

Sermon for 19.10.19 Rev'd Jenny Simson

In the gospel this morning Jesus speaks to us about prayer. He tells us to pray always and not to lose heart, and he uses parables to help us identify with, and understand his message.

In the parables the lessons that are drawn out are meant to support us in the belief that God will not abandon us, and that we should not abandon God because things are not working out as we hoped – instead we are to remain faithful through steadfast prayer and dependence till the end.

In the first parable, there are two main characters - a judge and a woman. The woman comes to the judge to seek justice. Now, according to theologian Tom Wright, in the ancient Jewish law court the judge was like a referee between the plaintiff and the defendant – the accuser and the defender. For example if someone had stolen from you and you wanted to bring a charge against them; it was up to you to go to the court and plead your case – you couldn't go to the local police station and get them to do it for you. If someone had murdered a relative of yours, the same would be true. Hence every legal case in Jesus' day was a matter of a judge deciding to vindicate one party or the other.¹

Now the judge in today's parable is someone who did not fear God, and did not respect other people. He was indifferent to all, in other words.

He did however have the authority of the office and if one sought justice one had to go through him – there was no getting round him.

The woman in the story is a widow, and as was the way in this time and culture, what this meant was she was a non-person in many ways. She had no power to use usual methods of persuasion such as bribes, nor did she have a protector to support her. The only power this woman had was her relentless, determined persistence. And as the story goes it was enough, for it wore the judge down and she got the justice that she came for.

Jesus' point here is that since even an unjust judge can sometimes do justice when he is confronted with determined persistence, much more must we expect that the righteous God will vindicate us speedily. It is helpful to understand however, that "speedily" in this sense is in God's time. Jesus is speaking of the certainty of speedy action when God's time comes.

The second parable highlights the spirit in which we should pray. Once again there are two main characters, the Pharisee and the tax collector. They are both at prayer in the temple.

The Pharisee's prayer is bold and brazen and betrays a spirit of pride. He itemises the detail of his adherence to the law - all of which is no doubt true, yet his prayer lacks both humility and dependence on God. He glances at God, but contemplates himself. He has it around the wrong way – we are called to glance at ourselves and contemplate God.

¹ Tom Wright. *Luke for Everyone*, SPCK, London: 2004. p212.

The tax collector on the other hand cries out to God. He is in desperate need of God's mercy, forgiveness and healing. He is not caught up in anything but his need for God and as the story goes, he, not the Pharisee goes home vindicated.

The two parables speak to us about our persistence in prayer even though we may at times feel discouraged and also about our acceptance -that we can't go it alone – that God is central in our lives.

In today's epistle the theme of persistence, continues. We are encouraged to remain persistent in faith. We are to continue in what we have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom we learned it - that in Jesus Christ we live in the new covenant that is not like the old one but rather one when Gods ways are written on our hearts -

And we hear these beautiful words in the reading from Jerimiah in the first reading.

The new covenant is the gift of God who is close - who dwells within. It invites us to make space for that gift – not going off looking elsewhere. Here and now it means encounter with God though Christ in the temple within at a level that changes us.

Our expression and experience of this encounter is called prayer and we are to “pray always and not to lose heart” in Jesus words.

Now as we know there are many forms of prayer. There is contemplative prayer, centring prayer, silent pray, discursive prayer, breathe prayer, song and music prayer, just to name some. However whichever way we pray, and wherever we pray - in a monastery or in a car park on the way to work – we are not to get hung up on how or where we pray because each will have its goodness – the important part of prayer, is that in it, we meet the Christ who dwells within.

Theologian Ian Matthew, in his book Soundings from St John of the Cross: The Impact of God, writes that Christ's resurrection means that what he was then, he is for us now, and we can find him now as they found him then.²

In prayer we are being invited to think of him, talk with him, adore, desire, be anxious or sorry, be grateful and praise; to look at him as he looks at us.

To be present to him as he sits at the well, wanting to quench our thirst with living water. To be there with him as he enters the closed doors, stands among us, and breathes peace into our being. To be there with him, walking with the crowd, approached by the woman with the haemorrhage who touches him. To ponder our own need for healing, to reach out and touch his garment and hold on to him in faith; to allow his love and power to search out our inner brokenness and to heal us there.

Whichever method we use for prayer our desire to meet him in the temple within is to experience the love of God for which we are made.

² Ian Matthew. The Impact of God, Hodder, London: 2010. p 143

Jesus words to us about prayer –to pray always and do not lose heart -are written on our hearts, so let us now enter into prayer with him, the one who awaits us within.

Dear Lord, We give you thanks and praise that you seek to meet us in the temple within. Strengthen our desire to meet you there, never doubting your presence but remaining faithful to you in all times of goodness and hardship. We thank you that you are with us offering help, comfort and guidance. We praise that you personally accompany each one of us in love and mercy. In Christs name we pray. Amen.

The Lord be with you.