

Pentecost 22 – Wesley 9 & 10.30am – 20<sup>th</sup> October 2013

Reading: Luke 18:1-8 'Persistent Prayer'

Text: **"Then Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." Luke 18:1**

### Introduction

Over my considerable years of ministry, in a variety of settings, I have been called upon to pray.

Not all of them easy situations, not all of them instances when I had expected to be asked to pray or when it was inferred that prayer was necessary.

Sometimes as a clergy person you hesitate to pray, not wanting to put your ideas/faith onto others in their situation. Yet often, this is what is being either verbally asked of you or suggested that you should pray.

I have been asked to pray for rain in a farming community experiencing drought. Is this appropriate or do you just do it? I simply did it!

As the mine chaplain, I was asked to pray for the safety of those working there.

When one was killed some time later, was it my lack of strength in prayer that they died in a preventable accident? No, but you wonder.

With a family, standing around a hospital bed, watching a loved one with life slipping away, being asked to pray for healing, knowing full well the individual before you has only a short time to live – how do you pray? (probably badly is my answer).

Sharing with a family who has lost a child to 'cot death' /SIDS or whose child has tragically been killed – prayer is difficult yet often asked for.

Sharing with troops in an operational zone where there may well be deaths, prayer does not come easily, or at least not for me.

Hence this parable, and we need to remember it is a parable, that is a teaching story with meaning or meanings, is a challenge for me.

It challenges me both with the perseverance to continue to pray and also not to lose heart. Two important aspects of faith for us all to remember.

### The setting and the parable

The setting of this parable in Luke's Gospel is shortly before Jesus entering Jerusalem and his last days. It is a teaching parable specifically aimed at his disciples, those close to him. It is as though Luke has placed this parable here to remind them that things are about to get particularly difficult and they are called to pray persistently and not give up their faith in the troublesome times to come. How often do we hear it said, 'I used to go to church but when I went through a difficult time I lost my faith, or the church did nothing for me so that was the end of my church going.'

How sad, because at that very point of need people cut themselves off from a support group, a faith group and a community of hope.

Yes, as the people of God, we do fail our friends and neighbours but here is a call, by Jesus, to persevere with our praying and not to give up.

The parable has two characters – the person of power, the judge, and the person of no power, the widow. The widow, back in Jesus' day, was vulnerable and helpless as she had no family to support and protect her. She was on her own. We don't know what justice she was seeking and against who except we are told it is an 'adversary'. We are also told that the widow eventually succeeds to get the

judge to give her justice because she keeps coming to him and in a sense bothering him. Hence the judge succumbs to her perseverance and she gets justice.

Jesus likens this to those who 'cry out day and night to God' – God will see that they get justice and quickly.

Jesus concludes the parable with a verse that seems strange:

“When the Son of Man comes will he find faith on the earth?” vs 8

Here we have the focus of the parable thrown back onto the widow and her perseverance and faithfulness in prayer. Will there be others like her prepared to pray constantly and not lose faith?

This parable is not about the mystery of answered or unanswered prayer but rather to teach the disciples, and us, to pray unceasingly.

### Story

As a newly ordained minister in my first country parish I learnt a lot about prayer from a beautiful lady called Agnes. Agnes had a youngish family and was an incredibly faithful person. She got the worst news possible – inoperable cancer was diagnosed and she had only months to live. Her prayer wasn't about herself but about her family and how they would cope without her. Her prayer was that she would live long enough to see all her three children as teenagers. She prayed persistently and was accepting of her situation. She lived for another 2 & 1/2 years just long enough that all her children were teenagers. Far longer than the doctors had given her and I can still remember being at her bedside as she died and Arthur saying to me, 'Well the youngest turned thirteen last week!'

### Conclusion

In Henri Nouwen's book "With Open Hands" it concludes with these words on prayer, which I find meaningful:

“To pray means to open your hands before God. It means slowly relaxing the tension which squeezes your hands together and accepting your existence with an increasing readiness, not as a possession to defend, but as a gift to receive. Above all, therefore, prayer is a way of life which allows you to find a stillness in the midst of the world where you open your hands to God's promises, and find hope for yourself, your fellow people and the whole community in which you live. In prayer, you encounter God in the soft breeze, in the distress and joy of your neighbour And in the loneliness of your own heart.” (page 154)

May we take from today's Gospel the thought to pray fervently and persistently and not lose heart in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Hence when he comes again he will find faith on earth. Amen.