

We are now at J day minus 17 and we are down to our last two talks in our seriesbecoming like Christ. Next week Jane's theme is with a faithful heart; today I'm focusing on becoming like Christ in persistence.

Chris touched on this subject two weeks ago in his story about Nehemiah; if you read through the whole of Nehemiah and I would urge you to do so, it only takes about half an hour, you will discover just how far persistence in prayer can take you in achieving your goal.

For those who were at New Wine this week and listened to the bible teaching of the great theological writer RT Kendall; I was surprised when he started saying almost word for word what I had drafted to say; so at least I know for certain that some of what follows is on the money!

You've heard the old adage that if at first you don't succeed try, try again. Well young Adam my three year old grandson has come up with a variation...if at first you don't succeed, get grandpa to do it for you.

In some ways you could say that grandpa is once again saying the same thing only in a different way; indeed you could say the whole preaching team throughout the year have been very persistent. Nearly every week, you have heard about a different aspect of Jesus' life and teaching and its application to our own lives as individuals and as a church family.

The aim was to encourage us individually and corporately to become like Christ; to unite the word and the spirit of our faith.

Earlier we heard Luke's parable of the widow and the judge and it starts with the words: "Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." So, we know the ending before we start "to succeed you need to pray always whilst not losing heart".

But this is a parable; and that's not how parables work. The last thing a parable usually does is to tell you the ending or the meaning right up front. Parables are stories that allude to other realities, and do so in an imaginative way that leads to illumination, enlightenment ... but also, more questions, and sometimes, confusion....a bit like my sermons then!

It may be helpful to say what parables are not: parables are not analogies. There is never an easy transference between the characters in a parable and those in "real life"; not everything fits together smoothly or perfectly; it's more multi-layered than that. Parables are deceptive in their simplicity.

So let's look at this story. In it there are two main characters. First we meet the judge; a very human judge who neither feared God nor had or showed any respect for people. This would have struck the listeners at the time very powerfully because Jesus is in effect saying the judge felt no shame before people and that would be 100% contrary to acceptable behaviour in the 1st century Middle East.

Even today, but definitely more so in the 1st century, Middle Eastern culture is often identified as a shame/pride culture, in which behaviour is guided by a community sense of honour and shame more than by an abstract principle of right and wrong. With the power available to the judge, he is supposed to do what is just, what is right, particularly when it comes to the most vulnerable members of society.

The second character in the parable is the widow. In a society in which women depended on the protection and patronage of fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, widows could be particularly vulnerable. It was only men who were allowed to speak publically; it was only men who were allowed to give evidence in a trial; women were not allowed to speak to strangers – remember the shock of the woman at the well when Jesus spoke to her and yet in this parable, the widow is described as continually coming before the judge, seeking justice against her opponent.

She does the petitioning herself, which is highly unusual and infers that she does not have any male protectors – other than Father God who in Psalm 68 is called "the protector of widows". So when we come to the second character, that of the widow, we need to bear in mind, the widow can't appeal to the judge "for the sake of God", because he does not fear God. Nor can the widow plead "for my sake" because he doesn't

care what anyone thinks about him rejecting a very vulnerable person.

The judge responds predictably at first: since he doesn't fear God, and doesn't respect people, it's no surprise to us that he initially ignores the woman's pleas. But eventually, he reasons with himself in verses 4 and 5: 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'

The unjust judge goes against his own character... he grants justice... because he wants to be rid of a nuisance. Not because of the shame in not helping her, not because of the pride in helping one of the society's more vulnerable people; not because she had proven how wronged she had been. No, because he wants the widow to stop bothering him.

We don't know why he refused her petitions for so long; maybe someone on the other side was paying him bribes but had then stopped; but had the widow not been persistent; had she not had the confidence to continue despite refusal after refusal her case would never have been settled.

Here, at one level, is what the parable is saying – the widow is a model to emulate in regard to confidence and persistence in prayer. After every rejection, every failure she would have prayed to God for help and justice to be seen and to be done.

But parables are by their very nature, multi layered.

At first glance, in keeping with the Old Testament traditions and symbolism, the judge would be portrayed as God. Though here Jesus makes it abundantly clear that this judge is about as unlike Father God as possible. He has no respect for God himself, and he doesn't care whether he does the right thing or not.

The next layer of the parable to reveal itself therefore is that even if a rotten judge like that can be persuaded to do the right thing by someone who pesters him day and night until it happens, then of course God the Father, who is justice personified and cares passionately about people, will vindicate them; will see that justice is done.

In Jesus' day, every legal case was a matter of one person standing accused by another with a judge having the responsibility to vindicate one party or the other. If someone had stolen from you, you had to make a charge against them in court; there was no such thing as police or crown prosecution services. Even if someone had murdered a relative of yours, the same would be true. Every single legal case whether it be civil, religious or criminal ended in a judge making a decision to vindicate one party or the other, by vindication I mean the decision was made in favour of one side, not the other.

This reveals the next level of understanding in the parable, namely God's people are like the litigants in a law suit, waiting for God's verdict. Two thousand years on we can see that whilst Israel as a nation was waiting for God's verdict –salvation as his chosen people – Jesus' message was not to the nation of Israel but to those embracing the message he was preaching of the new Kingdom.

And that message is as relevant today as it was 2,000 years ago – God's salvation comes through Jesus himself and salvation is therefore only available to those who believe in Jesus.

Or to put it into the language of Paul, we are justified by faith. The words vindication and justification are interchangeable in this sense. One day we will be justified by our faith or in other words, God will vindicate those who embrace and submit to Jesus.

This vindication, this justification is assured because we stand before a loving Father not a capricious judge. And it is within that relationship of love and confidence, that we offer our prayers to God.

We do not know how many times the widow sought vindication before the judge but persistence by definition means continually or repeatedly so we know she would have been disappointed time after time, yet she persevered.

Jesus goes on to explain in verse 6 and 7, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?” The implication is, if this terrible judge, who is so corrupt, will grant justice to this poor widow, how much more will God, who is perfectly just, listen to the pleas of those who cry out?

It’s an argument in favor of trusting in God’s perfect justice, even if we don’t see any evidence of it at the moment. It’s an argument in favor of taking our concerns to God, praying always, praying persistently, because God will respond.

This parable seems to be referring to intercessory prayer, when we are praying for God to intercede. In the case of the widow, the prayer seems quite urgent. Justice has been delayed, and we all know what that means: justice has been denied. And she is praying... which is to say, bothering, harassing, annoying the judge in hopes of having her petition answered.

RT Kendall quoted a statistic that a survey of nearly 2,000 church leaders revealed about the length of time they spent in prayer each day – less than 5 minutes. I found that shocking; but then I asked myself how long do I pray for each day? Then I asked myself do I even pray each and every day?

I decided yes, I did pray every day.....but as for being persistent....well one definition of persistence is the hard work that you do after you are tired of doing the hard work you’ve already done. I don’t think I can fulfill Paul’s command in 1 Thessalonians to pray without ceasing, but I can certainly try to be more disciplined so that I pray more specifically; more consistently and more persistently.

From my discussion thus far with Jon, I already know the great importance that he places in persistent prayer. So my closing question is: What about you? How persistent are you?

Amen