

Readings: Genesis 32: 22-31. Luke 18: 1-8

Persistence in prayer. Sometimes we find it a struggle to pray at all, and then in today's passages we are instructed to not only pray, but to pray persistently. It gives the impression, a wrong impression, that God will only answer if he is nagged to do so. So what is really meant by persistence?

In one sense it is about a battle of wills – what we want versus what God wants. We desire to do God's will, but our own desires keep getting in the way.

Jesus certainly understood that. In Gethsemane he cried out to God to spare him the pain of crucifixion, till he accepted God's will, and then in total obedience he resolutely set his face towards what must be.

Sometimes, as with Jacob, we have to persist in prayer until we learn the lessons that will put us right with God, and then we can move forward in his service.

Sometimes the extent of our faith is tested. How willing are we to follow God, especially when times are tough? At the end of the Gospel reading Jesus asks the question 'will faith be found at the time of his second coming?' Many will have fallen away. Will there still be those who, like the widow, are faithful and persistent in prayer?

When I study the book of Genesis I have found an increasing depth of spiritual truth that reveals itself amongst its pages, and which becomes more important than the questions people usually ask about how literally true the stories are.

Irrespective of how true it was that Jacob literally wrestled with a man till day break, it beautifully describes the struggle that Jacob was experiencing in his relationship with God as a result of his own situation.

The context of this passage is really important. His name Jacob had connotations of being a deceiver. He had deceived his father Isaac into believing he was Esau, the firstborn of the twins, and in that deception Jacob

received the blessing from Isaac that had been due to his brother. It was a blessing that once given Isaac couldn't take back, and it led to Jacob having to leave and stay with his mother's relative Laban who in turn deceived Jacob into marrying Laban's own firstborn daughter Leah, before he could later marry Rachel. Now Jacob was returning to Canaan and he would soon meet again with Esau, his estranged twin brother whom he had wronged, and who had every reason to kill him.

Full of fear and no doubt contrite about his own past failures, Jacob wrestles with God throughout the night. He realises that God's blessing was more important than the human blessing he had deceived his father Isaac into giving him. He perseveres and refuses to let go until he receives that blessing from God. God also gives him the name change of Israel from whom the nation would get its name – the people who would struggle with God and man, and overcome. Jacob had struggled with God and proved himself worthy of God's blessing. It was a perseverance that had paid off and which created the healing necessary to enable him to become the leader of a nation into which Christ would be born.

Moving on to the story of the widow, Jesus illustrates the importance of persevering in prayer until justice is received. God is not depicted as the judge but as a positive contrast to him. Judges were appointed as paid magistrates by Herod or the Romans. They were unscrupulous and were often bribed into giving the desired verdict. The widow had nothing but her perseverance. Ultimately the judge gave in, wearied by her persistence.

We aren't told what her case was about, but it could echo the desire for justice for all persecuted followers of Christ whom God will finally vindicate.

The uncaring judge is in total contrast to God who, as a loving Father, will always give to us what is best for us; not necessarily what we want, but what we need, and at the right time; and which may mean discipline and insights, such as Jacob needed.

Perhaps God requires us to persist in prayer to see how important our faith and trust is in him. Will we let ourselves be tossed about by the current thinking of this world, or be prepared to hang in there till God dispenses justice for all believers? No loving Father will withhold what his children need, and the timing will be perfect, unlike the unjust judge who cared for nothing but his own preservation.

I will finish with a prayer:-

Lord, increase our trust in you, as we persist in prayer, knowing that as a loving Father you will always meet our needs, and the needs of others for whom we pray, at the right time, and in the right way.

Amen.