

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Proper 24/C October 21st 2007-10-20

Persistence

2 Timothy 3.14-4.5

Luke 18.1-8

From the Second Epistle to Timothy, chapter 4 verse 2: 'be persistent, whether the time is favourable or unfavourable'.

This is a sermon to myself as much as to anyone else here: 'be persistent'

I'm not naturally a very persistent person. There are half-read books I've laid on one side because they're rather 'heavy' and demanding. There's a piece of tapestry work which I began in 1986, which languishes unfinished at the bottom of a bag somewhere. There are so many broken resolutions in my life – and some of them refer to the kind of things our readings were about this morning.

Timothy was told to be persistent in sharing the Christian faith: sometimes the time seems very unfavourable to that. But, the message is, don't lose heart! Don't give up!

Timothy, of course, had particular responsibilities for sharing the faith through teaching – as all of us who are pastors do. In this he was told to be persistent. And those of us who are ordained or licensed ministers must take this to heart for ourselves. But the message also has a wider application to every member of the Christian community: all of us can be – should be – people who are ready to share our faith. There are ways and ways to do it, of course. But don't duck it, or give up on yourself as a faith-sharer just because the times seem unfavourable, the prevailing mood unfriendly. Be persistent – in the wisest and most loving way, of course. But don't give up. I wonder how many of you feel as challenged by that message as I do?

'Be persistent': that's the message of Jesus' parable, too – a parable about prayer, about looking for the kingdom – that is, about longing for God's will to be done here on earth, and interceding for it without flagging. How often we *do* flag in keeping our times of prayer! How much I admire people who tell me, apparently with complete sincerity, that they have prayed every day for such and such a person, such and such a cause. It may be, even, that they tell me they have prayed persistently for me. What a blessing it is to fall back on the reliability of friends like that. But how few and far between they are.

Our culture is full of distractions, discouragements and other demands. Persistence in any spiritual discipline doesn't come easily. That's why it's good to have other Christians to check-in with - prayer partners to keep appointments with, spiritual directors, soul friends, or review groups to give an account of yourself to. People from whom to receive insight, encouragement, and the energy to keep starting all over again. I know that, although I'm frequently late, and it's not unknown for me to 'cut' morning prayer when other things intrude on my diary, I'm very grateful that sometimes there's someone else there to share it with in church. Someone whom I'm letting down if I don't turn up, or don't give Morning Prayer the time or attention it requires.

Well – that makes persistence easier for me. And the fact that I'm ordained makes it easier for me to be public about praying and the regular time I try to do it. But I wonder – for you? Is it possible for there to be a regular time and place? Is it possible for there to be someone you sometimes pray *with* – whether in 'set words', such as a little 'daily office', or in extempore prayer, or in silence together? Or is prayer rather a private, even secretive activity - something you'd hurriedly brush under the carpet if someone else caught you at it? What – or whom – would help you to become more nearly persistent in prayer than you are at present? Only

you can discover the answer to that question – and then only if you really want to ask it of yourself.

I'm not mentioning this question to make people belabour themselves with guilt – but just to share my experience of how much *I* need pattern and other people, and how often *I* fail – and how much I believe in the loving mercy and patience of God, and his desire to have us pray, and take our immensely privileged share in opening the windows of the world to the influence of his Spirit through intercession and openness.

It's something we just need to keep coming back to – and something we need to keep being honest about, with God, with ourselves, with other people.

But, you may say, what are the rewards of persistent prayer if it never seems to be answered? Jesus told his story precisely to help us think about that question. He didn't tell it to make us to think of God as the unjust judge of the parable – someone who only yields to pester-power. Rather, he told it to make us think about ourselves, the object and persistence of our prayer: the main figure to focus on in the story is the widow the pray-er. So let's take a look at her and her prayer, and see what we can learn for ourselves.

First, notice that the widow's petition was for 'justice'. Justice must be translated, in its ultimate sense, as God's will, 'on earth as it is in heaven'. For our God is a God – *the* God – of justice.

This means that when we pray, as we bring our precise desires trustfully and honestly before God, we must remain open to the possibility that they may have to change, and be refined through the process of praying – through the process of becoming more and more open to God himself. We may be led to understand the deeper meaning behind the apparent 'No's' which some of our requests run up against. This can be a bruising and painful process. Persistence in praying, with both honesty about how we feel, and openness to learn more, is how we travel on to become increasingly attuned to God's will, his justice, his righteousness, his surprising ways, so unlike our own.

Notice, in the parable, how the widow is presented as petitioning over what must have seemed to her like a long time – expending a great deal of effort. But, in the end, and at a quite unexpected time, the result came quickly. Everything was turned around. Jesus is telling his followers that God's will may seem slow in coming, but suddenly and swiftly it will dawn. And then the long night of doubt and sorrow will recede as nothing.

As I grew up, there were certain features of the world which seemed set in stone - right wing dictatorships in Southern Europe, for example (Franco, Salazar, the Greek Colonels). You have to be of 'a certain age' to remember all that, now – and how suddenly this 'fact of life' crumbled to nothing. Or the Iron Curtain. Or Apartheid in South Africa. What a weight of prayer, as well as of protest, was mounting up behind those seemingly immovable dams. And then they suddenly broke, when it barely seemed credible..

The Kingdom of God hasn't come in full glory in Spain or South Africa or the former Soviet states, of course. But surely these facts of recent history – startling, if you recall living through them – these facts should encourage us in the gift of hope, to accompany the qualities of consistency and perseverance when we pray. Hope, along with Love, is Faith's closest sister, and a great sign that the Spirit is alive in the heart of God's people.

Finally, let's notice that the widow of Jesus' parable was poor. Poor people are used to waiting –in queues, for food, for buses, for benefits, for operations, for better times... Those of us who are better-off use our privilege, very often, to circumvent the need to wait. But Jesus tells us that the poor are blessed – or, in St Matthew's version, that

blessedness belongs to the poor in spirit.. Perhaps one of the greatest distractions to our consistency and persistence in prayer comes from our not knowing quite how to be poor before God. Poverty isn't something we're very practised at. We don't like to wait.

And so the temptation is to substitute some other, ultimately tawdry satisfaction, for the true gift we need to wait for.

And the true gift is, in the end, God himself. His kingdom comes with him – into our lives, into our thinking, into our doing, into our experience and relationships, into our world. This is the pearl of great price, the yeast in the dough, the mustard seed, the city set on a hill, the lamp on its stand, the one thing necessary. What a lot we miss when we let ourselves get diverted!

Jesus, at the end of his parable, seems to equate persistence with faith itself. Will God find it in us – or at least the desire for it – when he searches our hearts?

Our text for the week, is this then: 'Be persistent, whether the time is favourable or unfavourable...' (2 Tim. 4.2). Apply it to faith-sharing, apply it to prayer – but, one way or another, apply it to yourself and your relationship with God.