

**Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> October 2022**  
**Luke 17:20-21 & 18:1-8**  
**Rev.Scott Burton**  
**Blackbraes Shieldhill and Muiravonside**

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's Word:

Come Holy Spirit and soften our hearts to the Word of God. Let there be light.

Come Holy Spirit and teach us the things of the Kingdom.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask that ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Recently, down the roads at Brightons we had a few volunteers come and share an incredible story with us, during the service there. We have an All Together Time which is normally some time to engage with the children but we also use it to maybe share testimony or are there bits of news. And so, I'd asked Nadia and Allison to share a recent experience of theirs because, on the Monday night just before, Nadia had been at the Fellowship Group that she attends and during that time someone had shared a prayer request for their son, who's a student, to find some accommodation. I'm sure we've read in the news about the lack of accommodation for students and so, they committed it to prayer. On the way home that night, Nadia remembered that she knew a friend in Glasgow who had a flat and sometimes it was available and so she contacted her friend who came back that night and said actually, it was available and she was just waiting to see how God might want to use it. So, by the following morning, this student had a flat. But the story doesn't end there, because then Nadia went to Pre-Fives, the toddler group down at Brightons that morning, the Tuesday morning, and during the prayer time before the start of it one of the other volunteers, Allison, shared a Bible verse that had spoken to her that week or maybe even that morning, about sharing your faith and being bold to share your faith and so, in that time of prayer, Nadia really took that to heart and when she went into Pre-fives that morning and got talking with some of the adults there, she met a couple and, rather than just exchange the usual pleasantries, because she took that word of prayer and encouragement from Scripture to heart, she decided to share, with them, this answer to prayer from the night before, and it opened up a whole range of conversation about faith, about coming to church, and then, maybe, God was on the case of this couple who'd just come along to toddlers that day, that He was wanting to be part of their life. And it all began with prayer. With a few words of prayer on a Monday night, with a few words of prayer on a Tuesday morning leading to a cascade of events the next day. And who knows where it will continue in that couple's life. Who know. All this, prayer changes things. It brings about the unseen Kingdom of God that Jesus spoke about in our passage. It brings about that unseen Kingdom into both our lives and into the lives of people around us. And our passage today, we are called to prayer, we are encouraged to pray and, also, that we can keep on praying.

In verse 1 of chapter 18 we read 'Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.' To show them that they should always pray. Jesus calls us to pray, to be a people of prayer and part of this parable with this widow women, part of its purpose is to hold up to us her example that, without her persistence, nothing would have changed, and what we, in part, are to take away from it is that, without prayer, nothing which truly matters will change either. And that's a point Illustrated across the scriptures.

So, we can go into First Timothy Chapter 2, a verse often used in reference to prayer where Paul says to Timothy 'I urge first of all that petitions prayers intercession be made for all people for kings and all those in authority that we may live peaceful and quiet lives.' Now, let's remember, Paul is writing at a time when the church is being persecuted and so, he's encouraging prayer for a leader, an emperor who was evil, that people wouldn't like and I'm sure we know some leaders of government or others that we don't like but yet, we are to pray for them because our prayers affect society, they affect leadership. But, maybe, the opposite is also true that when we don't pray, things don't change. And so, we all know of the economic crisis that we've been facing, particularly at the instigation of the mini budget some weeks ago, and we might want to just simply blame Liz Truss or others for that kerfuffle and the impact upon our lives. But, what if we, God's people across this nation and here, are in part to blame because we just moaned and we criticized and we judged, but did we pray? Did we pray consistently for those in government?

Or let's go to Acts chapter four. We're at the end of chapter four. We read that the church is facing persecution and has gathered for prayer and, in one of the verses, we read that they pray. 'Stretch out your hand O Lord.' and maybe we wonder 'Well, they're just asking for God to take away the hardship, to click His fingers and magic it away.' But that's not actually what they pray. They pray for themselves to be changed, for them to have boldness in the face of their circumstances and maybe that's the most pressing area for prayer for us, to be changed, to be changed from the inside out rather than just wishing things away. In these examples we can see how prayer is essential and so why it should be a priority for us. We are called to prayer because prayer changes things and especially changes ourselves. But, brothers and sisters, do we see it that way?

It's often said that we've got time for everything else but prayer. Everything else seems much more urgent. Everything else seems to take greater priority but not prayer. We don't make the space to slow down. We don't meet the space to give time to prayer, to learn to pray. We put it off. Yet, the parable of this widow shows us why we are called to prayer. Just as her circumstances would not have changed without her persistent action neither will ours without prayer. So, let us respond to the call of Jesus to be a people who pray.

Now, one of the common pitfalls with this passage is to think that Jesus is saying we must persist in prayer because God is as unwilling as the judge. We read about his unwillingness in verses four and five. We read there 'For some time he refused but finally he said to himself 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think yet, because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice so that she won't eventually come and attack me.' He's unwilling, he's selfish, he's only looking out for himself really and it's common to think that maybe Jesus is comparing like with like, that God is like the judge. Yet, what Jesus actually says of God in verses 7 and 8 'Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones? He will see that they get justice and quickly.' God is different to the judge. Jesus is not arguing like with like. He's arguing from a lesser example to a greater example and He does that to encourage us. The

Scriptures teach us that there's at least five ways in which we have something greater in God than what this woman experiences.

So, for example, she is but a woman, a poor widow woman. She had no status in society, easy to be overlooked and ignored but that's not our situation. We are the children of God and so we come before our Heavenly Father who will not ignore us.

She had no access, no rights really, to come before this judge but we have access. The way is open for us in prayer, to come before our God any time that we please.

She had no-one to come alongside her as she went to the judge. She went alone but that's not the case with us because we have Jesus as an advocate before the Father for ours, we have the Holy Spirit living in us to take the groans and yearnings of our hearts before God on our behalf.

She had no leverage to influence this judge but we don't need the leverage because we have the promises of God to stand upon, to claim, to cling to. He will be faithful to those.

She came to a cold court of law but, brothers and sisters, when we come in prayer, we come before the throne of Grace, the throne of Almighty God.

Jesus is arguing from the lesser to the greater. He's saying, in effect, if this poor woman got what she deserved from such a selfish judge how much more should we be encouraged to pray because God is our Heavenly Father and we are reconciled to Him through Christ.

So, brothers and sisters, are we encouraged to be a prayerful people? Are we praying through the week, not just on a Sunday, and do we do so together at any point? Possibly not, but then, the thing to do is not to shrink from prayer, not to think it's beyond you or too hard, but to give it a try, to find ways of growing in prayer.

When I came to faith at the age of 19, I probably had only three experiences of prayer, three common experiences.

The first was growing up saying bedtime prayers. Maybe you did the same and you maybe had a rote prayer. I had a rote prayer but that fell away probably around primary school somewhere and prayers at bedtime stopped. I heard prayers on a Sunday morning being said at church there by the minister and I had prayers from the minister at maybe a school assembly. Literally, those were the three areas of prayer I'd only ever come across in my life. But when I came to faith at the age of 19, a month later I started studying at Herriot Watt University because I'd taken a gap year after school, and when I went along to the Freshers Fayre, I found out about the Christian Union and got involved with the Christian Union and, within a very short space of time, some folks from the Christian Union invited me along to the prayer meeting that they held on a Wednesday morning at half past eight - Yes, even students can get up early! - when we gathered at half past eight for classes before starting at quarter past nine and we

prayed. And, at first, I probably just did a bit of listening because I've never been exposed to something like that, but being in that environment around those people, it taught me to pray and to grow in confidence to pray out loud and that was a gift, a real gift. I probably wouldn't be standing in front of you without that influence in my life.

Now, I will always encourage you to learn to pray out loud. I think it's something we should learn to do but I recognize not everyone is quite ready to take that step yet. We can all find ways of growing in prayer, of weaving it into our day, our week, our rhythms so that it's not just from Sunday to Sunday when we pray, but that we pray in many other ways, that it comes as easy as breathing to us, and, maybe, as regularly. And if we will grow in prayer, if we will find ways and rhythms to do so, there will soon come to be encouraged to pray all the more, just as Jesus sought to do in this parable.

Yet, we all know, there are times when prayer seems to go unanswered and that is the context of our passage today. In verse chapter 17 at verse 20 we read that Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God would come and they asked this because they prayed for this, they'd been praying for 400 years, if not more, for the Kingdom of God to come. They wanted to be free of Roman rule. They wanted to see God's Kingdom established with His justice and peace for their people and their land. And so, they asked this new Rabbi 'Well, when will the Kingdom of God come?' and then His answer, both of what we read and the portion we skipped over, He says that the Kingdom is hidden in part. He says, in verse 20, 'The Kingdom of God is in your midst.' it's hidden, part through Him, through Him coming into the world. The Kingdom is breaking into the world. But He goes on to say more is to come. The Kingdom is here but not yet. It's here in part but not fully. And so, He goes on, in the parable we read, to teach us to pray, to be persistent in prayer even. And so, in verse 1, He speaks of not giving up. In verse 3 the widow is described as coming, who keeps coming to the judge. The judge says in verse 5 that she keeps bothering him. She's that persistent. In verse 7 Jesus speaks of the children of God who pray day and night and in verse 8 that He wonders when He returns, will He find faith, ongoing, persistent faith that displays itself in prayer. I wonder, does that describe us? Are we a prayerful people? Or, have we given up?

The Greek word for 'give up' in verse 1 can also be translated 'to faint.' It speaks of someone who has grown weary, who's lost heart, who's become discouraged and feels helpless. Maybe you come to church feeling that way today, or you've known seasons like that and, maybe, you're in that place because you're waiting, you're waiting for God to answer our prayer and, when He seems to delay, you maybe wonder 'Well, why does He delay?'

I'm not sure I can give you an answer to the why, but I read something that gave me encouragement nonetheless, as we wait upon God. Warren Wiersbe, one commentator, said 'God's delays are not the delays of inactivity but of preparation.' God's delays are not the delays of inactivity but of preparation. And he bases that upon Romans 8 verse 20 where Paul says to the church at Rome 'We know that, in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his

purpose, God's chosen ones.' called ones as Jesus said in the parable are 'the children of God' and that includes us. And so, this verse is as true for us as for the Christians in Rome, that we know that, in all things, God works, God works for the good of those who love Him. God is at work. His delays are not of inactivity but of preparation.

We might gather today feeling discouraged about many things. The last time I was with you I brought news about the future of our churches in the Upper Braes and you may feel like God is inactive. Why are things not changing? Why is the church in decline? You might also wonder in this message 'Well, if we start to gather for prayer, if we started a prayer meeting, if we learned to pray out loud, would God then change things, might we have a future?' I can't promise that. Even if you started to pray and gather for prayer, the building still might close yet, that does not mean God is inactive. Maybe in that season, maybe through those prayers, God begins our work of preparation, our work to change your heart, to make you more like Jesus, to grow you in faith, to grow you in passion, to grow you in boldness, to help you see you're part of something new. Who knows what He might do and teach as you pray in that season but His delays are not of inactivity but of preparation. For our part, we are to keep on praying in and through the delays, refusing to give up, just like the persistent widow because we know we come to God our Heavenly Father and that He works for the good of His children.

So, brothers and sisters, let us take heed of God's Word to us today and respond, both to the call and the encouragement of our Lord, to pray and, in so doing, be a people who keep on praying. May it be so. Amen.