

Sermon 14 January 2023 Perseverance

James 1:2-8,12 Matthew 7:7-11

When a new year gets under way, we are invariably filled with a sense of optimism and hope. We may or may not make resolutions for the new year, and if we do, that in itself says that we are optimistic. Resolutions or not, we will have goals, dreams, things we want to achieve. If you have no hope for the year ahead, I am only half joking when I say we need to sit down and have a chat.

If that is the case, then it could be that you are focusing on the challenges that lie ahead. And if that is the case, then I have to concede that in one sense, you are being realistic, because there will be challenges this year. That is life, and is one reason why so often we find ourselves saying on December 31st, 'I am glad to see the back of this year.' Those trials and tribulations certainly impact on us and leave their mark. And as we reflect on the year, it is quite easy to put more emphasis on them than those things which put a tick in the success column. Of course, in many ways they are an integral part of our growth as people. But that is another story.

So yes, we can safely say that we will be confronted with challenges in 2024. So what are we going to do about it? Well, we can do worse than heed the message in our Gospel reading, which to put it very simply, is 'persist in prayer and God will answer your prayers.'

Firstly, it must be said that prayer was very much part of the culture in which Jesus grew up. The Jewish Rabbis had many sayings about prayer, one of them being, *'Human beings can hardly hear two people talking at once, but God, if all the world calls to him at the one time, hears their cry.'*

As we know, Jesus himself spent a huge amount of time in prayer. So the first message is right there – if it is good enough for Jesus, it's got to be good enough for us. If Jesus needs to spend time in prayer, what does that say about the need for us to spend time in prayer? Right there you have got my New Year's resolution, for what it's worth.

The other message contained in this passage is about perseverance. *'Keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking.'* And if you do that, your prayers will invariably be answered. There are two points about perseverance I would like to make.

Firstly, by persevering you are demonstrating that you are sincere in your request. If our prayer is thrown out there in the hope that God is actually there and will act upon it, then are we really sincere? Are we really committed to both the process and the outcome? I don't think so. And so why should God consider our supplication? Bottom line, he shouldn't and probably won't. But by hanging in there and demonstrating a commitment to the mode and practice, then God is far more likely to respond to our request.

Secondly, by encouraging us to persevere, Jesus is simply asking us to put into practice a maxim of life – success is more about commitment and effort than anything else. Napoleon said, *'Victory belongs to the most persevering.'* Let me share a couple of stories with you.

Thomas Edison was probably the greatest inventor in American history, and some of you might be familiar with his story. When he first attended school, his teachers complained that he was too slow and hard to handle. As a result, Edison's mother decided to take him out of school and teach him at home. Edison's inexhaustible energy and genius (which he reportedly defined as 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration) eventually produced in his lifetime more than 1,300 inventions. When Thomas Edison finally invented the light bulb, he tried over 2,000 experiments before he finally got it to work.

Wilma Rudolph was the 20th of 22 children! She was born prematurely and her survival was doubtful. When she was 4 years old, she contracted double pneumonia and scarlet fever, which left her very debilitated health-wise, to say the least. Her struggles with her health continued as a child. As a 12-year-old she took up running in a bid to improve her health. She entered a race and came last. For the next few years, every race she entered, she came last. Everybody told her to quit, but she kept on running. One day, she eventually won a race, and then another. From then on she won every race she entered. Eventually, this little girl, who as a child struggled to even survive, went on to become the first American woman to win three gold medals in a single Olympic Games – Rome 1960. She said, *'The triumph can't be had without a struggle.'*

So what has this got to do with us, gathered here in church this morning. As we travel throughout this year, there will be times when the going gets tough. By adopting the attitude as exhibited by Thomas Edison and Wilma Rudolph, not just to those challenges we are facing, but more importantly, to our prayer life, we will prevail and then hopefully on December 31st we will be saying, 'I am sorry to see this year come to a close.'

So this is the point I want to emphasise and to end on – yes, an attitude of perseverance is necessary in order to deal successfully with life's challenges, and as James points out in our first reading, that is an important part of our character development. *'Whenever you face trials of any kind, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.'*

But this attitude of perseverance becomes even more important when it come to our prayer life, and of course, that in the end is how we cope with life's challenges. For prayer to be really effective, we need to persevere. As Jesus says, *'Keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking.'* I cannot emphasise this more strongly. Hang in there. It might feel as if God is not listening, but he is!

Let me finish with a couple of quotes. Firstly, Jesus himself who said, *'But the one who endures to the end will be saved.'* Matthew 24:13.

And finally, a Japanese proverb, *'Fall seven times, get up eight!'*

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