

THE TEXT:

LUKE 18:1 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. 2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. 3 And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' 4 "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" 6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

MANUSCRIPT

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Have you ever felt like God is so far away that he has forgotten about you? Turned his back to you, or forsaken you? That can be a common feeling in the Christian life. So common that God gave us the Psalms to express our frustrations and longings:

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? (Psalm 13:1-2).

How long, O Lord, will you look on? Rescue me..." (Psalm 35:17a).

My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long: "Where is your God?" (Psalm 42:3).

How long must your servant endure?

When will you judge those who persecute me? (Psalm 119:84)

Are they words that resonate with you? We probably have all had times in our life where we have questioned where God is, or why he has allowed particular things to happen, or why he has seemingly not listened to our prayers. When we feel discouraged in our Christian life based on our feelings and experiences—or lack of experiences—then we might even think that there is something wrong with our faith to not get the answers to prayer we want, especially when we are wronged. In those times it might seem as though God is far away from us, silent and deaf.

With today's text, Jesus teaches his disciples a parable to encourage them to keep on praying in the midst of the trials they would face. A widow was being treated unfairly and was desperately in need of justice. Widows in ancient times rarely had resources at hand to help them. Centrelink pensions, Medicare and the Fair Work Ombudsman are some 2,000 years away. The widow in our text probably can't afford legal help, and she can't Google 'free legal aid' from the Legal Services Commission either. She is even more vulnerable to further injustice.

As this widow has no advocate she can only keep on coming to the judge. Some kind of judge—corrupt, and completely disinterested in justice! He neither fears God, nor cares about anyone else. He is only interested in himself and didn't want to be bothered by someone considered so insignificant in society like this poor widow.

What's this woman to do!? She is desperate! All she can do is keep on coming to this corrupt judge, who is growing sick and tired of her. This judge is the only option this poor widow has. She pleads to him: 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

Eventually, the corrupt judge grants her what she requests. He doesn't do this because he cares about her—but because he's fed up with her; sick and tired of her continual bother. He finally caves in to her, because he cares more about his own peace than he cares about justice. He gives her what she wants, so he can get her off of his back, and out of his life!

Remember we've been hearing that Jesus uses parables to teach what the Kingdom of God is like. As we hear of this unjust, corrupt judge, we might be asking...is God *like this*?

No way!

This is the very point Jesus makes in verses 6 and 7 of our text, which are a turning point in the parable and serve as a contrast to show what God is like: *how much more than a dodgy magistrate is God concerned about justice! How much more will God want to hear and help us!* The Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly" (verses 6-8).

God does not act out of self-interest but out of concern for others. We don't have to wear God down so that he finally capitulates and gives in to what we ask him for. God already knows what we need before we ask him (Matthew 6:8). In Psalm 139:4 the Psalmist declares: "Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether."

God doesn't get fed up with us; he isn't sick and tired of our continual coming, he doesn't get annoyed or bothered with us. He doesn't eventually cave in to our pleas because he wants us off his back. But he is merciful and compassionate, always ready to listen.

When the circumstances in our lives are painful and burdensome, and our prayers seem unanswered, we might feel that God is deaf to us and he is far away from us. We can't explain why God doesn't always answer us with what we ask for, when we ask for it. But the irony is that in seemingly unanswered prayer during suffering, we are actually 'closest' to God (from a human perspective). We see this through the widow in our text. If her request had been immediately granted, she wouldn't have needed to keep returning to the judge.

When things are going well in our Christian life, the temptation is to forget all about God—something that comes naturally for us human beings. But when things are not going well, God uses these situations to drive us closer to him. By way of analogy: a fierce storm serves only to press a delicate vine closer to the tree trunk it is growing on. So it is when we have the harshest of circumstances in the Christian life and it seems God is distant and deaf to our pleas. We throw ourselves before God, we cry out to him, we search his word for some kind of promise or explanation. We promise to amend our lives, we return to church, we confess our sins, we cry out to him again.

Jesus gives us great hope today. Listen to what he says: "Will not God bring about justice for *his chosen ones*, who cry out to him day and night? You are God's chosen ones; his elect; those he has called and claimed to be his very own. Your relationship with God and whether or not he has heard your prayers is not based on feelings, experiences or circumstances, but his choice to claim you as his very own. God promises to never abandon or forsake you, but to be with you until the very end of the age—and he will bring about what is just and right.

We can be sure this is true, for our text comes at a point in Luke's Gospel where the time is drawing nearer to Jesus' own unjust treatment by those in positions of authority who cared little for justice. Even though Jesus was innocent, he was abandoned on the Cross. Jesus knows what it is like to feel abandoned by God, and indeed is the only One who has been forsaken by his Father, when he cried out "My God my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus' death is how God brings about both his justice and compassion.

When this happened, the disciples would also be confused and afraid, for Jesus to be tortured and executed in the most brutal way was not how they understood the victorious reign of God to come about. The apocalyptic sights at the Cross when the sun stopped shining and darkness came over all the land, the curtain of the Temple being torn in two, the earth shaking and the rocks splitting, the tombs breaking open and bodies of many holy people being raised to life (Matthew 27:45-54) would have been a terrifying thing to witness.

Jesus' followers would also suffer, persecuted for bearing his name, beset and besieged by dangers to their faith. Everything in their experience might have pointed to God being distant and deaf to their cries, absent and removed, while chaos seemingly raged all around them. So Jesus gives this parable to encourage them to never give up praying.

With the ongoing persecution of Christians today, situations in the church, the terrifying calamity of world events that are an all too frequent occurrence in our news feeds, the circumstances in our own families, and the pain and suffering of our own fragile lives, it might seem that God is out of control, that evil has won, that chaos is unrestrained. We might well call out with the Psalmist: *How long O Lord!?*

Jesus wants us ready, still praying, still calling out to him, still alert, still clinging to his promises in faith so that we will not miss out on what we hope to receive, should that day come in our lifetime. "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Jesus asks. He gives this parable to us, his disciples of today, to encourage *us* to not give up praying, and not lose heart and let go of our faith.

We need encouragement because between today and the day of Jesus' return, we live in a world filled with sin, sickness, and death. We live in a world where bad things happen, and sometimes happen to us. We live in a body trapped in frailty; we live in a church where love is far from perfect, we live in a wicked world hostile to Christ and Christianity. Sometimes it can seem like God is far away and isn't listening to us. It can be easy to become discouraged with prayer if things aren't going as we would expect. It might be your prayers for justice when you have been sinned against. It might be prayers for healing, or for someone dear to you to become a Christian, or for God to meet a desperate need, or for persecution and injustice to stop in places where it is rife.

Children of God, do not lose heart in times like these, but keep on praying to the end—for he has chosen you to be his own. In the times that God seems distant, remember that Jesus suffered and died for you so that you would *never* be forsaken or abandoned by God; never unheard by him. God is just as close to you as the day he baptised you, for on that day you were joined to Christ and his own death and resurrection. So how much more than a corrupt judge will our just, gracious, compassionate and loving God hear you, and bring about what is just and right according to his will! That's why you can have the confidence that you can always go to your Heavenly Father, full of hope and courage in the face of whatever happens, knowing that he will listen to you for Jesus' sake. Amen.