

Dorset South & West Circuit. Written Service.
Sunday 19th October. Prayer, Persistence and Promise.
Prepared by Revd Jean Quick.



Call to Worship. I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. Psalm 121:1

STF 545

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
be all else but naught to me, save that thou art;
be thou my best thought in the day and the night,
both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,
be thou ever with me, and I with thee, Lord;
be thou my great Father, thy child let me be;
be thou in me dwelling, and lone with thee.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might;

be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong tower:
O raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise:
be thou mine inheritance now and always;
be thou and thou only the first in my heart:
O Sovereign of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright Sun,
O grant me its joys after victory is won;
Great Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be thou my vision, O Ruler of all.

Prayers of adoration and confession

Lord God, of all that our heart's hold dear, thank you for this amazing world in which we live. For the diversity of the whole of creation. For the ways in which we can experience what you have made through our different senses. We praise you that you care for your people, In every age, in every place, in every circumstance. We praise you that you make no distinction between one person and the next And that we are all made on your image. We praise your faithfulness to us today, we trust in your faithfulness for tomorrow. God your love knows no bounds and your mercy know no limits. You embrace us and offer forgiveness and healing to all. God, forgive us for the ways that we discriminate and exclude, consciously or unconsciously. Forgive us for the limits and conditions we set on your love, mercy, and forgiveness. Forgive us for our lack of imagination that reduces you to simply what we can perceive. Forgive us when we take without thinking and forget to share with others. Fill us with Lord, with your peace and mercy. Free us from the destruction of our behaviour and restore us to a life lived in you. **Amen**

Bible reading: Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'"

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Reflection

This Bible passage is one of the few passages where we are told why Jesus tells the story before we actually hear it. Luke gives us an almost throw away line. 'Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.' Have you experienced times when you have felt like giving up on prayer?

Prayer:

I remember when I was really struggling with my prayer time asking a learned Minister what I should do? I told him I was trying to pray 'religiously' every day and read my bible but it was becoming like a chore. His wise advice was, "just give up, stop praying and reading your bible until you find you can't live without it." I think I lasted about three days before I found I could not give up and that prayer and reading my bible was an important and meaningful part of my life. It was something and still is something I can't give up. I sometimes in jest say to someone who I hear using an exclamation of God's name when in crisis, "Oh G..!" I can't help but encourage them to keep on praying, saying "He's listening". I do sincerely believe that even in those who would adamantly say they don't believe in God, yet when they are in difficulty it's as if the core of their being cries out to God, even if they might disagree. Why if they don't believe would they use God's name? Why not

something else, "Oh bus stops!" or something else that is just as absurd but gives vent to their anxieties? I firmly believe that we cannot give up on prayer. It's at the very heart of our being. Even more so than communicating with others. We may say we are not going to speak to a single soul for whatever reason. We can't keep to it because communication is so important to us and even more so to communicate with our Heavenly Father. Prayer is the Soul's sincere desire, as the hymn writer aptly says.

So why might the disciples even consider giving up on prayer? They had witnessed how important prayer was to Jesus. Why then would Jesus think that they might even consider giving up on praying? Luke is of course composing his gospel at a time when Christians were facing great persecution for their faith. The disciples also suffered persecution as did Jesus. Prayer is important in Luke's Gospel. We see how Jesus frequently withdrew to a quiet place and prayed. He was in prayer at his baptism, he spent a whole night in prayer before he selected his disciples. His prayer was so intense that he sweats drops of blood in the agony of prayer on the Mount of Olives. Luke recounted so many instances where Jesus prayed and with great intensity. Luke also tells us that Jesus on many many occasions teaches the disciples about prayer and its importance. He teaches them how to pray with sincerity and to persist in prayer.

Persistence:

The story Jesus tells to illustrate his point is about a widow who has been wronged and is persistently trying to obtain justice. Widows featured widely in the scriptures and are they are symbols of vulnerability. With no means of support, they were dependent on their children or charity. God has a special place for those who are vulnerable and in Deuteronomy we read, "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow." In both testaments the widows and vulnerable are people who God instructs that they are to be cared for. The widow in our passage is someone who, yes must be cared for. However she is unusual for the time period that the story is set in. In a Patriarchal society in which women were not so feisty and the men were the ones who spoke out. Women were usually quiet and bowed down. Yet this widow ignores social rules and she not only speaks out but is quite persistent about her needs. She is not one to be fobbed off and is persistent in her claim for justice. She doesn't give up.

The story is very similar to the one we find in Luke 11. Where a friend goes to his neighbour and asks him to lend him three loaves of bread so that he might feed his unexpected visitors. The neighbour has gone to bed and doesn't want to get up but eventually gets up because of his neighbour's persistence.

Have you had times where you have had to keep on being persistent? I guess we have had so many of those experiences and some were we might have given up. So many that it's hard to remember them all. Some are quite trivial and others were the years have clouded the details. One very simple example might be when you have come through the supermarket checkout, paid what was asked and on checking the receipt later you discover that you have been overcharged. Do you go back to the store or give up? Perhaps it's not worth the bother? Or perhaps you try phoning and you're put on hold. An automated answer tells you how far you are in the queue and then returns you to the canned music. Do you hold on or give up? In the scheme of things this is a very unimportant example compared to some of the bigger issues in life that we have had to face and decide what to do about. Persist or give up and move on?

The other character in the story is an unjust judge. Which is a bit of an oxymoron? A judge gives out justice but this Judge is known for his lack of integrity. We are told that he neither feared God or was concerned about what other people thought about him. Despite the weight of the scriptures and societies thought's about how Widows were to be treated, he didn't care. He only gives in so that she will stop bothering him or escalate events and attack him. In a Patriarchal society it's strange that he fears that she will attack him?

There's a danger with this story that if the message is misunderstood, it might be the reason why some would like the judge say that they neither fear God or what others might think of them. They see God as someone who doesn't answer their prayers, who is unjust and doesn't care about them. In reality Jesus is giving us a sharp contrasting picture. The unjust judge vs our Heavenly Father. Who delights to answer our prayers and cares ultimately about us. So why do we need to persist in prayer? St Augustine said, "When faith fails, prayer dies", in order to pray then, we must have faith, and that our faith not fail, we must persist in praying.

Promise

The end of the story is explained by Jesus and it's surprising who he tells us to listen too. Not the widow but the unjust judge! "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God...." There's the contrast and the promise.

This story is parable. When we hear a parable, we can place ourselves in any one of the characters. Who might you align yourself too? The widow or the unjust judge? Who is Jesus inferring that they are represented by the widow or the unjust judge?

In Jesus' stories quite often the deepest meaning of the story is to reveal what God is like, what God is about, and what God is doing in this world of ours. So, as we hear the good news in this parable, just maybe the really good news for all of us is that God is the one who is like that widow – unrelenting, persistent, assertive. God is the one who does not and will never give up. That's the promise. God has not, does not, and will not ever give up on us, even when we have acted as though we "neither feared God nor had respect for people." The story when we think about who might represent who, has even more surprises for us. In that, because of God's great love for us, Jesus became vulnerable like that poor widow, even to the point of being nailed to the cross like a common criminal. And, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's reign has broken into this world and continues to break into our world, bringing forth justice for all people.

The promise is that if we continue to communicate our needs to God, if we are persistent in prayer. Then He will answer our prayers. He will not put us off. He will give to us justice and act quickly.....*You promise?* We might question. We have said it to so many people in so many different circumstances. "Your promises are like pie crusts!" We exclaim to those who don't seem to fulfil what they promise. We are told God answers our prayers and quickly but what does that really mean? We pray for things that are really important and vital to be resolved. A loved one is sick, in pain. Or someone is facing great hardship and difficulties. The world needs our prayers in so many desperate situations. Wars need to end and people need healing and wholeness. So if we pray, is God going to do something about it and quickly? Do we have to be like this widow and keep on and on until God acts? It's a very difficult question to ask. Surely one the disciples struggled with trying to follow Christ and facing the never ending persecution for their faith. Is God listening to them or us? Or should the question be turned around? We pray, but are we listening for God's answer? Someone once described our prayers that are a little out of sink with God's will as like seeing God as our own personal vending machine; we put in enough money, we push the right buttons and out comes the blessing! But that doesn't seem to be happening. The wrong decision was made.

Something bad happened. Injustice was served. We're mistreated, not applauded or even appreciated. Could that possibly be the will of God? Look at who's telling this parable? Who's asking these questions? Someone who has a few weeks left before His crucifixion, which will represent the greatest act of injustice and unkindness in all of human history. And it was all the perfect plan and will of God. Will God right every wrong? Yes, but not according to yours or my plan, but His. Oswald Chambers, an early twentieth century evangelist writes on this text, "Some prayers are followed by the silence of God because they are wrong; and sometimes because the answer is bigger than we can understand." Sometimes the answer to our prayers is no not now. Sometimes the answer is quite different from the outcome we expect God to deliver. Today the the injustice of the world seems to be without penalty or judgment. However the last line of our text today gives us the full promise that God will right all wrongs in His timing.

There's a strange saying in this last verse, "when the Son of Man comes,". Why does Luke include this when the one we know as 'the son of man', is telling the parable and has not yet been crucified or risen from the dead? Well of course Luke is writing after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. It's thought that this gospel was written between AD 80-90 by Luke a physician and the author of the Acts of the apostle's. Written primarily to set out an orderly account of the gospel and for a Gentle congregation. The sentence that Luke added to this account about the unjust judge and the persistent widow is a pertinent question that challenges readers of every generation..... "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?". Will we be found persistently praying and trusting in God's unfailing goodness. Holding fast to the promise that is ours in Christ Jesus? In the great prayer that Jesus taught us, we pray; 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done'. It's a difficult prayer to persist in, when our hearts desire is, for our prayers to be answered, in a certain manner and time. Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world."

John 16:33

This very short parable and instruction has some very deep lessons for us. One commentator said look at the contrasts of the story in this way: The judge is unjust. / God is just; The judge eventually acts contrary to his crooked character, / but God always acts consistent with His just character; The judge shows compassion reluctantly, / but God has great compassion for the needy; The woman was a stranger to the judge, / but we are the children of God by faith in Christ; The widow was insignificant to the judge, / but we are eternally significant as the chosen people of God; This woman had no friend at court to help her get her case resolved , / but we have an Advocate who pleads our case; She could never approach the judge's bench, / but we can come boldly before the throne of God in prayer; She had no promise that the judge would care about her, / but God has given us a book of promises that He cares about us; This widow's only hope was a court of law, / but our hope is in God's throne of grace. A story full of promises if we will only persist in prayer.

STF 529

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
uttered or unexpressed,
the motion of a hidden fire
that trembles in the breast.

Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
the falling of a tear,
the upward glancing of an eye
when none but God is near.

Prayer is the simplest form of speech
that infant lips can try;
prayer the sublimest strains that
each the majesty on high.

Prayer is the contrite sinner's voice
returning from false ways,
while angels in their songs rejoice,
and cry: 'The sinner prays!'

Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
the Christian's native air,
our watchword at the gates of death;
we enter heaven with prayer.

O you by whom we come to God,
the Life, the Truth, the Way!
The path of prayer yourself have trod:
Lord, teach us how to pray!

Prayers of Intercession: based on the Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Loving God, the Father of us all we pray for our Circuit and our churches. We bring to you our particular joys and needs. May we be a beacon of light to the communities that our churches are a part of. Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Heavenly King, whose power is exercised with love, we pray that all in positions of power in our world and in our church may use it seeking both to know and do your will and to know and serve the needs of others Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Give us today our daily bread. Loving Father, the giver of all good things, we thank you for all that feeds us in body, mind and spirit, and we pray for those who are hungry today: those without enough to eat, those without company or love, those without peace or a purpose in life. Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Compassionate God, the help of all in need, we pray for those who are facing a hard task or decision, for those who are going through a difficult time because of illness, worry, or grief. We pray for ourselves, for those we know, and for those whose needs are known only by you. Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. Eternal God, whose kingdom stretches beyond the limits of our sight and beyond the bounds of death, we think with love of those who were close to us and are now with you in heaven and share in your glory. Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Merciful Father: accept these prayers for the sake of your son our saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

STF 254

Seek ye first the kingdom of God,
and his righteousness,
and all these things shall be added unto you;
Allelu-, alleluia:

*Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia,
allelu-, alleluia!*

Ask, and it shall be given unto you;
seek and ye shall find;
knock, and the door shall be opened unto to you;
Allelu-, alleluia:

We shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word
that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord;
Allelu-, alleluia:

The Blessing

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” **Amen.**
Romans 15:13:

