

## **Sermon for Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> October 2025, Year C, Pentecost 19**

### **Preached at St John's Baillieston**

#### **Luke 18:1-18**

#### **Sermon**

Chapter 18 of Luke's gospel takes place as Jesus is travelling to Jerusalem for the final time. By the end of Chapter 18, Jesus and the disciples have arrived near Jericho and then in Chapter 19 comes the triumphal arrival in Jerusalem, which we know as Palm Sunday. So, the parable we read today about the persistent widow and the unjust judge is one of the last of Jesus's parables that Luke offers us in his Gospel.

Hearing this reading, we will be aware of the tension between what Jesus appears to be saying about persistence in prayer, and our own experience of prayers that seem to go unanswered. Many of us have prayed for healing for beloved family members and friends, and yet no healing has come, and the person has died.

We have been very persistent in our prayers; we have not given up even when the news from doctors and consultants grows worse and worse. We've prayed daily for peace in war-torn places of the world, and yet peace remains slow in coming, if it ever comes at all. Dictators remain strong, God's creation is exploited and polluted, and justice for the oppressed seems further away than ever. Jesus, however, tells his hearers that if they persist in prayer, "will not God grant justice to his chosen ones, and quickly?"

Christians have come to all kinds of conclusions about how to resolve this cognitive dissonance between what Jesus seems to be teaching and our own experience. Some have concluded that the reason prayers are not answered is because we fail to persist – we give up too soon. Others suggest that we are simply praying for the wrong thing, or for the right thing at the wrong time, and

our role is therefore to pray for God's will to be done, whatever that may be. Most of us have prayed for peace and justice in Gaza every day for the last two years, and perhaps now it is beginning to happen, but if this is the result of prayer, then why do we see some results this week and not any of the previous one hundred weeks? Did God only just decide to answer prayer now, or do answers to prayer take time, working within the constraints of a complex web of human hearts to which God has granted free will.

More painful for those of us not directly connected to warzones are the deaths of those close to us after long illnesses like cancer. In their case, it is not a matter of persisting in prayer for just a little longer – time has already run out, and we are left wondering if perhaps we are not good enough for God to hear us, or perhaps God's unfathomable purposes are simply different to what we may want or desire.

It's undoubtedly the case throughout the history of the Christian faith, that there has never been a time when everyone saw the justice and healing that they were desperately praying for. Some will have done, but many others will not. The earliest churches, who were the first to read Luke's Gospel, prayed for many things they desperately wanted but did not receive: safety from persecution, torture, and execution for example. Yet, every apostle except for St John were martyred rather than dying of natural causes. We have stories of young Christian women being thrown to the lions in Rome, and the persecution of Christians didn't end until 313AD under the Emperor Constantine. That's nearly 300 years of persistence in prayer before any glimmer of relief, and many, many people had died in the meantime. We might reasonably ask, "What was God waiting for?" but it's not a question that Jesus ever answered. All Jesus told us to do was keep persisting, keep praying, not because God is like some selfish judge who needs to be continually harassed into doing his job, but because this is who we are, and

this is the nature of our relationship with our creator – trust and love through all things.

Even Jesus himself, when praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, did not receive the answer to prayer that he was asking for. “If it’s possible, let this cup pass from me,” he asked God, but he was almost immediately arrested, tortured, crucified, and executed. God had raised several people from the dead through Jesus’s prayers, but Jesus’s cousin, John the Baptist, was beheaded, and he himself was crucified.

The truth is, none of us know why prayers go unanswered, or are answered at unexpected times and in unexpected ways. We might comfort ourselves with the idea that there is a purpose and meaning in all our unanswered prayers, but in truth we can never truly know if that is the case. We might look at the early church communities suffering under persecution, and with the wisdom of hindsight notice that although they didn’t receive the safety and protection they longed for, they did at least receive what they most needed – a sense of God’s loving presence journeying and suffering alongside them, and the strength and resilience they needed to live faithfully in such terrible circumstances. But this is easy to say two thousand years hence, and even if, as the psalmist writes, “For God, a thousand years are like a day,” I am not sure that the search for meaning in unanswered prayer is ever truly healthy or helpful.

Instead, I think Jesus’s teaching from the parable of the widow and the unjust judge can be summed up in two words: *persistence and resistance*. Persistence, in the sense that Christians are called by Jesus to pray to God with honesty and sincerity in all circumstances, whether God gives us what we ask for or not, and resistance in our constant crying to God and practical action against the injustice we experience in our own lives, and in the lives of others throughout the world. Prayer, just like the Holy Spirit, is always both internal and external –

simultaneously introspective and meditative, while also active, outward-looking and transformative in the world.

I don't think we're ever going to understand why some prayers are answered and some are not, and that is no different now than it was two thousand years ago, or even earlier. Indeed, if there's any difference between the holiest saints and the rest of us, it's that holy people pray simply because they love God, and they're not anxious about the rules of how prayer works or doesn't work. They pray when things are going great for everyone, and they pray when they're in the middle of disaster, because prayer for them is not a transaction, it's a relationship. 'For better, for worse,' say the marriage vows, 'in sickness and in health.' A loving relationship persists steadfastly through all things.

Jesus wants us to persist in seeking God and resisting evil, not because this is how we pester God into answering our prayers, but because this is how God's kingdom of love grows around and within us. We may not understand the many winding turns our journey may take us in life. We only know that there is a kingdom we long for, and that the way there is through steadfast persistence and trust.