**16th October 2022**

**Call to worship**

Let us pause and consider God’s point of view.
God is outside time and space, for God created both.
When we pray, God hears us;
when the time is right, God responds.
When we pray, God knows our needs;
when his time is right, God meets our needs.
Let us come to God in prayer now.

**A gathering prayer**

Lord, we meet to worship and to bring our prayers.
Teach us to be patient as we wait for your response.
We know that you hear all our prayers,
however they are made and whoever we are.
Give us faith to trust your awesome love and care for us.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

God, source of life and strength,
we approach you with longing hearts and addled minds.
May you lift our faces to see you,
even when the world is puzzling and unclear.
Help us to know you better;
and draw close to us today.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Lord, you are our keeper,
the one who watches over us,
you are always present,
ever loving, ever faithful.
You are creator and redeemer.
We praise you
for your kindness and justice,
and for all that you are.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Lord, forgive us when we have closed our eyes
to the things that matter,
when we have prioritised the trivial surface matters
over urgent needs and deep-seated injustice.
Forgive us when we have chosen to look away
from those who need us the most.
Forgive us when we have stretched ourselves so thin
that we do not have time and energy
for that which you call us to do and to be.
Forgive us and restore us, we pray.
Give us what we need to live, love and pray persistently,
in the power and counsel of your Spirit. **Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Loving God,
we know you hear us.
You not only hear us,
you accept us as your children,
surrounding us with grace and forgiveness.
Thank you for your unconditional love.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Lord, thank you that you are our place of help.
Where others fail us and circumstances change,
you remain and you are unchanging.
Your love supports us, underpinning us
with a strength beyond ourselves.
We praise you for your passion for justice,
for your kindness towards your people.
We thank you that you call us
to a life-giving existence,
that we may give and receive
in your name, learning your ways
and caring for your world.
**Amen.**

***Traffic lights and stacking dominoes analogy***

**A prayer for all ages together**

*(Everyone look up and, those who can, stretch their arms as high as they can)*
Lord, we look up to those who are bigger than us –
and you are bigger than all of us.
We look up to you, knowing that you see all of us
and you know just what we need –
even when we don’t know what to ask.
**(arms down)**
Teach us how to wait,
**(hands in front, palms up, as if waiting to be given something)**
so that everything can happen at the right time –
**teach us patience and persistence. Amen.**

**Luke 18.1-8**

**Sermon**

When I was young my father was seriously ill and was off work for about a year. I remember one day him coming home from visiting the benefits office with my mother. He had been summoned to give an update on his situation and things had got out of hand. Mum was so embarrassed at his behaviour. ‘Why did you have to shout? You drew attention to us all. It was so embarrassing’ she said. ‘But no one was listening’ was my father’s reply. ‘So, I got really angry. That made them listen’.

‘It was embarrassing’ insisted my mother.

I wasn’t there so I don’t know whether the person representing the benefits office was listening or not. Shouty people are usually shouty because they don’t believe any one is listening to them. Sometimes that is true, sometimes its not and more a reflection of their frustration, insecurity, anger whatever.

I guess we all suspect that to get people’s attention or to get what you want, sometimes you need to be angry or aggressive. Those who raise their voices or cause a fuss or threaten trouble often get away with it and get what they want. It can be a risky strategy - for some people and organisations won’t be intimidated and won’t listen until you calm down.

The Gospel story of the persistent widow hints at some of the emotions of human existence. The widow’s despair at the situation she finds herself in is felt through her plea for justice and when eventually granted, we can imagine her joy. The widow’s tale is characterized by her persistent behavior.

Equally, the judge seems only interested in making a quiet life for himself. The judge does not fear God or respect people. He responds only to the loudest voice. He will give judgement just to protect himself.

Jesus’ parable reminds us that God is not like this widow or like this judge. The parable invites us to accept that the world is mixed up and messed up, just like the people in the parable. Yet, we can still find God’s kingdom, God’s justice. It is not of this world, but it still has to be discovered in messy lives.

The parable raises many questions. Should we have the audacity to ask God for things? Some people think prayer is more about changing yourself rather than God. The word pray comes from the middle English ‘to ask earnestly’ and the Latin *precari* which means to entreat. It really is the most natural thing in the world to ask God for a safe landing, or for healing, guidance, forgiveness, provision, protection or even a parking space at the supermarket on a wet October day. Even atheists pray when they are falling out of a plane or about to go into battle.

People often ask why we need to pray. Doesn’t the Lord already know our needs? Can’t he be trusted to do the right thing regardless? But the testimony of scripture is that God asks us, invites us to articulate our needs, calls us into collaboration, asks us to co-operate with his will and purposes. ‘Whether we like it or not’ said the great Baptist Preacher Charles Spurgeon, ‘asking is the rule of the kingdom’. It makes for the relationship and the friendship. It shows our vulnerability and our humility. It expresses our intentionality and faith.

Down the road in Bristol they still remember the ministry of George Mueller a nineteenth century philanthropist and pastor who started 117 schools, cared for 10,000 orphans and educated 120,0000 children. He was accused of raising the poor above their natural state.

His legacy is made even more remarkable by the fact that instead of appealing for money and making his financial needs publicly known he trusted God to provide for his vast operation raising more than £90 million in today’s money. He literally prayed for daily bread.

On one occasion he said grace before 300 orphans gathered for breakfast. But there was no food in the kitchen. Suddenly there was a knock at the door and the local baker entered carrying fresh bread. He had been awake all night feeling an urge to bake for them. The milkman appeared next, announcing his cart had broken down outside and wondered whether they could use a load of fresh milk.

George Muller exercised faith on an industrial scale for thousands of vulnerable people and he certainly saw extraordinary answers to prayer, but he also endured hardships. Many of his prayers weren’t dramatically answered. Others weren’t answered at all. He was without doubt a man of faith, but he was also a man of faithfulness who endured discouragement and refused to stop asking.

Have you ever noticed the way children ask their parents for a thing again and again? Pester power they call it. They persist. They nag. In a way they are learning to intercede. Jesus warned us very specifically that we will sometimes have to ‘keep praying and not give up’. That’s what he says at the start of this parable.

Is it right to get indignant with God in prayer – like this stroppy widow? The 19th century congregational theologian PT Forsyth argued that contending in prayer was essential. ‘Lose the habit of wrestling and the hope of prevailing with God, make it mere walking with God in friendly talk and precious as that is, yet you tend to lose the reality of prayer at last. In principle you make it more conversation instead of the soul’s great action’.

I don’t think Forsyth was advocating irreverence or unnecessary emotionalism in prayer, but he is testifying to that aspect of intercession, which is militant, passionate and defiant– when we keep ‘beating on heaven’s door with bruised knuckles in the dark’ as George Buttrick describes it.

Of course, some of our prayers will not require perseverance they will be answered straight away. A green light. There are others which are amber lights requiring us to wait and persevere.

The great preacher DL Moody died fifteen years before the invention of traffic lights so he wouldn’t have understood this analogy, but he certainly knew about waiting and persevering in prayer. He carried with him a list of 100 non-Christians for whom he prayed for every day. Over the years whenever one of them gave their life to Christ he would cross their name of the list. By the time of his death 96 of those 100 people had become followers of Jesus. What a testimony to the power of perseverance. Even more remarkable was the four remaining surrendered their lives to Christ at Moody’s funeral. All because of his bloody-minded determination and refusal to relent over the week’s months and years in prayer.

But sometimes the prayers aren’t answered. The traffic light is red. It’s a dead end. The answer is no. You may feel like the angry widow that the judge is not listening. Not answering. Not caring. People lose faith. People give up on God. They haven’t got the answer they were hoping for. How do we deal with disappointment?

You can step into the shadows of gethsemane to acknowledge just how painful it can be sometimes to pray ‘your will be done’. The Bible is way more honest about unanswered prayer that the church. The gospel writers make no attempt to hush up the fact that Jesus himself experienced disappointments in prayer. On one occasion he prayed for a blind man and he was only partially healed, and he had to ray again. On another occasion he couldn’t perform any healings because of opposition and unbelief – which reminds us that we have to contend with the world around us and the forces of evil. Jesus prayed that we would all be one. But clearly and tragically we all remain bitterly divided. In Gethsemane before he went to the cross Jesus prayed Father take this cup of suffering away from me. We are told he prayed in great anguish and earnestly (Luke 22.44). Yet God did not let the cup pass from him.

When life hurts like hell and we find ourselves struggling to make sense of unanswered prayer, we may wonder why God doesn’t just click his fingers and make everything better. At such times of unknowing, when there’s nothing good in the pain and we’re helpless and hopeless, it is tempting to doubt God’s kindness and pull away from faith. God may seem like the uncaring Judge.

But this is the very time that we need God’s comfort more than ever before. Getting rid of God’s love and power doesn’t actually help. In fact, I would argue it makes things worse. When you try to remove God from the equation of your suffering you reduce yourself to a highly evolved animal in a meaningless universe whose suffering is without purpose, consequence or hope. By holding on to God when things are tough, you retain the possibility of rescue and receive comfort in your distress, a sense of purpose in your pain, and ultimately the hope of life after death. Jesus ends this parable where the unjust judge finally gives justice and says:

*‘will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?****8****I tell you; he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?’*

Will he find faith on earth?

We read the Gethsemane prayer with the benefit of hindsight, understanding exactly why Jesus prayer had to be unanswered. And the bible assures us that one day we will look back on our own lives and understand and come to that place of peace. PT Forsyth again says ‘we shall come one day to a heaven where we shall gratefully know that God’s great refusals were sometimes the truest answers to our truest prayers’.

May the Son of Man find faith in us. 

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord God, just as the widow persisted, we persist in our prayers of intercession.

Lord, we lift our eyes to you.
**Hear our cries for justice, mercy and peace.**

We pray for all involved in our justice system, for police officers, judges, lawyers and all who uphold the law. We pray for all who work in our prisons and for all those serving prison sentences.

Lord, we lift our eyes to you.
**Hear our cries for justice, mercy and peace.**

We pray for the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, where Russian strikes have again targeted civilians. For Somalia. And for aid workers everywhere. We pray for safe passage for lorries and workers to reach those in need.

Lord, we lift our eyes to you.
**Hear our cries for justice, mercy and peace.**

We pray for families everywhere, of those killed in the nursery in Thailand. And those in the garage explosion in Ireland. We pray for widows, orphans, the needy and the vulnerable. We pray for our own loved ones and for our communities. For those who are fearing the prospect of blackouts this winter and dreading escalating debt due to the ever-spiralling cost of living.

Lord, we lift our eyes to you.
**Hear our cries for justice, mercy and peace.**

We pray for all who preach your word, Lord. For all Christian leaders in our churches. For all your people. You call us to pray, to work at it and not give up. You care about every detail in our lives, from the smallest to the more complex.  We place all into your hands, for on you we can depend.

Lord, we lift our eyes to you.
**Hear our cries for justice, mercy and peace.
Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

Lord our God,
you promise to stay awake,
you protect us,
you hear all of our prayers,
you want us to keep talking to you.
You are God of everything and
we look up to you.
Bless us as we trust in you.
Send us out to live and work and pray.
In Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**

*Bibliography Pete Greig, How to Pray, Hodder 2019*

*Roots Worship Material Sep Oct 2019*