

## Jesus' parable: The Friend at Midnight.

### Luke 11 v5-8 [OT – Psalm 27 v1-6]

Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; <sup>6</sup>a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.' <sup>7</sup>And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' <sup>8</sup>I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, *yet to preserve his good name*, <sup>1</sup> he will surely get up and give you as much as you need. [footnote replaces 'yet because of your shameless audacity']

### Keeping up Appearances

Why do we behave like we do? Are we trying to portray an image that we want people to like? Is what we portray honest or dishonest? Do we do what we do, because we know it's the right thing – if you like our moral compass. Do you do things that you do because you feel obliged by others. I am in a row of 4 houses with a hedge in front of our road. When I come back from work and all 3 neighbours have cut their portion of the hedge and mine is looking really scruffy in comparison, why do I feel compelled to do mine at the earliest opportunity – I couldn't care less yesterday. Or are you trying to persuade people that you are different than you really are, perhaps better than you are. In the comedy 'Keeping up Appearances' Hyacinth Bucket (pronounce Bouquet) is always trying to make out she is posher and better connected than she really is – leaving a brochure for a QE2 cruise on her dining table, desperate for her visitor to see it and comment.

When we **pray**, it is important that we are open and honest with God. If we're hurt share it, if we are angry with him, then be angry with him. Often we don't know how to pray, how to approach God, what we can say and what we can't. How often do we need to pray, how often do we have to ask for the same thing before its too often. The disciples wanted to know. We going to look at this parable in the context of the expectation and culture of first century Palestinians such as the disciples of Jesus. Through their eyes we will explore what Jesus was telling his disciples about the nature of God, and the assurance that he gives to mankind. Once we have understood this, we'll explore what it tells us ; We'll look at the difference between prayers where we can expect to be answered straight away and those we have to fight for.

### Intro

For 3 wonderful years, Jesus was a preacher and a teacher, both through what he said and through what he did. Jesus was also a poet, a great poet. He speeches and parables were often delivered in the poetic forms of the day, which are all of course for us are all lost in translation. He was also a wanderer. He strode the lesser paths, staff in hand, his knees punching his robe, but not hurrying. At every small village, he would stop and spent time with the villagers, he would eat with them, and stay if shelter was offered two days, perhaps 5. He would sometimes pick up those that saw something they really wanted, and would follow him. Then as they got further from their home village, even 15 miles away where everything already looked alien, some would lose confidence and turn back for home. Others would stay, but even these would need encouraging, intimate teaching and assurances that they good trust in him, they could trust in God.

On one occasion, Jesus had been praying observed by his disciples. He may have gone off to a peaceful remote place, with his disciples following respectfully at a distance. They frequently observed Jesus in prayer, and wanted to know how to have the same level of prayer life themselves. Teach us Lord. He did and gave them the model of prayer that we know as the Lord prayers. Then in Luke's narrative we see this followed up immediately by a parable, which was delivered as a poem.

Jesus is teaching his disciples about prayer. Then in the Luke passage, he tells them a parable. This parable poem had two clear stanzas ( or parts) to it.

Part 1 – is in the form of a ridiculous question. – This looks at what **will not** happen.

Part 2 – is about the avoidance of shame – This look at what **will** happen.

## **Part 1**

*Jesus said to his disciples 'Can any one of you imagine going to a friend's house at midnight, and saying "Let me borrow 3 loaves of bread. A friend of mine who is on a journey has just come to my house, and I have not got any food for him", and your friend answers from inside "Don't bother me, the door is already locked, and the children and I are in bed, I can't get up and give you anything"?'*

The poem contains a Greek phrase which is used when a question or statement is expected to get an emphatic negative response. There is no parallel word for us, but we do the same by emphasising a word or words. Do you say things like this - Have you ever SEEN such a mess? Can you BELIEVE what's just happened? etc.

Jesus paints a picture of a situation which to us seems fairly reasonable, but to the disciple would seem ludicrous. Imagine some-one coming round your house when you and your family are all tucked up in bed, your partners snoring, your kids have been asleep for hours, and some-one from outside your house starts calling your name. Softly first, then a bit louder, semi-conscious you ignore it, but then you here it louder and persistently. In sheer disbelief you get up and open a window – Sssh, what do you want? / I've got an unexpected visitor and I'm out of bread. I know you've got some, please let me have what I need. / No its late, the door is locked and the kids are asleep – go away. Bit harsh, but it's midnight, and anyway if you give him your Hovis 'Best of Both' loaf how are you going to make toast in the morning to spread your rhubarb and ginger jam on. Whose being unreasonable in our culture – the caller or the sleeper? Most people would say the caller is out of order calling that time of night for a loaf. So why was this a ridiculous question for the disciples. Why is the response from the sleeper something that the disciples could not imagine happening?

First Century Palestine has a Middle Eastern culture, where the responsibility for one's guest is legendary.

**The guest comes at midnight.** In desert areas such as Jordan, Syria and Egypt, travellers such as Bedouins would often travel at night when it was cooler. But in places like Lebanon and Palestine, there was a sea breeze on the coast, and elevation inland. For a Palestinian Peasant, travel by night would have been only under exceptional circumstances. So a visitor at midnight **would** not have been expected.

**He is a guest of the whole village,** not just the caller. There may be just two of them eating, but a guest **in** the village was a guest **of** the village. As such there was a responsibility of the villagers as a whole to provide for the guest. Even today in remote Middle Eastern villages, where the customs have changed little, you still have the practice of rounding up on other villagers to provide the food for your guest. There is an honour in hospitality. The guest must leave the village with a good feeling about the hospitality of the village as a community. In going to his neighbour the caller is asking him to fulfil his duty to the guest of the village.

**He calls out and doesn't knock.** The caller is known to the sleeper. He doesn't knock on the door, he calls out. A stranger knocks in the night, a friend calls. When he calls, his voice will be recognized and the neighbour will not be frightened. Even today when we visit a friend, we say that we'll call on them.

**He requests 3 loaves of bread.** These weren't small rolls (as they ate in Syria) but large circular loaves, one normally more than enough for a single person, but it had to be a whole new loaf, one partially eaten from a previous meal would have been an insult. The caller said he had no bread, but he may have had some leftovers, what he did not have was some unbroken loaves. It was also customary to have a spare loaf as you would not want to run short of your guests appetite. Each person would have their own loaf (plus one spare, means that the request for 3 loaves were for 2 people only). The bread was the utensils, not the meal itself. You would tear off bread from your loaf, scoop up food from a communal dish then eat the bread with the meal. That way no germs could go back into the pot. The caller is just asking for bread, which was the most basic of the ingredients. The disciples would be aware that the caller would still need to roundup the rest of the food for the meal from various neighbours on his round. He would also need the best tray, pitcher, cloth and goblets from the village.

**He knows the neighbour has bread.** The Palestinians would bake bread every day. It was a communal act for the woman, and they would know who had baked most recently and who would have bread left in the evening. It is no good the neighbour pretending that he does not have any spare whole loaves.

**The friend makes excuses.** A great deal is made of the door being bolted and the children asleep, but they are very weak excuses. The door bolt is light, and you know what children are like, If you wake them up, they go back off. After a long car journey, I would take the children out of the car asleep, carry them up the stairs, lob them into a cabin bed, they would partially wake up and say something, I would reply with 'its bedtime goodnight', and within seconds they would be back to sleep. Where the honour of hospitality is at stake, such excuses were derisory?

Disciples can you imagine asking a friend to contribute bread for a meal for a village guest, and the friend makes up such weak excuses. No of course not, that would never happen.

## Part 2:

Having been told in the first stanza what will not happen, because its too ridiculous, Jesus then carries on the parable with a second stanza that tells them what will happen.

However with this second stanza we have a problem of translating a greek word on which the whole meaning of the parable rests. It is the word 'αναιδεια' (anaideia) because the same word has two different meanings, of which either could be true – persistence or shamelessness.

Most translators have gone for the word 'persistence' and the only contextual way this would make sense is to apply it to the visitor. So in the NKJV for example, we read that 'because of his persistence he will rise', i.e. because the visitor persists in asking then then the Neighbour will get up. This theme is taken up in the Good News bible, J B Philips and even the Jewish Orthodox Bible.

There is a big problem though if we keep this traditional interpretation that it is the Persistence of the caller. This follows on directly from teaching of the Lords Prayer, so we would then have to interpret this explanation on prayer as applying to the elements of the Lords Prayer, where we ask for the food we need, God to forgive sins, and to protect us. This would make the passage very difficult, by taking any element. If we ask God to forgive our sins, then we would have to expect him to say No, and only forgive our sins after repeated requests. Do we starve, unless we have hours of petition. No. It can't be what Jesus means by this parable.

You would expect each line of the stanza to have the same object, and we can see that the neighbour is the object. From the ASV we read: I tell you, even though **HE** will not get up and give him *anything*, because **HE** is his friend, yet because of **HIS** persistence [or shamelessness], **HE** will get up ....

So it would not make sense in the poem to switch to the visitor as object, so the person with persistence of shamelessness is the neighbour not the visitor. If the translation then is 'persistence' then it is the neighbour who is persistent which doesn't make sense, - he is not being persistent in getting up, he wants to stay in bed! Also, in first century greek texts there is no record of this greek word 'αναιδεια' being used to mean persistence.

We have to conclude from our evidence that the meaning of the passage is that because of his shamelessness he will get up. But then we have to make sense of this word 'shamelessness' – it needs to be interpreted as 'sense of shame' – a positive quality. Shame is an extremely important quality In Eastern Culture generally. Some areas of life are governed by Law, but much of life in these cultures is controlled by the shame (negative) which is avoided because of the individuals inner 'sense of shame' which is a positive attribute. The first is negative and to be avoided at all costs, the second is positive and to be encouraged. In Aramaic there was a specific word for this positive 'sense of shame' but not in the Greek. So the Greek word for shame is modified to make it sound like a positive version. A bit like in English, how we have blame as a negative word, He's to blame. But if we modify the word slightly – he's blameless.

So 'shameless' should be translated as a positive sense of what shame is. Then the notes in the NIV and Living Bible start to make sense. 'To preserve his good name, he will get up (NIV). ' 'In order to avoid shame, so that his reputation won't get damaged, he will get up (Living Bible).

If the sleeper refused the request of anything as humble as bread, the host would continue on his rounds cursing the stinginess of the sleeper who would not get up even to fulfil this trifling request. The story would be all over the village by morning. The next day the neighbour would be met with cries of shame and derision where ever he went. **Because of his desire to 'avoid shame' he will rise and grant whatever the borrower wants.**

**The NIV rings true with the footnote inserted.** I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, *yet to preserve his good name*, he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

The parable has a great ending, the neighbour gets up and not only gives him the bread, but he gives him whatever he wants. The implication to the disciples ears were that the neighbour not only gives him the basic bread, but once he has got up he then sorts out the food to go with it, plus anything else that he can offer for serving the food. This implies that it was done happily with goodwill, and not begrudgingly (in which case he would have only given him the 3 loaves asked for).

Of course, he did, that's what you would expect, in a culture thick on the importance of reputation and the avoidance of shame. That's what you would expect to happen. So why tell this parable when teaching about prayer.

### **What we avoid**

With the traditional translation of 'persistence' we had a very difficult passage on our hands. We come to God with our petitions and we have beg him and persist to the point of annoyance just to get the basics that he's promised us, such as forgiveness of sins. Of course there are certainly times when we do need to persist in prayer, but these will often be in the area of spiritual warfare, [past examples included praying for the down fall of communism, or apartheid], praying for healing, praying for the souls of friends and family that don't yet know Jesus. This is hard focussed intercessionary prayer, where we somehow empower the forces of good against the forces of evil with our prayers. This is different to the daily walk with God i.e. provide for me, protect me, forgive me.

### **Meaning of the passage – to disciples**

When we settle on the alternative meaning of *αὐταῖς* (avoidance of shame) and apply it to the sleeping neighbour, then it fits much more comfortably with what we understand as the nature of God.

The parable says to the original listener – 'When you go to this kind of neighbour, everything seems to be against you. He's in bed. The door is locked. His children are asleep. He's generally a grumpy old man and doesn't really like you much. Yet you will receive more than you ask. This is because your neighbour is a man of integrity and he will not violate that quality. The God to whom you love also has an integrity that he will not violate AND he loves you.

The second meaning takes Jesus into another of his 'how much more' comparisons:

Example 1: Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And **how much more** valuable you are than birds!

Example 2: If you then, though you are evil, know **how** to give good gifts to your children, **how much more** will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

If you are confident in getting your needs met when you call an awkward neighbour in the middle of night, then how much more can you rest assured when you call on a Loving Father; when you take your requests to him in prayer.

The disciples needed to hear this, they were a long way from home, they had given up a lot to follow Jesus. They could see Jesus had a good prayer life and God answered his prayers, and they wanted assurance that God loved them too, that he would answer their prayers. Teach us to pray. We want a close relationship with God, we want to know he will

answer our prayers. So Jesus teaches them a pattern for prayer then gives them this parable to assure them that their prayers will be heard, and answered, not because of persistence but because of Gods integrity, and his love for them.

### **Meaning to us**

Examples: difference between regular prayer (Lords prayer) and heavy persistent intercessory prayer.

Compare taking a small vitamin C tablet each day for health maintenance, and taking extra big dose when you field a cold coming on. Compare knocking on an elderly neighbours door every day to check if she's okay and wants anything from the shop, and hearing a crash and a wail then kicking the locked door to get to her.

Are we any different? Becoming a Christian is a step of faith, we put our trust in Jesus, in God. When we ask Jesus into our life, we are inviting God into a relationship with us. The Christian journey is fundamentally the journey of a relationship, just as it is with all our relationships. They unfold, progress, have highs and lows. But in other relationships we are either in control of them, or at least have a share in that control. Our relationship with God is different because our aim is to hand control over to him, to put Jesus in the driving seat, for him to lead us into the areas where we can serve him. But, we are taking a risk, basing our lives on something unseen. We have some evidence that what we are following is the Truth from what we read and hear, and we have our own experiences what we ourselves have witnesses and experienced in our own lives and the lives of others. So we enter this relationship with some confidence, but can we ever be fully sure, fully convinced, free of doubt that we are doing the right things. For Christians in the Central African Republic and the Middle East, the decision to become or stay a Christian is a life-threatening one.

Part of any relationship is good communication, and as disciples of Jesus ourselves, as his followers, we need good communications. Jesus tells us how. Come to him regularly and ask for the things we need, those things that are keeping with his desire for our lives. Freedom of guilt made possible by being regularly forgiven. The basics each day to survive and the provisions to do the things that he has planned for us. Then protection over us to do those things, until the chosen day when our time is up and he calls us home.

Jesus is telling us through this parable that we can trusting God for his forgiveness, his guidance, his provision and for his protection. He freely gives to those who ask. These things are part of your Christian birth-right, you don't have to persuade God to give you them. Jesus is assuring us through this Parable that you will get the things that you expect (and probably much more) because of Gods integrity, and because of his love for you, you as an individual. We can risk God with control over our lives, because..

he won't let you down because he won't compromise his own integrity and

he won't let you down because he loves you.

It's the assurance we need, to daily offer up our lives to him and go his way, not our own.

**Amen.**