

The Widow and the Judge

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 20th October 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Jeremiah 31:27-34; Luke 18:1-8

I have two questions for you this morning. Firstly, how is prayer for you? Is it something that comes easily, that you do frequently? Do you pray only for easy things, or for more challenging topics – like peace in Syria, or for someone you know to be healed of cancer? And what do you expect to happen when you pray for these things? Do you believe that God is listening, that he cares about the things you pray for, and that he is able to answer your prayers?

Believe me, if you feel at all challenged by these questions, so do I.

Here is the second question: how patient are you? For how many hours would you be prepared to queue in order to:

- Get on a ride at Thorpe Park
- Get the best bargains in a Boxing Day or “black Friday” sale
- Get tickets for a concert or exhibition
- Shake hands with the Queen or another celebrity visiting your town?

Have you ever tried to master a foreign language, learn to play a musical instrument, or lose a significant amount of weight?

Have you been prepared to keep working at a difficult relationship with a member of your family, a child, teenager or spouse? Have you supported someone in a battle with cancer, or a fight for justice in the courts?

If you have persevered through any of the last few examples, you may be able to put yourself in the shoes of the widow in Jesus' parable of the Widow and the Judge – sometimes known as the parable of the Unjust Judge.

On the one hand, the purpose of the parable, according to Luke is to tell us that we should “always pray and not lose heart”. It is about being patient and persistent, not giving up because the answer to our prayers is slow in coming. We live in an age of instant gratification. We expect to be able to find information quickly on the internet, not to have to queue for too long in the supermarket, to be able to choose whatever viewing we want on the TV or Netflix. By contrast, the widow in Jesus' parable was under no illusions about getting an instant answer from the judge. But she was driven by desperation: the only person who had the power to give her justice against her opponent was the judge, and she was willing to carry on hassling him until he gave it to her.

Thinking back to history, we admire people like William Wilberforce who kept on fighting for the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, or the women who fought for all women to be given the vote, or modern-day campaigners like Malala Yousafzai or Greta Thunberg, campaigning for education for girls or for action on climate change. People like these are committed to seeing justice done, to make the world a better place for everyone. The campaigners who succeed, do so because they are committed to the cause and willing to carry on fighting for it in the face of opposition and setbacks. They recognise that it takes time to achieve results, and that patience and perseverance are key.

When I was at University in the 1980's, I remember hearing that some students had superglued the cashpoint of Barclays Bank to protest against Barclays' illegal trading in South Africa, in defiance of the British Government's sanctions against the apartheid regime. But I only became passionate about the injustice that was being perpetrated in South Africa when I saw the film *Cry*

Freedom! That was when I began to pray seriously that the people of that country would be freed from oppression.

I had also been aware for some time of the persecution of Christians and the general oppression of the people behind the Iron Curtain, and visited East Germany myself. Like many Christians at the time, I prayed for an end to the evils of Communism and of Apartheid. I would like to be able to tell you that when both systems fell I wasn't surprised that our prayers had been answered; but in fact the answers to my prayers were much greater than I had expected! The same was true when the Good Friday Agreement was signed.

So now let us turn to the character of the judge in Jesus' parable. Jesus portrays him as corrupt and callous. He has no respect for God or people, and is only interested in himself. He does eventually grant the widow's request, but only because he is fed up to the back teeth with her constant complaining. The Greek word translated "wear me out" literally means "give me a black eye". The widow has made his life quite miserable with her persistence, and he'll give her anything if she'll only stop pestering him.

Does Jesus intend us to understand that God is equally unwilling to answer our prayers, and that we have to pester him until we wear him out? Not at all. This parable works by contrast. The point Jesus is making is this: if even a godless, self-centred and corrupt judge can be persuaded to do the right thing, don't you think your loving heavenly Father will answer your prayers in the way he knows best, and at the earliest possible time? Do you think he doesn't hear his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Trust me, Jesus seems to be saying, the important question is not whether God is listening, but whether we are really committed to what we're praying for. God desires to put things right in the world; but how important to *us* are the injustices we pray about? "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Jesus asks (v 8). The word translated "faith" also means "faithfulness". Will we be faithful in prayer for those who suffer and those who are oppressed? Will we be as committed to their cause as the widow was to hers?

I am aware that this does not address the question of unanswered prayer. For example, what about when we pray for someone to recover from cancer and instead they die? Not all prayers are answered with a "yes". Sometimes we'll be disappointed. The only comment I can offer here, which comes both from studying the Bible and from experience, is that God listens to all prayers, cares about all people, knows how each situation fits into the bigger picture, and weaves even suffering and injustice into his bigger plan for our good and the outworking of his gracious purposes. He also gives us strength to cope with loss, and teaches us more about ourselves and himself, if we are open to learn.

There is always a bigger picture than the immediate situation we are praying about. The context in which Jesus tells the parable is relevant here: in the previous chapter Jesus has been asked when the Kingdom of God will come. It's thought that Luke's gospel was probably written in the 80's AD, so the question was one that the early Church were asking too. They'd been expecting Jesus to return as King within the lifetime of the first apostles. The parable had a timely message for them about waiting in hope and prayer. It's timely for us too. The world we live in is imperfect and spoiled by sin, but God does promise that one day it will be superseded by a new heaven and a new earth¹ in which there will be no more pain or crying.

So we are to pray for ourselves and those in need in the light of God's final purposes of bringing an end to suffering and injustice. God has made promises and he invites us to wrestle with him in prayer for their fulfilment. This is beautifully expressed by the prophet Isaiah:

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels;
all day and all night they shall never be silent.
You who remind the LORD, take no rest,

¹ Revelation 21:1-4

and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem
and makes it renowned throughout the earth. (Isaiah 62:6-7 NRSV)

The letter of James ends with an encouragement to those who face suffering to look forward to the return of Christ as King:

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. (James 5:7-8)

So let us take Jesus' exhortation seriously: we should always pray and not lose heart. God is good, and his purposes are good. His grace is always available, and is made complete in our weakness². Let us trust in his faithfulness, and pray faithfully that we will see his promises fulfilled through our prayers, in our lives and in this world – and the next.

² 2 Corinthians 12:9