

Tidenham and Tutshill 16/10/22

Luke 18: 1-8 – Nagging God

Prayer

Sometimes you just have to nag to get things done. Or sometimes we have to be nagged if things are going to be done – and it's the latter that is probably more true in my experience. Does anyone else know about driving down the motorway; there's a sign for the next services, passenger says, *do you need to stop?* You don't but as you sail on by, you become aware of a frosty atmosphere and when you enquire, back comes *Well, I wanted to go*. So you say, well I say, *why didn't you say so?* Sometimes you do just need to say so.

Our reading this morning comes from Luke chapter 18, and it's clear, Jesus said, this story is to encourage his disciples to pray always and not lose heart. In Jesus's time and things haven't changed much in this respect, people had problems with prayer. How is it that the Bible encourages us to pray, to trust in God and bring him all our problems and needs, and when we do – nothing seems to happen? Does God hear? Does he listen? Is it our fault? Haven't we prayed long enough? Or hard enough? Do we need more faith? Do we need to nag God? I imagine those are the kind of questions that come to many of us who pray. Unanswered prayer. Maybe there is a question behind all of that – does God *really* care about what I care about?

To the story then that Jesus told. In a certain city – read a Middle Eastern walled village – they were all called cities if they had a wall around them, in a certain city there lived a judge. Again we need some rethinking – this is not some High Court bewigged fellow. This was a prominent man in the local community who acted as an arbiter in local disputes. He was one of the elders. And he was one who *neither feared God nor had respect for people*. He was proudly and fiercely independent. He had no time for God and he did not bow to anyone. He was one of the respectable men – pillar of society, probably a Town Councillor if not Deputy Mayor, member of Rotary, the golf club and possibly a freemason too. For the record none of the last three apply to me. We get the picture. There was also a widow in the story and she had a case she wanted settling. It was not a criminal matter – it was what we would call a civil dispute – and most likely it was an argument over some property or land. And she was a persistent blighter. In the ancient world widows were by definition vulnerable. They lacked a protector. Generally widows were poor, because they could not inherit their late husband's wealth or property. That always went to a male relative. They were generally defenceless in a society where it was the men who had all the power and influence. So she was after justice for something or other. But the judge was just not interested. The Old Testament is full of instruction about the need to care for the widows in the land, but this was a judge who did not fear God. But she went on and on; she nagged him until in the end he gave in and gave her what she wanted just to get her off his back – *so she may not wear me out*. One possible and more colourful translation would be – *that she may not beat me around the head and give me a black eye*.

So this was the story and Jesus wants us to think about it. That's what parables are like – a good wine that needs tasting and savouring and not just swigged down... So let's savour this parable... what's it about? Justice always wins in the end? Hardly. Is it that we should always be nice to widows lest they turn nasty on us? Probably a good idea to be nice to widows but this may not be the main point. Let me suggest that we have something here about God and something about prayer.

About God then. As soon as Jesus finishes the story, he says, *Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will God not grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?* Look at the character of the judge, says Jesus, and then look at God. At first sight that seems rather strange. We can

understand how God is like the father in the story of the prodigal son, waiting to welcome back his son, but is he really like this judge? Alexander Maclaren, writing many years ago, put it this way – *Every point in the description of the unjust judge is to be reversed and then we shall have the picture of our Judge.* This is a parable of contrasts then, but Jesus is really clever because he knows that a lot of people think that God is indeed like this unjust judge, and he wants to challenge this. Jesus knows full well that God does seem to delay in answering our prayers. But the judge delayed because he couldn't be bothered, he wanted an easy comfortable life. God's delay – if that is the right word – is not because he is deaf to our prayers or because he doesn't care about our needs or problems. God will be, he is the just Judge. Christians look forward to that great and final day when the Lord Jesus Christ will come again. Unlike the unjust judge he does care about our needs, he cares about justice. He hears our prayers. He might seem to us to delay in responding but that is only because he knows the best timing for an answer. He will bring justice to pass but the final call on that will be when Jesus comes again, which is still to come.

And what do we learn about prayer? Obviously when we pray and ask for something that is not God's will, we should not be surprised at the answer No. There are many things I would like - a villa with a swimming pool and vineyard in Tuscany would be nice, but I suspect that no matter how long I nag God about that the answer is not going to change. But we often read in Scripture that God will answer *yes*, if we ask according to God's will and purpose. That's what the little phrase *in Jesus' name* is about. It's not something we tack on to the end of our prayers to increase our chances! More seriously it is a very unwise parent who gives their child everything they ask for. Our passage teaches us to expect the answer, *Yes, but not yet*. Sometimes, quite often we need to learn to be patient and hang on in there. God's timing is not yours or mine. When we are tempted to become impatient, we need to learn there is time and we will be the better for waiting.

But that is not all. There is a question rather oddly tacked on at the end of the passage – *And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?* I think this question comes from the story, maybe from the character of the widow. She got her way by nagging. Is that the model for prayer? I'm not entirely sure it is. Jesus leaves us with this reminder about faith. So I wonder if this story is less about persistence in prayer – I can't imagine that God enjoys being nagged any more than we do – and more to do with perseverance and trust. If the answer to our prayer is *Yes, but not yet...* then what do we do in the meantime? I wonder if this is where Jesus is leading us. One of the early Church fathers put it, *Faith is the basis and foundation of all prayer.* Augustine, another one of the early fathers was more blunt – *If faith fails, prayer dies away; for who prays without faith?* Quite.

And that really takes us back to the beginning of the passage – *Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.* It is true unfortunately what Augustine also said that *many grow faint in prayer; and in the newness of their conversion pray fervently, afterwards faintly, afterwards coldly, afterwards carelessly as though they become presumptuous.* This is not a parable that tells us to nag God. It is a story that assures us that God does hear our prayer and he understands. But if he appears silent and not to answer, we should not give up trusting him. On the contrary we should hang on in there, trusting that in his time he will answer and that his timing will be just right.

Prayer

Notices

Banns

1. At Tidenham from 30 Oct the morning service will revert to 9am like it used to be pre Covid. This will enable refreshments after the service and less stress for those who have to dash to Tutshill.
2. David Rees is making steady progress and is now at home recovering.
3. Mandy Vaughan is celebrating 25 years as a Reader in Hewelsfield and St Briavels. There is a celebration service Sunday afternoon at 3pm in St Mary Magdalene Church, Hewelsfield.
4. Monday evening sessions with Tudor are back on THIS Monday at 7.30pm in St Luke's.
5. All Souls List. If there is a departed loved one you would like remembered by name at the annual All Souls service then please clearly print their name on the sheet at the back of the church.