**Persistent Prayer**

**Sermon for Sunday 16th October 2022 at Cashmere Presbyterian Church**

**Right Rev Hamish Galloway**

**Text:** Genesis 32: 22-31

Luke 18: 1-8

**Introduction**

On the surface, at first reading, this parable reminds me of the Mainland Cheese ad: Good things take time! Or it reminds me of a friend who is slowly. Surely. Carefully crafting a beautiful model boat that one day he will sail on Lake Victoria in Hagley Park. Many hours of painstaking work with the goal in mind; racing it majestically on the lake!

So it is that the widow returns time and again, ‘bothering’ the judge repeatedly for justice in her case *and* eventually her persistence pays off, justice is achieved like the savoured taste of a n aged cheese or a sight of a lovingly crafted model boat sailing at the head of a fleet in a race on Lake Victoria!

But there is much more to this ‘good things take time’ message. As is typical of Jesus and his parables, the message is layered, nuanced and deep. Let’s explore….

1. **The Characters**

Firstly, the judge ‘who neither feared God nor cared about people’. He was without scruples! In fact he represents the judges of the day who were appointed by the Romans or Herod as a reward, and were in it for themselves; part of oppressive and corrupt regimes, they themselves were typically oppressive and corrupt. Ears closed to the cry of justice and wallets open to the influence of bribery. William Barclay quotes a well known saying of the day when he says that such judges were prepared to pervert justice for a dish of meats!

On the other hand, the widow would not have even had a ‘dish of meats’ to hand over! Widows were the most vulnerable of all peoples of this day. There are numerous scriptures that identify their plight and call for people to act with kindness and justice towards the needs of the widow and the orphan!

And so here we have a scenario seen so often in the world today:

Corrupt, unjust and oppressive people in power

Vulnerable people crying out for justice.

We see it in Ukraine, Myanmar, Iran, many places in Africa, West Papua, in the Rohingya people of Myanmar, or the Uyghur people of China, or the Christians or Syria….

This sets up a timeless and exasperating repetitive scenario of helplessness in the face of oppression!

1. **Vindication**

Vindication is a - some would say *the* – main message of the parable. In the end justice will prevail. It comes out in many ways.

Firstly, there is the context of this parable. It is part of a section in Luke’s gospel that goes from 17:11 to 18:8, where the overriding theme is the future decisive manifestation of the Kingdom of God. That ultimately God will prevail, justice will be done, and the faithful prayers of the people will be answered, the disciples will be vindicated!

Secondly, the idea of vindication is repeated in v3 and v5.

Thirdly, it comes out in conclusion to this story – the judge gives in and justice is done, albeit because he is so bothered that he can’t be bothered! (note – the literal translation of ‘bothered’ alludes to being given a black eye!)

Finally, it comes out in the use of a popular Jewish mode of argument seen elsewhere in scripture, that is, if the unjust judge vindicates the case for justice, how much more will the holy and just God do so!

Our Old Testament reading about Jacob wrestling with God is a potted version of the parable:

Jacob wrestles with God all night – this is a long and persistent prayer, an insistent prayer: “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

The outcome of this persistent and insistent prayer is vindication! He is given a new name to identify him as a man of faithful persistent prayer – Israel, the one who struggles with God! He obtains God’s blessing! This story concludes:

“The sun rose above him” – a nod to the new life of the resurrection – “and he was limping because of his hip” – a nod the reality of the scars left by the difficult battles in this world for blessing to triumph over curses!

1. **How long Lord?**

One of my favourite bands is U2. They sing heaps about justice, but they also lament that injustice so often seems to prevail and their concerts often end with a rendition of Psalm 40 and the whole crowd repeatedly singing *How Long?* A plaintiff cry echoing the plight of the widow who repeatedly cries out for justice and must have, too, lamented “how long?”

U2 and the widow are not alone – the most common theme of the Psalms is lament! It is a fair question! Absolutely. Putin invaded Ukraine thinking it would be over in a week; now, many months of cruel, brutal, destructive, life-taking war later, it is hard to see just how and when this will end!

And the big question is this – OK God, if you do care about justice, and if you are all powerful, and if you do actually hear our prayers, why don’t you act **now!**

How do we answer this question?

Some possibilities.

1. God knows the big picture and plays the long game

One commentator put it this way: ‘while we may be conditioned to expect everything to happen at the click of a button, God’s timetable is more carefully planned.’

Our Psalm today is interesting. Psalm 121 is often requested for funerals. Where it is requested in the case of a tragic death, I choke over the words:

*The Lord watches over you;*

*he will not let your foot slip*

*the sun will not harm you by day*

*nor the moon by night.*

*The Lord will keep you from all harm!*

So where was the Lord when this person’s car crashed? Or this toddler drowned?

I can only settle my soul on this with the thought that God has a big plan in which, ultimately, we are safe, captured in the first and final words of the Psalm. The first words ask us to look to the rocks of the ages, the ancient mountains, and the final verse reminds us this is not just about the now, but the evermore!

God knows the big picture and plays the long game, whereas we see but a fraction of the big cosmic picture. The challenge to us is to keep trusting that God has this, so that, it he words of the parable, when the vindication does come. When ‘the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?’

It is a plea to keep the faith in the midst of trying circumstances! Which segues nicely into the next point.

1. Relationship forming!

Faith, character and good relationships are formed over time!

The commentator Boock says

‘prayer is an essential mechanism of relationship with God.’

When God’s response is not immediate it teaches us

1. To stay in touch with God in continuing, ongoing conversation of prayer.
2. To remain patient, for patience is indeed a powerful and transforming thing. I think of how Nelson Mandela was shaped and formed into the great leader he became through long unjust imprisonment!
3. To remain sensitive to the needs for justice! And, as such, march in step with God’s longing for a world dominated by resurrection not death.

I understand David Coster told you a story recently about an orchid that finally flowered after 18 years of tender nurturing. We have a similar story. When my wife Anne’s Mum died in 1999 we took a wisteria from her place back tours. We have kept it and cared for it since then, yet not a flower until this year! 23 years!

We persevered because of the special relationship, and our perseverance was vindicated with a blossoming of flower!

May the peoples of this earth who persevere in faith and prayer see in time the flowering of justice and peace on earth!