

KEEP ON PRAYING: 29th SUNDAY C

One evening six year old Bobby asked his father for a dog. 'Sorry, son,' his father said, 'not now. But if you pray real hard, perhaps God will send you a baby brother.' Bobby prayed faithfully for a month but nothing happened. It seemed to him useless to keep on praying, so he gave up. One month later, he was taken to see his mother in hospital. With a proud smile his father drew back the covers from the cradle next to his mother's bed. Bobby saw not one, but two babies, twin boys. 'Aren't you glad now you prayed for a baby brother?' asked his father. 'I sure am,' said the boy. 'But aren't you glad, Dad, I stopped praying when I did?'

By contrast, the widow in the story Jesus told, got what she wanted and needed. To appreciate her desperation it helps to know that she was living at a time and place when widows counted for nothing. There was no widow's pension, no social services of any kind. She could not inherit the property of her late husband. She wasn't actually allowed to go to court and appeal for assistance. So we have to admire her front and daring in approaching the judge, and presenting herself not once, not twice, but over and over again. Maybe every morning, noon and night!

She must have been particularly desperate too, to keep approaching a judge with such a bad reputation – a reputation for being always on the take, for always taking bribes. A judge who had no reverence for God and no respect for human beings either! A real crook, in fact!

So it comes as a complete surprise that against all the odds the widow wins her case against her opponent and gets justice from that crooked judge. How did she do it? How did she succeed? She succeeded because she kept pestering him. She was always in his face. She gave him no rest, no peace. Night and day she drove him crazy. She never let up. So finally, just to get her out of his hair, he gave in to her demands and pleas.

Luke sums up the point of the story in these few well-chosen words: 'Jesus told the disciples a parable about the need to pray always and not to lose heart' (18:1). Of course, Jesus is not saying that God is like the judge in any way. And he is not saying that we have to wear God down like the widow wore down the judge. What Jesus is saying, on the contrary, is that if in the end an evil judge can give a poor widow justice, how much more will God our loving Father give his children what we need most of all.

We might well ask, though, why Jesus taught us to keep asking God for what we need, when God already knows our needs. In short, why does God want us to name our needs quite specifically? It's so that we might keep in touch with God. It's so that we might express our dependence on God and acknowledge his love, mercy and goodness towards us. It's so that we won't take any of God's gifts and blessings for granted.

What blessings? The blessings, for instance, of life itself; of food; drink; health; fitness and medicine! The blessings of family; friends; children and community! The blessings of gardens; flowers; trees; pets; music; education and travel! The blessings of fresh air; sunshine and rain, warmth and coolness! The blessings of beauty; sport; art; comedy; drama

and dance! The blessings of meaning; belonging; and a sense of responsibility! The blessings of the persons of Jesus Christ our brother, and of Mary, his mother and ours! The blessing of the constant presence of God, and the promise and assurance of everlasting life with God! And in the meantime the blessings of faith, hope and love!

It happens in our prayer for our needs though, that at times God does not seem to be listening. We run into darkness and silence. At these times we might think: 'I'm getting nowhere. Why keep on praying? What's the use?' That's precisely why Jesus gave us his message today, his message to keep on praying, no matter what.

The trouble with us human beings is that we fancy we know exactly what's good for us. The truth is that we have limited vision, even tunnel vision. The truth is that we don't know exactly what's going to happen next year, next month, next week, next hour, or even in the next few minutes. Only God sees time as a whole, and only God knows what is good and what is best for us, both in the long run and in the short run. That is why Jesus wants us, as Luke puts it, 'to pray continually and never lose heart'.

We will never lose heart and we will never lose our faith in the power of prayer, if after putting all our requests, pleas and petitions to God, we add a few special words to our prayer. Those words are from the perfect prayer we will be saying today before Holy Communion! They are the words, 'thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven'.

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