

Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> October 2016

[Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8](#)

[A Persevering People](#)

On holiday, Jean & I can usually be found wandering into many churches! Often I find myself profoundly moved by those I may encounter kneeling or sitting in fervent prayer – obviously greatly distressed. I can only remember one prayer of happy thanksgiving when a young woman ran into the church, kissed a statue of Jesus and ran out again in obvious joy. The story is told of what another tourist witnessed in Cairo: he noticed a man kneeling before the altar at Saint John the Baptist Coptic Church. Two others flanked the kneeling man with their hands on his shoulders. Seventeen others stood praying around this trio. The man kneeling stood up, leading the group to another altar where he knelt again. The visitor inquired about their actions. The man kneeling was dying. Doctors exhausted all options. Family members brought their loved one on a pilgrimage, praying at all the church altars and Holy Shrines in Old Cairo. Reflected on his experience, the visitor said. “I was struck by their fervent faith and their love, both for this man and for God. I don’t know what happened to him. I had witnessed an event of profound spiritual healing.”

We all know the story of how Jacob wrestled with God! Persistently, insistently, hopefully he argued crying out, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” Jonah, Job, Jeremiah all struggled with God.

Moses, the man of God, stands on the hilltop interceding for his people who are struggling for their survival in the valley below, attacked by the violent tribe of Amalek. His arms are raised in the classic gesture of intercession (later immortalized in the Cross of Christ, and still used by the celebrant at Mass.) When, out of sheer weariness, his arms begin to droop, Israel fares badly in the battle. With the help of friends, he manages to persevere in his mediating prayer, until victory is won. A beautiful prophetic image for Christ, whose prayer continued even when his soul was sorrowful, in the face of death. It supports the ideal of intercessory prayer on behalf of others - not, however, in a superficial way or for petty requests; but for matters of life and death, for salvation, release from sin, recovery from depression, strength to cope with problems, perseverance. And when we pray these things for others, we must do so seriously, with a love that is ready for practical service too.

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### **A Persevering People**

Today we have the story of the widow, who kept up her petition until finally she forced the judge to try her case and give her justice. Her situation was that of a poor person under threat, but with the law firmly on her side. There was no doubt about the justice of her case, but the problem was to have it taken into court at all. She stands for the need to pray constantly on our own behalf, as well as on behalf of others. We must recognize the depth of our need (especially for peace, love, grace and salvation), and turn to God in a continual petition to answer our needs. Of course, God is not unheeding- like the slothful judge of the parable - but often seems to leave our prayers unanswered for a long while. His will, according to Our Blessed Lord, is that we persevere in prayer and never abandon hope.

There is a way to pray with the heart, which God cannot but hear, and he cannot but answer. To speak from the heart is to speak to the heart. God can read the human heart.

The widow asked for something which God would certainly want for her – justice. Jesus elsewhere compares God to a decent, caring parent. Would such a parent give a child a stone when he asked for bread? Would a parent give a scorpion to a child who asked for an egg? If even worldly parents will give their children what they need, says Jesus, how much more will a loving God see to the needs of his children? On that occasion, Jesus concluded his teaching by saying that God will always give good things to those who ask him. Luke's version says that God will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask.

When we read this parable about perseverance, we usually think of it in these terms: God is the judge and we are the widow. This means we should persevere in pestering God until we are given what we want.

God can be moved to listen, to respond, to care, to act with justice. When we bring our own situations into the voice of prayer – honestly, insistently, persistently, courageously, hopefully – then the conversation with God moves in life-changing ways. So Abram became Abraham, and Jacob became Israel: Saul became Paul: new names for newness of life. And the woman yelling and knocking at the judge's door received justice: the transformative gift of salvation for her.

But what if we turn thing around and say that we are the judge and God is the widow? In some ways, this interpretation makes more sense.

We, like the judge, are basically unjust. Sometimes we, too, have no fear of God; that is, we do not allow God to scare us into being good. Similarly, like the judge we persist in refusing to listen to the cries of the poor all around us. But God is the persistent widow who will not go away. God keeps badgering us, refusing to accept as final our no to love. God will persist until we render a just judgement, that is, until we let the goodness out, until we learn to love. In Genesis after all (!) we are told we are made in the image and likeness of God.

These are surprising scenes for us as we look at our own relationships with God, our habits of worship, our attitudes to prayer. We look at the widow in today's gospel, insistently and hopefully banging on the judge's door, and we realize she was a pain in the neck and we do not want to be like that. We look at Jacob's story with even more horror: the man was a liar and a cheat, his life-long modus operandi was to manipulate and make deals, with his brother Esau, his father-in-law Laban, and even here at the ford of the river wrestling with God himself. We surely do not want to appear in the presence of God like that.

Annie Dillard, in her little book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, – published in 1982 – a collection of essays weaving her spiritual experiences with ordinary human reality, mused:

“Why do people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a package tour of the Absolute? ... On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? ... It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church: we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life-preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to the pews.”

Maybe we really do need to be tied down, to listen to God's badgering!

In fact, in the history of God's people, this does seem to describe the way God often behaves. Remember Jonah, running in the other direction but finding that he couldn't run far enough to get away from God. Think of St. Paul, breathing righteousness in his persecution of the people of The Way, until God caught up with him on the road to Damascus. Think of St.

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Augustine, revelling in his profligate life until his conversion, and writing the beautiful lament, "Late have I loved thee, O Beauty so ancient and new. Late have I loved thee."

Doesn't God sometimes act like this with us? Perhaps God has been persistent in calling us to knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Perhaps we have strayed from the path, for however long or short a time, and have heard God's voice calling us to come home. Or perhaps it is not so much that we have strayed, but rather that we have become complacent in our Christian lives and we hear God calling us to a deeper commitment. In whatever ways God calls us, the common experience is that God is persistent. We may not always want to hear God's call. We may have our own agenda. Perhaps we have put our trust in the things of this world

John Donne, poet and priest wrote thus, of his response to the persistent call of God in his life:

*Batter my heart, three person'd God, for you  
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow mee, and bend  
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.  
I, like an usurpt towne, to another due,  
Labour to admit you, but Oh, to no end.  
Reason, your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,  
But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue.  
Yet dearely I love you, and would be loved faine,  
But am betroth'd unto your enemye.  
Divorce mee, untie, or breake that know againe;  
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I  
Except you enthrall mee, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.*

*(Holy Sonnet IV)*

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