

## The Parable of the Widow and the Judge

### Readings:

**NT: Luke 18 v1-8** Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to teach them that they should always pray and never become discouraged. <sup>2</sup>“In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. <sup>3</sup>And there was a widow in that same town who kept coming to him and pleading for her rights, saying, ‘Help me against my opponent!’ <sup>4</sup>For a long time the judge refused to act, but at last he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or respect people, <sup>5</sup>yet because of all the trouble this widow is giving me, I will see to it that she gets her rights. If I don’t, she will keep on coming and finally wear me out!’ <sup>6</sup>And the Lord continued, “Listen to what that corrupt judge said. <sup>7</sup>Now, will God not judge in favor of his own people who cry to him day and night for help? Will he be slow to help them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will judge in their favor and do it quickly. But will the Son of Man find faith on earth when he comes?”

**OT: II Chronicles 19v5-7 (Jehoshaphats Reforms)** . <sup>5</sup>He (King Jehoshaphat) appointed judges in each of the fortified cities of Judah <sup>6</sup>and instructed them: “Be careful in pronouncing judgment; you are not acting on human authority, but on the authority of the Lord, and he is with you when you pass sentence. <sup>7</sup>**Honor the Lord** and act carefully, because the Lord our God **does not tolerate fraud or partiality or the taking of bribes.**”

Also see Parable of the Friend at Midnight: Luke 11v5-8.

### TALK: The parable of the Judge and the Widow

#### Realising the impossible dream. -

Did anyone ever ask their parents for something that they really wanted and got told No !

Imagine you have two small children and they have been watching the TV adverts and announce to you that this year they want to be taken to DisneyWorld – Florida. You smile and say no. They keep asking – you look into , see the airline prices and realise you have nowhere near enough to take them., so say No again. The next year you get the same demand and check your monies and say no not this year, and every time they ask you, it’s the same answer. You holiday again at a local resort. This happens again for two more years, and then on the fifth year. The children now older enough to have a paper round are still asking if they can go to Disney World Florida for their holidays, and by now it is beginning to seem to them like an impossible dream. .You smile and say lets go to town, then take them to the travel agents and book your holiday to Florida. They are over-the-moon, at last my Dad loves us enough to take us to Disney land, he has finally heard what we want, after 5 years of pestering him, he has finally given in to our demands, and is going to go where we want to go for a change and not the same old boring place that he likes.

That is their perception, but what has really happened is this. You wanted to go to Florida too, but never been because you could not afford it. However from their first request you started putting by twenty pounds a week until 5 years (250 weeks) later, you have the £5000 you need for the dream holiday. It meant that for four years the best holiday you could afford was in a friend static caravan near a holiday park. It was the best holiday you could give the children with the money you had. During these four years to the children you came across as mean, it seemed to them that they would never get to go to Florida, but they didn’t give up asking because they wanted it so badly. It kept you going too, had they given up asking for a Disneyland holiday, you may have spent the money on something else worthy for the family, something more tangible. They had to keep engaging with you year on year about Disneyland, but it was not about changing your mind like they thought, because it was already made up, but it was always going to take time to get that amount of money together. To get the result, you both had to have been in there together for the long haul – but you did it, and it was brilliant !

As small children all your bargaining is from a position of weakness, your persistent asking is the only thing you can bring to the table. No matter how much you saved up your pocket-money you could never organise and pay for a holiday to Disneyland Florida with your own strength and means. Today's parable is one of a lady who is also having to get what she wants from a position of extreme weakness. This is the parable of the Widow and the Judge.

**v1:** Luke introduces the parable by saying that Jesus told this parable to his disciples with two messages for them. 1. **Always pray** (i.e. don't give up). 2. **Don't get discouraged**. He pre-frames this parable, so we now know what to look for ourselves.

But surely if you are a disciple of Jesus, you would be well into praying, and in the presence of Jesus, surely they would not easily get discouraged.

### **Dangers of following Jesus**

In the time of Jesus, Palestine was under Roman rule and was regarded by them as a sub-province within their Roman province of Syria. The Roman procurator Pontius Pilate was in charge of military rule and governed Judea and Samaria, he was ruthless in quelling any riots. Herod Antipas (referred to as King but did not have the title officially) governed Galilee and Perea (West of the Jordan), but in Jerusalem the temple Sanhedrin (a council of generally rich religious rulers, Sadducees and Pharisees) looked over Jewish law and had their own temple guards who could dish out punishment for those breaking temple laws.

Jesus was a Galilean and they had a recent history of being trouble-makers often challenging the new authorities. Jesus himself was out spoken and brought attention on himself, especially when challenging the religious rulers and their love of money. Herod was intrigued by his reports of Jesus, and any former associate of the executed John the Baptist, who had challenged Herod and died, needed to be wary of Herod's army. Whilst not actively sought by the Romans, Jesus would no doubt have been wary of the ruling soldiers and would have probably avoided routes that had Roman check-points.

As the ministry of Jesus developed, he and his small band of followers were starting to attract the wrong type of attention, and he was having to keep on the move to avoid Herod's men catching up with him. Being a disciple of Jesus was not the safest occupation. This parable is placed during his final week before he enters Jerusalem, but after the raising of Lazarus, following which the Pharisees made their plans to kill Jesus. His teaching now was making frequent reference to the end-times. It would get increasingly difficult for his followers over the next few days

As part of his teaching, his disciples would need words that would give them hope in difficult times, and encourage them to persist in their faith whatever their opposition. When Jesus is ascended and they can no longer speak with him in his physical form, their prayer life would become even more important.

### **Always ?**

The parable opens with Luke saying that the purpose of the parable was to encourage the disciples to 'always pray' and not grow weary of it. By 'always' though, he means not continually time-wise but under all circumstances, no matter how bad they are, no matter how unlikely is to get an answer to prayer. Keep praying. For the disciples, it will come to also mean don't give up praying for the return of the Lord, no matter how long it seems to be taking

There are two key characters in the parable, the Judge and the Widow. This relationship is to be a window in the relationship between his followers and God. However, this was a brave new move within the parable of Jesus, as the first time he uses a negative character to compare God with.

### **THE PAGAN JUDGE**

In the Old Testament the Jews depended on the appointed of God-fearing judges to keep order when they had no King, and often when they did. Such as under King Jehoshaphat where In 2 Chronicles he gives instructions to his

judges i.e. : *“Be careful in pronouncing judgment; you are not acting on human authority, but on the authority of the Lord, and he is with you when you pass sentence. <sup>7</sup> Honour the Lord and act carefully, because the Lord our God does not tolerate fraud or partiality or the taking of bribes.”*

But often the judges in Jesus’ time were terribly corrupt. Jesus probably had in mind one of the regular police-magistrates, not a practicing Jew, but full-time posts appointed by the authorities. They were paid a large salary from the Temple treasury, but still took a large amount in bribes. A subtle play on words had them sometimes labelled as ‘robber-judges’ instead of ‘prohibition –judges’. Some of the village based judges has such a bad reputation that it was said they would pervert justice for a single dish of meat.

**V2 .** *In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people.*

This judge was of the corrupt sort, but to the extreme, because he had no fear of God. So he was in direct contradiction to the Jewish expectation of a non-corrupt God fearing judge.

Our bibles say that he also did not respect people, but a better translation is that he was not ashamed before people’. i.e. He could act unjustly and feel no shame. This was bad in a culture that placed so much importance on honour over shame. If you were telling off a child you would not say that what he did was wrong, and expect him to understand the abstract concept of what was right and wrong, but instead you would say that it was a shameful thing.

For this judge, he neither feared God or felt shame. There was no spark of honour left in his soul to which anyone could appeal. The only way to influence this man was through bribes.

The Widow in the story had an adversary, who the judge for some reason favoured, and allowed his injustices to the widow, most likely because of his standing and ability to give bribes.

### **THE HELPLESS WIDOW**

**V3** *And there was a widow in that same town who kept coming to him and pleading for her rights, saying, ‘Help me against my opponent!’*

In the bible, the widow symbolises the innocent, powerless and oppressed.

The Jewish lone Widow was seen as the most vulnerable adult in their society. With no husband or sons, she may have no-one to support her or stand up for her. We know that this widow had no-one because she is in court which is where you would only find men. Women’s rights would be represented at court by their men-folk. She was there because she had no-one to go there for her.

Judges were obliged by Old Testament law to hear the cases of orphans and widows first, because of their vulnerability. Her rights were being violated. She kept coming back to the judge but he would not hear her case.

She kept coming back and pleading for her rights to be properly considered. She would no doubt have shouted out and be told to be quiet, but kept persisting, kept coming back.

There is a story from a traveller to the ancient city of Nisbis in Iraq in the 1800s, which paints a very similar picture and fills in some details:-

*Immediately on entering through the city gate was a prison , with a large open hall opposite which was the court of justice. At one end of the long hall on a raised platform half covered in cushions was the Kadi, or judge. Squatted around him were a number of secretaries. People filled the hall and at one time there were a dozen voices clamouring to be heard next. However there were some who were at the front whispering to the secretaries and agreeing a ‘fee’ to be heard next. When a high enough bribe was offered, the secretary would tell the judge who would then announce that case. Meanwhile during the proceedings of the case, a poor woman interrupted it with loud cries for justice. She was sternly told to be silent, and told off for coming back every day. She replied ; I will keep*

*coming back every day until the Kadi hears me'. After a long day of interruptions, the judge impatiently demanded what does that woman want. Her case was heard. Her only son was taken for a soldier, and alone she could not plough her field but was still being taxed on it even though as a lone widow she should not be expected to pay. The judge ordered that she be exempt, and she finally left with the result she had needed.*

### **The special place of women**

But why were the widows in the parable and the story from Iraq **not forcefully evicted** from the court-room for their breach of peace. In the parable whilst the judge had no shame, presumably the others did, and there was no one willing to do that.

In the Middle East women are generally powerless in a man's world, but at the same time they are respected and honoured. It is acceptable to mistreat a man in public, but not a woman. Women can shout and scream at a public figure but will then not be harmed. In one town, rebel soldiers moved in and set up base in a neighbourhood bringing much fear. An old lady was seen shouting at the guards of the compound telling them of the shame they brought on the area and how they should leave. The guards just smiled at her, and told her not to fret with calming words. Had it been a man doing the same, he would have shot him.

In the final days of Jesus, the role of women became increasingly important, as the danger increased. When Jesus was crucified, out of the male disciples only the young John was able to be at the foot of the cross, and he was only safe because he was wrapped around the mother of Jesus as her support. Perhaps the words to Mary and John from the cross, Here is your Mother, Here is your son, were also intended for the soldiers to hear, so they realised John's role in support of Mary and not to harm him. The other men could not risk it, but because of the culture, even though they were followers of Jesus the women were safe.

### **Vindicated**

**V4-5** *For a long time the judge refused to act, but at last he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or respect people,<sup>5</sup> yet because of all the trouble this widow is giving me, I will see to it that she gets her rights. If I don't, she will keep on coming and finally wear me out!*

The judge had no respect for the woman or her rights. She could be heard above the men, because she could shout and scream out in a way that would have got them evicted. The phrase 'wear me out' can mean 'blow to the head'. However if she were to attempt any violence on the judge then she would be removed. We might use the phrase 'She's doing my head in' – her nagging has given me a headache and I don't think I can take much more! The phrase 'keep on coming' has a permanence attached to it – he is convinced that this woman will **never** give up. It is a war of attrition. He is being worn down. So for his own preservation, and still no concern for her, he hands her the hearing and the result she sought. I think she knows that he will have to give in eventually, she is not giving up herself, she stuck in there and won the victory.

### **The Light Heavy - Dark times**

**V 6-8a** <sup>6</sup>And the Lord continued, "Listen to what that corrupt judge said. <sup>7</sup>Now, will God not judge in favor of his own people who cry to him day and night for help? Will he be slow to help them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will judge in their favour and do it quickly

The Judge is not the actual God figure in the parable, but is the contrast used for God. This is the common Light-Heavy tool of teaching used commonly by parables. If the Judge (with no shame or like for the Widow) will give her what she wants when she perseveres in this way (the light), then how much more will God come good for you, and judge in your favour, quickly (heavy).

The disciples are facing dark fearful times, but they need not fear. They are far from perfect themselves, but God has put away his anger at a distance from those who follow him, so that he can get close and personal with them. He is a loving Father and he will vindicate them.

So what is Jesus teaching ? This is an assurance that God will **hear** our prayers, but what is he also telling us about our prayers. Careful - It is far too easy to misunderstand this parable.

### **Prayer**

There are two perspectives you could take in interpreting what has happened in the parable.

**1.** From the Judge perspective: The Judge gave into the Widow, because although he wasn't interested in her case. He gave in because her persistent nagging began to annoy him, and he did it to get rid of her. That's true.

or **2.** From the Widow perspective: The Widow knew the outcome she wanted and stuck in their doing what she needed to do, to achieve it. i.e. having set her stall out, she kept going on her decided path until she was victorious. Freiderik Neizche coined the phrase "Long obedience in the same direction". She stuck to her guns and got the result she needed.

We have to see it from the Widows perspective not the judges perspective. This is not about God changing his mind by our nagging. To help illustrate this, we should look at a similar parable that Jesus told earlier.

### **The Friend at Midnight Luke 11 v5-8.**

This is about a man who visited another villager at midnight to get some bread for an unexpected visitor to their village. At first the man did not want to get out of bed and unlock his door, but he persisted with his friend, and to avoid the shame of not helping out a visitor to their village, the man got up and not just gave what was asked for, but gave the other things his friend needed to host his midnight caller. This parable is straight off the back of Jesus teaching on the Lord's prayer. So it can not mean you have to nag God until he gives you what you pray for, - Jesus, give me my daily bread, - No, not unless you ask me a dozen times. - Lord, forgive me my sins, - not straight away, keeping asking me until you shame me into forgiving you ! That can't be right can it? We know God loves us, and wants to forgive us and give us good things. There must be another explanation to these two parables.

The parable of the Friend at Midnight 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 might be a difficult awkward person to deal with and may have a low opinion of you, and yet you still receive more than you ask him for. This is because your neighbour has a sense of integrity and does not want to be shamed. He will uphold this standard, and you can expect the right thing will be done. If this is true of an awkward neighbour, then **how much more** will the God who loves you dearly, be dependable and provide you not only with what you need, but far more.

He has the utmost integrity, He is a generous and superabundant God. You can trust God with your prayers.

### **Not the same parable**

The parable of the Judge and the Widow looks very similar but is not saying the same thing. It says to the original listener - 'If a Widow, with all the odds against her, can get what she needs by hanging in there and keeping on until she gets the breakthrough. If she can get this from a Judge who has no sense of morality or shame, then how much more will a God who dearly loves you, be with you in the darkest situations, provide for you and save you, answering even the most unlikely of prayers as you show that level of determination. When you show long obedience in the same direction. When answers to prayer seem so long coming that we give up through weariness and cease praying. This is primarily about keeping a steady relationship with Jesus in prayer going, so that you can together see Him work out his general purposes on Earth and specifically in your life.

Neither parable 'The friend at midnight' or 'The Widow and the Judge' is about changing Gods mind by persistently nagging him. He already wants good things for you, that is his will, that is his integrity. Some prayers he will answer

quickly, but there are those prayers which will take longer, some because of timing, but others because there is something in the heavenlies that needs breaking or shifting which will require you to keep engaged with God in prayer for the long haul in order to see it happen.

### **The disciples needed to hear this**

The disciples needed to hear this sort of encouragement from Jesus as they entered an uncertain future, with opposition increasing, and danger waiting for them. They would need these stories, as Jesus is taken, as Jesus is Crucified, as Jesus later ascends and leaves them again, and even later when they are persecuted and dispersed around the known world. Even in the most impossible of situations, engaging in prayer will help quench their fear, and help them believe that all things are possible through Christ Jesus.

What does this parable tell us about our relationship with God, and our own prayer life.

Prayer is not about changing Gods mind to get what you want from him. It's engaging with him, feeling what he is feeling in certain areas, wanting these things yourself and then asking him for them, and keeping asking as long for as the payer takes until the time has come and you reach that tipping point, something changes in the heavenlies in order for the answer to your prayer to be realised on Earth.

### **The long prayer**

If you buy a garden chair, you can sit down on it and it won't break, but if you use it for many years, one day you will sit down on it and it will collapse. It's the same chair and you are the same weight, or perhaps just a little heavier, but it was fine yesterday so what's changed. The truth it was always going to break. On day 1 a tiny flaw in one of the struts on the set grew a tiny bit as you bent the bar back and forth as you sat down and got up. This happened every time you sat on it, the crack grew a tiny bit in size, it is what we call cyclic fatigue. You can't see the crack growing but it is. But as it progressed through the cross-section of the strut, only the uncracked part is taking your weight. Then one day, the metal that's left which is uncracked is not enough to support your weight, and it suddenly breaks, in what we call fast fracture. The chair collapses and the unlucky sitter has crashed to the ground. As long as some-one kept sitting on it and getting it up, it was always going to break, that was just no visible evidence of the crack propagation until the chair failed.

Some of our prayers are like that, God has already answered it and said yes but we need to keep applying our prayers to it until we get that breakthrough.- the last prayer was no more powerful than the first of very many, but the accumulative effect of partnering in payer with God for that period of time got the result. After much prayer the Berlin wall came down, and there was an end to apartheid in South Africa. Today thousands pray for the unification of Korea, one nation under God. The first two happened – the third prayer has already been positively answered but here is still much praying to be done.

### **The Berlin Wall**

Many people had been killed trying to escape East Germany over the berlin Wall. One month before the Berlin Wall came down, there was a mass peace rally in Leipzig on the communist East German side of the wall, which many believe signalled the start of the end for communism. Father Christian Fuehrer of the Nikolai Church had been holding peace prayers every Monday evening since 1982, attracting lots of people who were politically dissatisfied and unable to voice their concerns. After **7 years** of meetings the Stasi (the East German secret police) barricaded the street to discourage people from going to Church but the congregation grew. A peace protest was planned for **October 9<sup>th</sup> 1989**. Two days earlier there were hundreds arrested by brute force outside the church and the president Honecker said the Church should be closed. On the 9<sup>th</sup>, papers announce that counter-revolution would be put down "with whatever means necessary." The day before, the church was visited by doctors who told us that hospital rooms had been made available for patients with bullet wounds. So the Church was terrified of what might happen. 70,000 people gathered in the city for the protest. Everyone was holding a candle, a symbol of non-violence - you need to hold a candle with both hands to keep it from going out, which makes it impossible to throw stones.

The police had everything ready including tanks to crush the rally, but not a bullet was shot, and they marched to the wall peacefully. A police official later said "We were ready for anything - except candles and prayers. You can't fight candles and prayers." Weeks later the wall had come down. Years of prayers not just by the East Germans but by Christians all over the world shifted what seemed immovable. It wasn't the last prayer that did the work, it was the combination of all the prayers. It was the joint persistence of the faithful.

### **What about us?**

<sup>v8</sup> "I tell you, he will judge in their favour and do it quickly. But will the Son of Man find faith on earth when he comes?"

There is concern here from Jesus as he concludes the parable. Will his disciples stay with it, and will **we** stay with it? Will we develop our prayer lives and have strong relationship with Jesus in prayer? Will we trust that he hears us, and answers our prayers, on a daily basis where is appropriate? Then will we partner with him, on the big prayers, those that break the heavy chains, bring back long lost loved ones, destroy the big illnesses, overcome oppression and poverty in suffering countries?

The two parables tell us that our God has integrity and will provide for us out of his superabundant love.

He hears our prayers and answers them, but some take effort and determination. Something needs shifting and in prayer we have to get out there. Put the effort in and shift it.

Prayer helps us in hopeless situations, because there is always hope in God, he is capable of all things, and as we enter into prayer we enter into the love relationship with the Trinity, and it helps quench any fear we have. Perfect love drives out fear, and our prayers can give us strength

This is what Jesus is saying both to us individually and corporately, these hard prayers, the really tough ones, the prayers where there seems no hope of change, are prayers that can be answered Yes, but we need to put the effort in if we want to see our answer. Remember we have the Victory. The Cross is above it all. Greater is he than is in us than he that is in the World. Don't be discouraged.

What prayers have you not prayed recently? What prayers did you start then lay down? Which prayers have you never prayed although you wanted to because they seemed too difficult to pray. It's time to pick up those prayers again. What has got laid on your heart, how desperate is your situation? Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Take your light into the darkness. Take your prayers into the battle.

As the East German secret police said – You can't fight candles and prayers.

Luke reminds us that this parable teaches us to always pray and not be discouraged.

So gather up your prayers the old ones and the new ones. Always pray and do not be discouraged.

Jesus hears your prayers, he is dependable and is with you in them.

Amen.