

PENTECOST 21

'Jesus told the disciples a parable about the need to pray continually and never lose heart' Luke 18:1

The scene is a law court, with the plaintiff a poor widow whose enemy is probably someone who has refused to settle a lawful debt. She was in great need to obtain a legal settlement so she pleaded with the judge for justice. 'I want justice from you against my enemy' she cried. But the judge is - what he claims to be - someone who had no fear of God nor respect for man. So at first he does absolutely nothing. 'A helpless widow,' he thinks, 'without money or influence - why bother about her? Case dismissed!' Next day she was back again with the same plea, and this went on for several days. Eventually he relented and gave her justice. 'Maybe I have neither fear of God nor respect for man, but since she keeps pestering me I must give this widow her just rights, or she will persist in coming to me and worrying me to death.' And he did.

The judge is not meant to be a picture of what God is like. Jesus is not describing God as a miserable deity who needs to be badgered into compliance. Jesus is describing a situation on a purely human level in which a callous judge is persuaded by a persistent nagging to take action - how much more, he says, will our heavenly Father, the God of love, who loves us beyond what we can imagine; how much more will God hear our prayers. So it is a parable of encouragement for us to pray continually and never lose heart.

So what is this thing called prayer? All I can offer in answer to such a big question are a few reflections and suggestions for your consideration.

It has been said that prayer for the Christian is what original research is for the scientist - through prayer we are able to get in touch with ultimate reality. The author of the eighth psalm experiences this. He writes;

'When I look at the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars set in their place by thee, what is man that thou shouldst remember him, mortal man that thou shouldst care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than a god, crowning him with glory and honour.'

Here, prayer is contemplation - reflection - meditation. It is time when we stand and stare. The poet writes, 'What is this life, so full of care we have no time to stand and stare.'

There is a story of a Catholic priest in France who used to find a tramp sitting at the back of church at various times of the day. One day he approached the tramp and said 'What are you up to? Why do you spend so much time in here?' The tramp replied, 'I just sit here looking at him, and he looks at me.' That is contemplative prayer - simply being in the presence of God - the practice of the presence of God. Prayer is contemplation.

But prayer also leads to action. There is a true story of an anthropologist called Brody, who spent a year studying the tribe of hunter-gatherer Indians, in a remote part of Northwest Canada. Their territory was about to be crossed by the projected Alaska

natural gas pipeline. The idea of the study was to map their movements, and so to plan, as to minimise the impact of the pipeline on their way of life.

He found that when the tribe made their choices about which route to travel in their search for hunting grounds, they did not use maps as we might, they used dreams. For guidance they looked back at the dreams which their elders had experienced and used these as guidance for their movements. For Brody, in his attempts to guide the pipeline planners, he had to wrestle with maps and dreams, an almost impossible task. We often delude ourselves into thinking that we can devise maps for ourselves to guide us through our lives. But life is not amenable to being mapped out. We may be able to plan short term things like holidays and to some extent our work, but our dreams - our visions - our hopes and our fears, are the stuff that our prayers are made of. These we take to God in prayer - our hearts' desires - the things which ultimately matter. Jesus encourages us to 'Ask' to 'Seek' and to 'Knock' in our prayers to God. 'Ask, and it will be given to you' Seek, and you will find, Knock, and the door will be opened for you.'

Above all Jesus encourages us to pray for the coming of God's kingdom here on earth. 'Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.' The coming of God's kingdom implies a transformation of human society - its politics, its economics, its personal, institutional and international relationships. The kingdom is not some kind of extraterrestrial entity that will one day be imposed on the world from above. It is the liberation of the

world in which we live and move and have our being - the world we live in, know, touch and smell and suffer, is to be set free from all that corrupts it, and threatens to destroy it. But it goes even beyond that to the rediscovery of the real potential of the whole created order. That is why St. Paul wrote in Romans 8:22, 'The whole creation groans in travail as if in the pangs of childbirth. Not only so, but even we, to whom the Spirit is given as first fruits of the harvest to come, are groaning inwardly while we wait for God to make us his children and set our whole body free.'

Jesus told the disciples and so he tells us also, 'pray continually and never lose heart, and in the Gospel of John, he says, 'In very truth I tell you, if you ask the Father for anything in my name, he will give it you . Ask and you will receive, that your joy may be complete.'

AMEN.