

Sermon 16 October Luke 18: 1-8, Psalm 121

In prayer, *God works through us to make us the best we can be.*

Whether you are a fan or not, you cannot help but notice that we are now well into the “Strictly Season”. Even if you don’t watch it, you will have seen the trailers and heard discussion on discussion on radio and tv. I came a little late to the party, but over the last few years, I have become a bit of a fan.

The show is geared towards making the celebrities look and perform to their very best on live television for three minutes every Saturday night. This year there seems to have been a particular focus on thanking the backstage crew, the choreographers, hair and costume designers for their contribution and support and raising awareness of the massive machine which goes into making each 3 minute act the best it can be.

The success, I believe, is how they push the traditional boundaries of ballroom dancing to appeal to the judges and the public. The professionals are skilled in making the most of their celebrities, bringing out personality, acting skills or athletic prowess in those less talented at dancing. In doing this, they make dancing accessible to people of all shapes, sizes and abilities. They help the casual onlooker appreciate skills and technique learnt through hard work and perseverance. And perhaps, for those of us inclined to be a bit traditional in our approach, see that there can be other ways of doing things.

Unlike the Strictly Stars, the woman in our reading today had no skilled and talented organisation to help her appeal to her judge. In that society, the justice system was male, and women would not generally appear in court. They would be expected to have a male relative go and plead their case for them. The fact that she was there herself, shows that she had no father, uncle, brother or nephew to speak for her. She was vulnerable and alone.

Further, she faced a judge known to be unfeeling and uncaring. She didn’t have many options. We are told that he had not fear of God and, by implication, no sense of right and wrong. He was uncaring of people so was unlikely to be swayed by her poor and desperate status. It doesn’t say explicitly in the passage, but commentaries suggest that the judge would have taken bribes and that the widow’s inability to get him to take notice was that she had no money to bribe him. The odds were certainly stacked against her, and many people might expect her to give up her claim.

But this woman is like the Strictly Stars in one way. She makes the best of what she has available to her and she keeps on persevering. In her case all she can do is persist and she does this wholeheartedly. She returned to the judge again and again and again until she had worn him down to the point where he relented and granted her petition simply to make her go away.

Jesus tells the disciples at the beginning of this passage, that it is a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. Unlike the judge in the passage, God is a loving and caring Father, who will listen and respond to our prayers without delaying or putting things off. I think the widow’s situation highlights two areas where we can gain confidence for our own prayer life.

Firstly, no one is too insignificant to be heard. This is the first of three passages in which Jesus draws attention to those who are at the margins of society. Jesus commends a contrite tax collector in the parable that follows and, a few verses later, he suggests that we can learn from children who

have much to show us about how we should receive God's grace and mercy. God listens to all equally, regardless of position or status, whether they are just starting on their Christian journey or have been committed and faithful for many years. He understands that small things can have a big impact on our lives and cares about every detail and concern that we bring before him.

Equally, the parable tells, our voices are important in the big issues. There are many things wrong in the world. In our own country, we face rising costs and shortages of power and food. Further afield there are tragedies in Ireland and Thailand, wars in Ukraine and elsewhere, protests in Iran, flooding in Pakistan and famine in Somalia, to name just a few. When we pray for God's intervention and justice in these matters, it's easy to feel that our voice is lost in the enormity of the situation and amongst the thousands or even millions of others praying into the situation too. This passage reminds us that our voices do count, God listens to all.

A question that this passage raises is why we need to persist in prayer, when Jesus tells us elsewhere that God knows what we need even before we ask. (Matthew 6:8)

One reason, it seems to me, is that persistence and perseverance reveal something about the faith and commitment of the person praying. Just like the widow who showed herself to be brave and committed to her cause, our prayers can help us recognise and commit to God's plan for the world. Jesus words at the end of the passage illustrate the fragility of that plan, *"When the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth"*

When we pray, we build our relationship with God through Jesus. Prayer can help us understand God's kingdom and our role in it. Its notable that Jesus does not say that we will get what we want when we pray, but what we need. Sometimes, but not always, as we continue to pray over time, we can learn to appreciate the difference. Sometimes, but not always, we might find that the answer to our prayers lies within. I remember being told a long time ago that when we pray, we should always be aware that we ourselves might be the means through which God responds. Sometimes we might never understand how our prayers have been answered, but we can be assured that they are received and acted upon.

Jesus commends the widow for her determination and resolve in seeking justice. She used the resources she had to make the best of a what appeared at the outset to be a hopeless situation She expended time and energy returning to the Judge without regard for her own dignity. To put it in "Strictly" language, "She gave it her all!" Can we say the same thing about our prayers? Jesus says, if such actions can win over a hard-hearted callous judge, how much more generously will our loving God respond to the prayers of the faithful.

For the celebrities, their time on Strictly is often described as a journey and its true we often see them develop as the weeks progress. We too are on a journey, not for a few weeks of rigorous training, sequins and lycra, but a lifetime of learning, awe and wonder as we grow into the people God wants us to be.

A journey through which, as the psalmist says, God helps us, watches over us and protects us now and for evermore. Support like this is far greater than the best and most talented production team of the BBC and worth so much more than a glitterball trophy.

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