parables of the persistent widow and the persistent neighbour, we have to remember that a parable is a story intended to only teach one truth. The details are not the important thing. God is not being compared to an unwilling neighbour or an unjust judge, nor is his answer to prayer attributed to selfish motives. The only moral of these two stories is the importance of our persistence in prayer. If persistence achieves its end in our every day human relationships, how much more will it achieve in our relationships with God!

Note the action words Jesus uses for petitionary prayers, those prayers where we bring our requests before God. These words are ask, seek and knock. These are not passive words but words depicting deliberate action – ask, seek and knock. Jesus’ assertion was that prayer will be answered. In this he is absolute and unqualified, no ifs or buts. However, we need to remember Jesus’ own prayer as he faced death: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done.”

So here we learn the lesson that true petitionary prayer is an act of exploration. In these prayers, we seek to discover God’s will for us that we may submit to it. This is a wonderful concept for us to learn – our prayers to God are one of our ways to discover God’s will for us.

Jesus had great confidence in the value and power of prayer. If we can trust our human fathers and mothers, how much more can we trust our heavenly Father, he asks. Thus we move from the possible goodness in men and women to the perfect goodness of God. To Jesus, God was goodness itself. It is before this goodness that we could come in prayer and petition knowing it is not an empty gesture or a waste of time. As ancient leaders in the faith have said: Ask of God habitually and faithfully; do not be afraid to ask and do not be discouraged from asking.

The one true thing these stories illustrate is that God cares for us, that he listens to our prayers, and that he rejoices in giving to us what we need. God may not give us all the good things we happen to ask for, but he is always ready to give us his best gift – the gift of himself, the Holy Spirit. Note that this is the one gift he can not give to us without our asking. When we ask, the Spirit is there for us.

Barclay, the commentary writer, says this about God giving to his children what they need: “This is true, but we must remember that that is no reason why we should expect to get whatever we pray for. Often a father has to refuse the request of a child, because he knows that what the child asks for would hurt rather than help. God is like that. We do not know what is to happen in the next hour, let alone the next week, or month, or year. Only God sees time whole, and, therefore, only God knows what is good for us in the long run. That is why Jesus said we must never be discouraged in prayer. That is why He wondered if men’s faith would stand the long delays before the Son of Man would come again.

Barclay reminds us that we will never grow weary in prayer, and our faith will never falter if, after we have offered to God our prayers and requests, we add the perfect prayer, Thy will be done.”

Our Old Testament lesson today was once again from the book of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah reminds the people over and over of God’s reluctant anger with their lack of religious fervour and their short memory for all God has done for them. Jeremiah made graphically clear how disappointed God was with his people’s attitude and their unwillingness to take seriously their role as his grateful, covenant people.

Jeremiah goes on to say these words from God: “Behold, the days are coming ... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke.”

God then speaks about this new covenant: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people.” Then to the relief of Jeremiah, God says: “For I will forgive them their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

These passages may be the most important single teaching of Jeremiah, where his religious thought reaches its climax, one of the high points in Old Testament teaching which also came to have great importance in the New Testament. These words from Jeremiah lie behind the words used by Jesus for the Last Supper: “This is the new covenant in my blood.”

In other words Jeremiah glimpsed the truth that God had moved on from the old covenant with the Israelites which involved land, property and their declaration that God would be their God forever.

Now God would create a new covenant in the hearts of all men and women and write this covenant into their very hearts. Jesus reminded the disciples that his blood about to be shed for all was the crowning sign of the length to which God would go to convince his people of God’s commitment and everlasting love. In other words, God was fully committed to his original creation of men and women wherever they may be.

This picture drawn by Jeremiah is valuable to us today as we examine our prayer life. He is stating that God has built into our very being and soul the capacity for good, the capacity for right relations with our fellowman. But even more important, God has given us the capacity for a close relationship with God himself.

This relationship is nourished through our study of our faith and in our private and community prayer life. The new covenant is in our hearts and we need to respond in grateful thanks.

We started today with the story of the persistence of the widow and the neighbour. They would not give up and kept up their determination to reach for what they believed was necessary and just. Ask of God what you will, says Jesus, for God knows our needs and wills the best for us.

Prayer is a life long activity for all who believe. Most of us mean well in saying regular prayers of thanks and petition for others as well as for ourselves. However, we get busy and before you know it, it has been some time since we stopped and prayed to God.

Mohammed as he was setting up Islam as a faith, understood all too well the way life hinders our best intentions for prayer. Thus, he set up daily ritual prayers to be said by everyone at prescribed times in the day. It is not only a powerful act but it is a witness to faith in all areas of life. We Christians sometimes poke fun at these rituals people must observe.

However, the fact remains that we need to be intentional about prayer, to show persistence in developing a prayer life and to ensure we do not neglect God our Creator.

Thanks be to God for his willingness to wait for us and his capacity for patience with us as with the best of intentions, we wander from prayer which we know should be central in our life.

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