

October 16: Luke 18:1-8, 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Two weeks ago I found myself unexpectedly on Henleaze Road at the unveiling of a statue of Amelia Edwards. If you haven't seen it, it's on the wall outside the new flats near the junction with Southmead Road.

The flats are named "Amelia Lodge" after Miss Edwards who lived nearby. The statue, on top of a high wall, takes the form of a small Victorian lady, who appears to have climbed up there using books lodged into the wall like steps.

Amelia Edwards made her name as a novelist during the mid 19th Century. By the age of 30, she had sufficient means to be able to travel. At that time, women writers were expected to confine themselves to writing romantic fiction or articles on household management. They were certainly not expected to travel without the protective company of men. Undaunted, Amelia and her female companion, set off on a series of intrepid journeys including one to Egypt that changed course of her life. The book she published recording this journey is a recognised classic and still in print today.

Amelia was shocked by the lack of respect for historical and archaeological finds in Egypt, by the illegal and lucrative trade in antiquities, by the lack of care and the destruction of ancient sites. She recognised the value in the emerging study of Egyptology and that scientific investigations might have a role to play in understanding ancient civilisations.

Amelia, consulted with experts and used her experience in journalism to set about raising public interest and support for excavation work. She studied the subject and became an expert in her field, even learning ancient languages so that she could translate some of the writings. She founded the Egyptology Society which she promoted through her writings and lectures.

Amelia Edwards, like the woman in our gospel reading, found something she wanted to change. Something which, in her view was not quite right with the world. Both, at first sight found themselves in circumstances where they had little influence, but both used the little that was available to them to bring about change. For Amelia this meant, books, her intellect and a formidable personality. For the woman in the gospel, often known as the "persistent widow", it was slightly different.

This woman had no standing in the community in which she lived. It seems that she had been wronged in some way, but it was unacceptable for women to go to court in that society and no one appears to be available to speak on her behalf. She was completely on her own.

There is no doubt that women in general and widows in particular were treated very poorly. But, as a widow, this woman had one advantage over a man in a similar situation. There is, in the Middle East a tradition of public chivalry towards women, even poor widows. Consequently, she was able to use her loud, persistent pleading to badger the judge until he gave her justice. A man in that position would have been thrown out of court if he tried to pester the judge in this way. But the woman, through courage and persistence, was able to get what she wanted. Eventually this judge, who cared nothing for what God or anyone else thought of him, relented.

Over the last few weeks we have been looking at our vision and mission statements. Today we come to the rather ambitious statement "Change the World" We believe, that part of our mission as a church is to change the world.

Before you all hold up your hands and tell me about all the things that are wrong with our world, let me just add that I don't think this is an order to put everything to rights, but rather a challenge to each do our bit. To use our resources, our gifts and our opportunities to change those things in the world as we are able. We all change the world through the people we encounter, the things we do, or don't do, the conversations we have. It might be in a small way like the persistent widow who obtained justice for her particular situation, or something bigger like Amelia Edwards who changed the study of Egyptology. Whatever we do, and however we do it, we must always remember that our mission statements are the means through which St Peter's seeks to bring about the vision of lives transformed by following Christ in love and service. Our challenge is to change the world for God.

Jesus states at the beginning of the parable that it is a story about prayer. The widow's persistence wore down the uncaring judge so that eventually he gave her what she wanted. He didn't do it because it was the right thing to do before God, he didn't care what God thought. He didn't do it because he felt sorry for her or because of what others might think, he didn't care what others thought. He simply gave her what she wanted to make her go away. We too are to be persistent in prayer. To ask for God's help, guidance and support in all that we undertake.

Unlike the judge, God loves and cares for us. He listens and wants what is best for every one of us.

It's tempting to think of this parable as a kind of golden ticket, a get out of gaol free card to get what we want from God. But prayer isn't like that. It's not a shopping list, but rather an opportunity to share our lives, cares, concerns and wishes with God. In so doing, and in reflecting on God's response, our cares and concerns become attuned to those of God the Father. We want what God wants and God wants what we want, and that is how we become equipped to change the world for God.

One of the great things about our world is its diversity. We each are equipped with our own peculiar set of circumstances which makes us who we are. Our place of birth, our personalities, our likes, dislikes, the people we meet, the things we do. Each one of us is in a unique position to change the world. Even the woman in the gospel, a woman who appeared to have nothing, found that she could act in a belligerent way with impunity where others may have been unable to do so.

We are all different, but there are some things we share, which equip us in our mission. We have a Saviour, Jesus Christ, who intercedes for us in our prayers and the Holy Spirit, to prompt and guide us and we have scripture.

In the Epistle, Paul exhorts Timothy to turn to scripture as he continues in his mission to spread the gospel. Like Amelia Edwards climbing the wall on Henleaze Road, we have a set of books which can take us to places we never imagined we might go. Unlike Amelia, our books, those in the bible, are inspired by God.

Tom Wright, in his book *Simply Christian*, describes the bible as,

"Not only the most famous book in the world, but one which has extraordinary power to change lives, to change communities, to change the world."

What a resource to help in our mission! It's my guess that everyone here today has at least one copy on their bookshelves. Further, text, guidance and commentary can be resourced instantaneously through the internet. We would be crazy to ignore it.

Paul doesn't say it will be easy. In fact, in this passage, his suggestion is that scripture is to be used to form as well as inform. His list that it can be used for reproof, correction and training is somewhat reminiscent of a Victorian classroom. As with prayer, we are to be persistent. We struggle sometimes to understand meanings which appear to contradict each other, or which seem to have no place in the 21 Century western world, but maybe such struggle is necessary for a growth in understanding and to push boundaries to bring about the changes God requires.

So how are we to change the world. For most of us it won't be through grand projects or gestures. For most it will be through seeking God's will for us in the places we find ourselves. We can do this by being persistent in prayer to attune our will to that of God and persistent in reading the bible so that we are equipped for whatever befalls us.

As for Amelia Edwards, she definitely seems to have been a formidable lady, quite capable of persistence and making a fuss to get what she wanted. But she also reminds us that it is not always necessary to be loud and belligerent to be persistent.

Last month, Amelia Edwards' grave in Henbury churchyard was given listed status, not as you might expect for her services to the study of Egyptology, but to celebrate it as a landmark in Britain's LGBT history. Amelia never married and is buried alongside her companion, Ellen Drew Braysher, with whom she lived in Eastfield. The fact that this and a number of other listings have been made are in themselves evidence of the change in our attitude to sexuality in the 120 years or so since she died. I have been able to find out very little about this aspect of her personal life and I wonder if just by quietly, but persistently, living in the way that she believed to be right Amelia Edwards has also contributed to this gradual and continuing acceptance of our diversity.

So yes, the mission to change the world is ambitious, but that it not a reason not to take it up. To quote Mother Teresa, another formidable and persistent lady,

"If you can't feed 100 people, feed one."

How will you change the world today?

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