**Luke 18: 1-8**

In 2017 a phrase became popular after US Senator Elizabeth Warren objected to the confirmation of Senator Jeff Sessions as US Attorney General. The United States Senate voted to silence her & Senator Mitch McConnell made this remark in a speech to defend the silencing – Nevertheless, she persisted.

Well, the expression went viral. Overnight, t-shirts were printed, TV episodes were created & Chelsea Clinton wrote a book about inspirational women - all of these had the title: She persisted. The English National Ballet premiered a new program of works all created by women with this title & in Minneapolis more than 100 customers lined up to get the phrase tattooed on their bodies. Nevertheless, she persisted.

And that could be a good summary of Luke 18:1-8 as Jesus describes a persistent widow & uses her as the example for us to persist with prayer.

I have a confession to make. Sometimes I read parts of the Bible & think, ‘I have no idea what that is all about. Why is this in here?’ If you know this experience, then, like me, you can relax because today’s passage is not one of them. At the outset, Jesus tells his disciples why he is telling this parable:

Why? They should always pray & not give up

When should they pray? Always

What should they always do? Pray

That’s the first point – always pray & don’t give up

The parable in v.2-5 has two characters:

A judge – who didn’t fear God & had no regard for people. He was controlled by his own ideas & inclinations.

A widow – who persisted for justice. She was a symbol of vulnerability & helplessness; in no position to bribe a judge & she had no protector to put pressure on him. She was armed with nothing except the fact that right was evidently on her side – & her persistence. She kept after the judge, “My rights are being violated. Protect me!”

Her persistence eventually wore the judge down. In the end the judge did as she asked for with no higher motive than the desire to be rid of her. He did not want her to wear him out.

Jesus is not likening God to an unrighteous judge. The parable is of the ‘how much more …?’ variety. Can you think of another time when Jesus used this logic?

[Matthew 7:11 - If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him?”]

In the case of this parable, Jesus is saying that if a wicked man will sometimes do good, even if from bad motives, how much more will God do right? Even if we think of God as an unjust judge, He’ll still answer, but He really isn’t like that. How much more will He answer us? It demonstrates how God looks or bends toward us; He is for us. He wants to align our hearts with his; we can be partners with him working in the world.

 Always pray; don’t give up

26 yrs ago on the other side of the world I heard a man give a remarkable testimony. David Hamilton joined the Ulster Volunteer Force as a teenager during the troubles in Nth Ireland. The UVF is a Loyalist paramilitary force, an illegal terrorist organisation, & they were opponents of the IRA. He grew up to become one of the most prominent figures of the UVF & a target for the IRA. He was repeatedly shot, orchestrated bombings & robberies & brought terror to the streets of Nth Ireland.

Eventually, in 1978, he was sentenced to prison for twelve years. His mother sobbed at the back of the courtroom. “There’s no hope for the likes of my son.” And yet, a little old lady said to David Hamilton’s mother, “I’ll pray for your son.”

And so, in prison, Hamilton, who said he’d smoked his way partway through the bible that was in his cell, heard a voice in his head one day saying to read the Bible. He quickly dismissed it; he had no interest. But this inclination persisted & he felt compelled to read the bible. So he began to read & one day a voice in his head said to become a Christian. Once again, he had no interest & dismissed it; but this thought persisted, so without really knowing what it meant, he decided he would. Through the prison chaplain, he learned more.

Now David Hamilton is a pastor at a church in England. “I went into prison as a terrorist & came out as an evangelist”, he says.

There’s lots to love about his story but when I remembered it this week, I thought of the little old lady in the story – who prayed. Perhaps she had the invisibility that older people in our society can feel; she may have been readily dismissed & not thought of as having great influence. On the contrary, the God of the whole earth heard her prayers & answered them. They were a team working together. There’s good reason to believe that little old lady whose name we don’t know has been far more influential than a celebrity with millions of followers on social media.

Remember the parable was of the persistent widow. And that widows were a symbol of helplessness. That’s a good posture or attitude with which we cry out to God. There’s so much we can’t control - & recognising what we can’t do & what God can do is a good beginning for prayer.

Always pray; don’t give up

In Kate McCord’s book, In the Land of Blue Burqas, she tells about conversations she had about prayer in Afghanistan where namaz is one of 5 pillars of Islam that identified people as religious Muslims. She writes:

My neighbours often asked if prayed namaz. My prayer practice was an important marker to them. I always responded that I did pray but that I didn’t pray namaz. That answer never fit their framework; it made no sense to my neighbours.

The women challenged her, “How do you know what to pray?” That excellent question reveals a vast difference in our understanding of prayer. For my Afghan neighbours, namaz is a beautiful ritual that must be practiced consistently. For me, as a follower of Christ, prayer is an intimate conversation with the God of the universe. I told the women, “I pray what’s on my heart. I pray for my family and my work. I pray for you & your family & for peace in Afghanistan.”

That explanation only deepened their confusion. I had had this conversation often enough to recognise the disconnect my prayer practice illumined. Afghans know I should pray namaz & I’m condemned if I don’t. Yet I did pray & even prayed for them. That’s a beautiful & honourable thing. I broke the rules yet showed myself to be spiritual.

Kate Mc Cord managed to change the paradigm about prayer by focussing not on the no. of times prayed/day or the ritual of it but to her relationship with the God to whom she prays.

Some Jews tended to limit their times of prayer lest they weary God. Based on the model in Daniel 6:10 of 3x/day, that was accepted as the maximum no. Jesus’ teaching in Luke 18 goes beyond that.

Always pray; don’t give up

Now I‘ve listed five reasons we don’t pray or persevere in prayer & then some counter arguments against them. Maybe you identify with one of these:

1. God won’t answer me because I can’t get my act together. I can’t even concentrate for half a minute before my mind wanders. Always pray; don’t give up.

That’s ok. Go for stream of consciousness prayers.

1. God couldn’t possibly answer me. My language isn’t sophisticated & I don’t know what I need to say. Always pray; don’t give up.

That’s ok. Use short sentences & just tell plainly what is on your mind in whichever language is most comfortable for you.

1. There’s no point in me praying. I can sort this on my own. Action is where is at, not being still & dependent. Persist with prayer.

Sooner or later you will learn there are things far outside of your control. Better to realise & start praying sooner.

1. My prayers won’t work. I can’t sit still; there’s too much to do; I’m too busy. Always pray; don’t give up.

That’s ok. Pray as you vacuum, drive, wash up the 100th cup for the day & as you wash up the 100th cup for the day & as you collapse on the lounge at the end of the day.

1. How can my prayers make much difference to anything? I’d give my right arm for the answer I’m seeking but God’s not going to listen to me.

That’s not what he says. “If you, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!” (Matthew 7:11)

It’s easy to be discouraged when we see no sign of an answer for our longed for prayers; pray on & don’t lose heart. Even when God’s answers aren’t what you expect or want.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6 )

Can you believe God’s promises? & if you can’t, can you ask him for the belief you need?

“Ask & it will be given to you; seek & you will find; knock & the door will be opened to you.” (Matthew 7:7)

Can I encourage you today to consider one of these:

* Borrowing a biography that powerfully shows the difference prayer has made in someone’s life
* Perhaps you could form a prayer triplet with two others at church & meet regularly to pray for each other
* Have a conversation at morning tea about an answer to prayer that you’ve had or you’d like
* Just spending a few mins thinking about what barriers to praying are relevant for you & if there is a quick fix to enable it

The second point I think this passage makes is that:

God is for justice.

The Russian writer & actor, Yevgeny Yevtushenko once said, “Justice is like a train; nearly always late.”

In v.3 the widow asked for justice, not vengeance. And Jesus from v.7 says, “Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day & night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, & quickly.”

Now, this raises a few good questions. Apparently the Greek here is difficult & may mean that vindication will come soon or it may mean ‘though he bear long with them’. In this case, the thought is that God may delay justice for a gracious purpose, either for strengthening his children as they endure hardship or to delay judgement for oppressors, giving them time to repent.

When the time for justice comes, Jesus says we can be sure of speedy action.

And then v.8 finishes with a question, will he find faith on the earth? The characteristic of the world’s people at that time will not be faith. Who will believe that God will make things new & right? Who will trust that He is both powerful & compassionate enough to bring about justice?

And how will you join with God in also being for justice? There are so many stories in the news currently about the world not being right. And while you may feel incapable of affecting much change, you can be the persistent pray-er. And you can use your voice.

Imagine if in the next month the politicians who represent us received 50 letters saying that we want them to work for us in bringing about a more just community – whether alleviating homelessness in Hobart, or strengthening anti-slavery legislation.

Imagine in our own contexts how we can put the brakes on corruption or violence. Imagine how we can honour those without access to power.

God is for justice. He is for you.

There’s a problem when the application of a Bible passage is that I have to do something. I need help. I can’t organise so much that I want for myself & prayer is no different. The thing that will get me to pray persistently – the ONLY things that will get me to pray persistently are: owning my desperation & reminding myself to whom I pray.

Don’t leave today thinking I’ve got to pray more by my own sweat & effort, but rather delight to be at peace with the Father, & with all the wobbliness of a small child’s conversation, tell Him what’s on your mind.

I always wanted to be better at playing tennis. Occasionally I hit a mean forehand down the court but I stopped lessons soon after all the other kids progressed to the next stage & my lesson group filled with younger kids. But there’s a way I could still win at tennis. Imagine if the game was doubles. And my doubles partner was Ash Barty. The world’s no. 1. Really, all I’d have to do to win is get out of the way. I’d just be on court for decoration. A minimal contribution, you could say.

Prayer is even better than winning at tennis with Ash Barty on your side. The God who is there & who is not silent hears the cries of your heart. Always pray & don’t give up. He is with you. God is for justice. He is for you. And we can persist with prayer because the One we pray to is strong & kind.