

**ADDRESS****20 October 2019****19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

Jeremiah 31.27-34	God's promise to Israel
Psalms 119.97-104	How I love your law!
2 Timothy 3.10 – 4.5	Persistence in ministry
Luke 18.1-14	Persistence in prayer

*Open our minds, O Lord, to hear and to understand your Word, and open our hearts to do your will. We ask in Jesus' name. AMEN.*

One of my earliest memories of Sunday School is the story of the little engine that could. Mr Vincent told us the story at least once a year, when the new kids came up from the infants school. Sometimes he told the story again during the year, and we big kids never tired of hearing it. Mr Vincent would draw a thick line on the blackboard in the shape of the mountain, the mountain of life -- first a gradual slope, then a steeper slope, then a flat peak, then a slow descent to the other side. Then he would bring out a brightly-coloured wooden cut out of an engine, a steam engine of course, there were no others in those glorious days, and dramatically recount the story.

The track was steep and the load was heavy but the little engine would not give up. The cut-out moved up the first slope. *I think I can, I think I can*; the cut-out went more slowly as the climb became steeper *I .. think .. I .. can .. I .. thin .. k .. I .. can*, it stopped, breathless, as the engine reached the peak, *I .. think .. I .. can ..* then it went faster, with a triumphant *I knew I could, I knew I could* . . as it hurtled down the slope to the other side. And we kids all clapped.

The story of the little engine that could first appeared in a Swedish children's book in 1902; a preacher told the story in a children's address in a Washington church in 1906; the address was printed in a Sunday School magazine, and from there it spread all around the world in one generation, even as far as Chatswood South.

The point of the story of course was, *Never Give Up* – never give up loving God, never give up following Jesus, even when the going is tough; rely on his strength, trust his promises, never be discouraged.



*Never Give Up* is the message in the cartoon in *Connections*, which comes from a manual for training salesmen. And it's the message of both our readings from the New Testament today – we are called to be persistent in sharing the good news with other people, and we are called to be persistent in prayer.

In our epistle reading, Paul writes to young Timothy: *continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ... proclaim the message, be persistent, whether the time is favourable or unfavourable ... endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.*

And why is this important? Because people need to know that Christ Jesus has come to earth once to inaugurate his kingdom, to show humankind the way to abundant life, and will come again at the end of time to judge the living and the dead.

So these words are written for us, as well as for Timothy and for the members of the early church, in times of tolerance, under some emperors, and in times of persecution, under other emperors. Whatever our situation, we are entrusted with proclaiming the saving message of the scriptures, which are inspired by God.

Believers don't always agree on what 'inspired' literally means – some believe it means that the Scriptures came down from God, word for word, in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek; others argue that God is the ultimate author, but he speaks to us through human experience of the divine; still others assert that the Scriptures record centuries of human understandings of God's dealings with humankind in their own time. There are many variant definitions.

Paul simply tells us that scripture is God-breathed and that his breath is the breath of life. Our duty is to pass on this life-breath to others -- we don't need to waste our energy struggling to define a God-given relationship in human words. They will always be inadequate.

This duty to proclaim truth is all the more important today when the institutional church and its leaders have lost credibility with many people – because of recurrent child abuse, and because religious teachings can seem irrelevant in the age of computers and missions to Mars and the threats posed by climate change. As Paul says, *people will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.* They may say, *I am spiritual, but not religious*, whatever that means.

So, people may not listen to bishops and archbishops and priests and other clergy, but they may listen to us, as people who have found the secret of abundant life, and are willing to share it with everyone, are committed to sharing it with everyone.

Our Gospel reading is Luke's record of part of Jesus' teaching about prayer – *Jesus told the disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart*. We must persist in our prayers, for our own sake, as well as for Jesus' sake. We know we must persist to succeed in our education, and in our work, and in our family life – the same principle applies to our spiritual life.

On the surface, the parable is not very profound – a corrupt judge finally delivers justice to a widow who keeps pestering him.

In Jesus' day both would have been very familiar figures – the widow left without means of support, an easy victim of injustice, and the judge, appointed by the Roman authorities or by the puppet Jewish king, indifferent both to his duty to God and to his duty to his people.

Commentators point out that, at the time, family and religious disputes were generally brought before the Jewish elders; only disputes involving money or breaches of Roman law were brought before these judges, who had a reputation for demanding bribes, even to hear a case.

As a widow, with no man to support her, this supplicant had no money to pay a bribe, and, as a woman, she was not allowed to approach a court, much less to approach a judge, so she was defying tradition and risking arrest by coming to him again and again. Persistence was her only weapon, so she kept demanding justice.

How different is God from that unjust judge, Jesus says. God will answer prayer quickly, in his own time and in his own way, yet we are urged to pray day and night, because, in the end, prayer is really about keeping in touch with God, living in his love, not just about getting something that we want at the time.

This is not the only parable Jesus told about persistence in prayer. Back in chapter 11, Luke's gospel records the parable about the man who knocked on a friend's door at midnight asking for a loaf of bread to feed an unexpected visitor. Jesus said, *At least because of his persistence, he will get up and give him whatever he asks. So I say to you, ask and it will be given to you, search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you*. "But not always on the first asking" – that is part of the message.

Last month I made my annual retreat – I try to get away to a quiet place once a year, to read and to think and to pray, and to share the lives of different people. Marty helps me pack a few things, she always seems quite keen to see me off, and I go somewhere out of the ordinary to live in an out-of-the-ordinary way.

This year I spent a few days at the Benedictine monastery at Camperdown in Victoria, where our reading sheets come from. Monks and nuns are models of the ultimate persistence in prayer –

they pray together in the chapel five times a day, and they pray alone much the rest of the time – opening their hearts to God as they work, interceding for those who are too busy to pray, or who do not acknowledge God as the lord of life.

They spend more time listening, and less time talking than we do in our Sunday services, in line with the rule attributed to St Benedict, *Listen with the ear of your heart.*

This is the monastic way to follow St Paul's command to *rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances*, to quote his letter to the church of the Thessalonians. (1 Thess. 4.16-18) By persisting in prayer, we too can see our prayers being answered in the sweep of history, and often in ways we did not ask for or expect. By persisting in prayer, we bring our wills more closely into line with the will of God.

As in all Jesus' parables, the parable of the importunate widow and the unjust judge has a single message – the analogies cannot be stretched too far, although some preachers and commentators do. When doing some research for this address I found one black American writer who says that this parable is not really about prayer – it's about stereotypes and sexism and racism, and about the way the legal system functions today. Can you believe that?

Many of Jesus' parables were recorded and treasured by the early church because they had special significance in times of persecution and conflict. As this parable does – it speaks about the last days, as well as our present days.

The last verses of the reading make this clear: *will not God grant justice to those who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?* Another rhetorical question, which we need to answer for ourselves.

If the church is the bride of Christ, and this metaphor is used many times in the Scriptures – if the church is the bride of Christ, and Christ has died, the church is his widow, crying out to God for justice in times of persecution, persisting in prayer for his return, and this prayer will also be answered, in God's good time.

Of course Jesus' two parables are only a little of his recorded teaching about prayer – in Luke's gospel, today's reading is immediately followed by the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector – we need to be humble as well as persistent in our prayers.

Jesus also teaches us to pray for our enemies, as well as for our friends; he teaches us to pray without drawing attention to ourselves, he teaches us to pray with others as well as alone, and he

teaches us to pray with confidence that our prayers will be answered. He even gives us a model prayer, which includes the prayer which he uttered while in agony on the Cross: *Thy will be done.*

*Thy will be done.* Life is not always easy, many of us have burdens to bear, burdens of sickness, burdens of loss, perhaps burdens of loneliness, or financial stress, or concern for others.

Whatever our burden, we need to persist in praying *Thy will be done*, and take up Jesus' offer to take all our cares upon him.

Then, as we overcome the hill of despair, we will rejoice with him, saying *I **knew** we could, I knew we **could**, I knew **we could**.*

*Lord, teach us to pray -- with persistence, with humility, with our ears listening for your voice, and with our hearts in tune with your will. **AMEN***