

Sermon 9 June 2024 Perseverance

James 1:1-4, Luke 18:1-8

I want to talk this morning about perseverance. Our Gospel story is about a woman, a widow, who pesters a judge until she receives justice. She doesn't give up, she perseveres until he relents and gives her what she wants.

There wouldn't be an area of life where success is not invariably brought about through perseverance. Whether it is on the sports field, in the performing arts, in the classroom, in business, sweat and hard work, commitment and discipline are essential ingredients in the recipe for success.

You probably have not heard of William Carey, known as the 'Father of modern missions.' He became a Baptist minister after working as a cobbler, served in India in the 18th century, translating the Bible into several languages, and was a social reformer. Year after year he experienced overwhelming obstacles and massive problems. At the end of his life, having established a mission station, set up churches, translated the scriptures and set in motion the modern missionary movement, he was asked how, in the midst of so much adversity, he could accomplish so much. He replied, 'I can plod. I can persevere in any pursuit. To this I owe everything. Few people know what can be done till they try and persevere in what they undertake.'

The same is applicable to prayer, and this is just the point Jesus is making in this short parable. So let us take a more detailed look at this story.

We get something of a peek at the judicial system of the time. Disputes were invariably taken directly to a magistrate or judge. This judge would have been appointed by the Romans and such judges were notorious. Unless plaintiffs had influence or money to bribe their way to a verdict, they had little hope of getting a settlement. This judge was no exception. He is motivated entirely by self-interest. He has no interest in either justice or the woman's rights.

On the other side, we have a widow who represents the poor and the defenceless. Not only is she a woman, who of course had very limited rights, but she is a widow. Women were very much defined by who their husband was, so to have no husband meant that she had virtually no standing or status in society. So she was very much up against it. She had little going for her, but one thing she did have was determination and perseverance.

So, against all the odds, the woman does receive justice. She does this purely and simply through her perseverance. Jesus is making the point that our approach to prayer must be of a similar nature. It is a theme that Paul takes up on more than one occasion. '*Keep on praying.*' 1 Thessalonians 5:17. '*Pray at all times and on every occasion in the power of the Holy Spirit.*' Ephesians 6:18.

So why should we have to persevere in prayer? Surely God hears us the first time and then can respond accordingly. It's a good question. I would like to make a couple of points. Firstly, perseverance shows that we are sincere, that we mean business. This is not a request thrown out there in the hope that something might happen. This comes from the heart; this comes with conviction and a deep desire for a certain outcome. This is a genuine request.

Secondly, this is a genuine relationship. By speaking to God repeatedly and from the bottom of our heart, we are building and developing a relationship with God. This is not just a one-off approach to God, this is serious. Most importantly, it does show that we have faith.

Think about it. If we didn't have faith, if we didn't believe in what we were doing, would we really persist? I don't think so. Commitment to a cause is a sure sign of belief in a cause. Time and again we are urged in the Bible to pray and pray. To cement our relationship with God, we need to adhere to this commitment. The psalmist tells us, *'Evening and morning and at noon I will pray and cry aloud, and he shall hear my voice.'* Psalm 55:17. Jesus himself spent many hours in prayer. *'One day soon after Jesus went to a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night!'* Luke 6:12. Another example from Paul. *'Don't worry about anything; instead pray about everything.'* Philippians 4:6.

This leads me to something else I need to say about prayer. When we are faced with a challenge, it is important to pray. I think we all accept that. However, I do need to say this – our prayer shouldn't be, 'God, I lay this problem at your feet. Please fix it for me.' Rather, it should be, 'God, please give me the strength and the direction to fix this problem.' God helps those who help themselves.

I want you to picture yourself rowing a boat. One oar is faith, the other oar is work. If we pull just on the faith oar, we won't go anywhere. We will just go round in a circle. Similarly, if we pull just on the work oar, we won't go anywhere – just round in a circle. It is only when we pull on the faith oar and the work oar together do we go where we want to go. Faith and work must go hand in hand. Only then will we overcome the challenges that come our way.

I want to finish by making a last point with regards perseverance. There is nothing surer than the fact that we will encounter obstacles as we journey through life, as we pursue our goals and dreams. It is in the meeting and overcoming of these obstacles that not only do we grow as people, grow in character, but if we accompany our efforts with prayer, our faith will grow.

James makes this point so very clearly in our first reading: *'My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.'* James 1:2-3.

The story is told of a traveller who met a guru and asked him, 'Where's the road to success?' The bearded sage didn't speak but instead pointed to a place far off in the distance. The traveller, thrilled at the prospect of quick and easy success, rushed off in the appropriate direction. *Splat!* Down he went in a screaming heap. He limped back, bruised and stunned. Assuming he must have misinterpreted the message, he repeated his question, and again the guru pointed silently in the same direction. So, the traveller took off once more. This time, the *splat* was even louder. Crawling back bloody, broken and irate, he shouted at the guru, 'I asked you which way is success! I followed the direction you indicated and all I got was splattered. No more pointing – talk!' Only then did the sage speak. 'Success is that way. It's just a little beyond the *splat*.'

The fact is we all experience the *splat*. There's no way to avoid it. But it's what we do after the *splat* that determines whether we achieve our success or not. And perseverance always wins. *'Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.'* Hebrews 12:1.

So, in conclusion, our prayer must be, 'God, give me the perseverance to run the race and cross the finish line.' Amen.