

16th October 2016

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: **20** **“Be still, for the presence of the Lord”**
 158 **“Lord you sometimes speak in wonders”**
 160 **“Powerful in making us wise to salvation”**
 682 **“God of grace and God of glory”**

READINGS: **2 Timothy 3:14-4:5**
 Luke 8:1-8

“PERSISTENCE IN SEASON AND OUT OF SEASON”

The season is coming, indeed it will soon be here – it is already here in some places. Which season? Halloween? Well that is coming close but that is scarcely a season and that is not what I am referring to.

The season I am talking about is known as Advent and Christmas to Christians but is known as the biggest marketing opportunity of the year to the commercial world. Over and above that it is the biggest marketing opportunity for toys and games and all things for children. The commercial companies have done their homework, consulted their psychologists and the campaign to get ‘pester power’ underway has already started. Those of you who are parents and grandparents of young children know what I mean. The advertising industry targets children, especially, would you believe, those aged 4-6 years old through the TV and what they see in shops.

Children then become the advertisers; agents unrelentingly, nay demanding, the latest fashion in dolls, computer games or whatever. This is known as ‘pester power’. It is big business and it is estimated that it costs parents on average £460 per Christmas season.

The core of our reading from Luke is a parable about the power of pestering, too but in a different context and for an altogether more wholesome purpose. So what is that context? There is a widow trying to get justice who takes a situation before a judge. That’s the bare bones of the story but if we are to really understand the full meaning of the story we need more background. Widows had a difficult time in 1st century Palestine- indeed in many parts of the world widows still have a tough time.

Normally a widow had no automatic legal right to inherit her late husband’s estate. So, for example after his death the widow could not take it for granted that she could stay in the family home. She had to contend of the house and property for herself and her children with her in-laws. If the in-laws happened not to like her life would be extremely tough.

Our parable does not give us details of how this widow was being cheated but we have to imagine that she was struggling for her livelihood and that of any young children.

Then there was the judge. He was not a Jewish judge – all ordinary Jewish disputes were taken before the elders and if it had to go further it was always before a group of three judges not just one. The judge in this parable is one the paid magistrates appointed by the Roman authorities. Judges such as these were notorious and usually for their corruption. It was okay if you had money or friends in high places – you might get a favourable hearing ... but a poor widow, not a chance of getting her case heard.

Widows throughout the Old Testament and in Jesus' own time were potent symbols for poor and defenceless people and they were at the centre of God's concern.

But the widow in the parable was not just going to accept her predicament meekly – she used 'pester power' – she harassed the judge at every opportunity until she wore him down. The judge felt that her actions were affecting his work and his reputation and so he granted her the justice that she pleaded for just to be rid of her, just to get her out of his hair and out of his presence.

This weak little widow was able to make this powerful judge feel the heat. The Greek term for the expression 'wear me out' spoken by the judge means literally 'give a black eye to' or 'strike in the face' but the figurative meaning is 'to bring one to submission by constant annoyance and brow-beating.

This was a story, a parable that Jesus was telling his hearers but it would have been very true-to-life for those hearers. They would have been able to name women in that position and judges that had acted in the way.

As with all parables Jesus had drawn people into the story – they were with him waiting to know what would happen. Then he uses the story to speak of God. But is there not a bit of a problem here? Surely God cannot be likened to the unjust judge? God is the epitome of just and merciful judge, always compassionate and loving to his people – especially the most vulnerable.

So what is Jesus trying to say here? Well this is one of Jesus' 'how much more parable' – if an unjust judge can be wearied into giving a widow justice then **how much more** will God, the Loving Father, give his children what they need.

Jesus told this parable about prayer, to quote from Luke "Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." For me it is at one and the same time both surprising and heartening that even in Jesus' own lifetime on earth his hearers needed to be reminded that God was a merciful and good God and that they should not lose heart or give up praying for justice , a better world – indeed for the Kingdom of God to come.

2000 years down the line we can surely echo the plea in Revelation 6, 'How long, O Lord, how long?' Faced by violent conflicts around the world it seems that as much as we pray for peace little changes and each week brings new horrors of civilian casualties let alone the destruction of huge areas.

On the radio this morning I heard a woman from Syria talking about the truly horrific situation there. Asked by the interviewer what we in this country should do she said, 'pray for us and for peace.' It is important that people in conflict zones know that they are prayed for – it is a source of strength for them. This is especially true for beleaguered Christian communities who feel abandoned by Christians in the West.

But I can empathise with those who say that surely prayer is not enough, is not the only thing we are called to do.

Well this opens up questions of what we understand by prayer. Prayer is a conversation with God – as much, if not more, our listening than our speaking. And prayer is surely more than closing our eyes, or kneeling before God – prayer is also a prompt to action.

When we pray for others in this congregation who are ill or bereaved, we don't just leave it at that, we are spurred to action – to visit the person or to ring up and to let them know that they are in our thoughts. Prayer is much more than talking with God – it is a plea from one to another worked out in action. Depending upon the nature of our concern the action might be writing letters to the newspaper, organising or adding our name to a petition or making a request to our MP.

We should never be weary of persisting in prayer and the actions prompted by prayer.

It is 50 years this October since the Aberfan disaster in South Wales when a mine dump, made unstable by water, slid down and completely buries a primary school killing 116 young pupils and 144 people in all. Needless to say the parents of Aberfan were devastated and asked how a God of love could allow such a thing to happen. Some who had been practising Christians lost their faith. But, in the course of time, new beginnings were made – a new school, a youth centre and other new facilities for the village. An Enquiry was held to try to determine the cause of the disaster and the National Coal Board were blamed for negligence and that the fact that they knew springs of water were present under the tips.

A disaster Fund was established and a large amount of money was raised with contributions coming in from all over the world. In the end £1.6 million was raised. Though there was a lot of controversy the fund did pay out to rebuild houses, put up a memorial for those who died and provide holidays for traumatised children among other things.

One of the obvious things needing to be done in the aftermath of the disaster was the removal of the remaining tips. The National Coal Board (NCB) and the Treasury

refused full financial responsibility for this and pressurised the Disaster Fund to give £150,000 towards the works.

The people of Aberfan saw this as a gross injustice – the NCB had been found to be responsible for neglect of safety. The Disaster Fund was for the village and the victims. They prayed in words and in deeds for justice to be done and for the money to be returned. It was 31 years later in 1997 but with no compensation for interest lost.

Prayer in words and prayer in action sometimes brings speedy results but often requires long and patient perseverance. We can think of so many examples, at home and overseas, when justice has taken a long time to come.

The Slave Trade is a blot on this country's history, as of other countries, too. William Wilberforce and his fellow campaigners worked over decades in Parliament and in meetings around the country to end the practice. Wilberforce became weary and in danger of losing hope that anything would ever change. He received a letter from the dying John Wesley, the last letter he ever wrote, urging him never to give up the struggle. In 1834 – 43 years later an Act to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire was passed.

There is much in this world that can make us grow weary and lose heart but let take the parable for today to heart. Let us be people of perseverance in the struggle for justice in our world and may we give hope to others by our prayers and in our actions.

When the Son of Man comes, let him find in us, people of faith, never losing hope and making God's love available in the world. Amen