

Wrestling with God in prayer

St. Brandon's

Genesis 32:22-31; Luke 18:1-8

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Jesus is aware that his followers might either stop praying, or lose heart even if they continue to pray. He addresses the issue in His usual way via a parable. And in the parable the widow gets the justice she apparently deserves, and Jesus says very clearly after the parable that God will answer prayer, granting us justice too. He doesn't say more about what kind of answers we might receive from our prayers (that's the subject of a different sermon), but He does imply that we need to have faith if we are to receive an answer to our prayers – "And yet, when the Son of Man [i.e. Jesus] comes, will he find faith on earth?"

My problem is that I've tried this, and it doesn't seem to work. My prayers for justice for the oppressed – for the people of Syria and Aleppo, for example, or for those in this country who are forced to use food banks – don't seem to have been answered. And, unless God's idea of "quickly" is rather different from mine, I can't see answers coming any time soon. And it's not just prayers for those who suffer injustice, for as we shall see later when we look at the OT reading, and how Jacob's prayer was answered, precisely the same issue arises over much more directly personal prayers. This year, for example, we have suffered the untimely deaths of two close family members. God didn't seem to answer my prayers for those situations either.

Now this may well be because I don't have enough faith. But that means I could well be in a kind of downward spiral. I don't have enough faith, God therefore doesn't answer my prayers, which discourages me and leads to a further diminishing of my faith, which means that God doesn't answer my prayers next time round because I have even less faith. There's a danger that I could end up either not praying, or just going through the motions, not really believing or expecting answers to prayers, and finding that that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy – I don't get expect and therefore don't get any answers. Jesus says in the previous chapter in Luke's gospel, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea', and it would obey you" (Luke 17:6). Well my mulberry tree still seems to be firmly rooted at home.

Now I know that I am going to be preaching to myself this morning, and that it's entirely different for all of you. I know that you all have faith; you pray; God answers your prayers quickly; and so your faith increases. In comparison with my downward spiral, you are on all on an upward spiral. And I know that because the last time I went to the seaside the number of mulberry trees I found there was truly astonishing! (There was even one from the Rectory!)

So bear with me, while I try to work out just what our readings today are saying to me. And if that helps you to understand what it's like for people like me, then so much the better.

To return to our gospel reading, the woman in the parable is not just speaking on her own behalf, but is a representative of all those who are oppressed and defenceless, and who long for the justice they deserve. She was a widow, and under the Mosaic Law she had certain rights to food and clothing (Deuteronomy 10:17-18). And the judge had no personal reason to deny the widow's claim, nor would it have taken much effort to uphold it. And it's not even a case of petty officialdom throwing its weight around. The fact is, he just doesn't seem to care. And what finally moves him is not rational argument, but the widow's persistence. The word for "wear me out" which the judge uses is the same as is used for delivering a blow in a boxing ring. The widow is in a fight, and is going to carry on punching for justice. And eventually, to extend the metaphor, the judge decides to throw in the towel.

And Jesus' comment on the parable is that, if this could happen under an unjust judge, how much more we can we expect from a loving God, a God who cares; how much more will He grant justice to those with faith ("his chosen ones"), who cry to him day and night.

But maybe this does suggest that a certain intensity and persistence are required, a bit like the widow in the parable. Those who cry to God day and night will get an answer. And the next verse can be translated "and even if He delays, He will still respond suddenly and unexpectedly". Well, OK, so that perhaps holds out a bit of hope for me – perhaps I am expected to be intense and persistent in prayer; perhaps God won't always answer prayer quickly. But even so, if I cry out for justice, either for myself or by standing in solidarity alongside those who are mistreated and excluded, I should expect to see answers eventually. But then I still want to ask, how long O Lord? How long do I have to wait to get an answer? And I find that it's not easy waiting, and still having faith.

Well, let's leave the lucky widow, who receives her justice by wearing out the judge – in effect, punching him repeatedly till he gave up – and look at another fight. Our OT reading is a classic, Jacob wrestling with an angel or with God Himself. But it's not entirely clear what's going on unless we have the back story. So, very briefly, here's what led to this event.¹

Jacob was the twin brother of Esau, and was born immediately after him, and came out of the womb grasping his heel. As the first born, Esau had a birthright over Jacob, but as they were growing up Jacob tricked it out of him by offering him a plate of stew. The time came when their father Isaac was coming to the end of his life, and so wanted to bless his older son. But, egged on by his mother, Jacob impersonated Esau and tricked his nearly blind father into giving him the blessing instead. And when Esau returned and found out, Isaac was adamant that he only had one blessing to give – there was nothing left for Esau. Unsurprisingly, Esau then held a big grudge against Jacob, and decided to kill him once their father had died. But mother got to hear of this and sent Jacob away to relatives a long way away. And once there he married his two cousins, had 11 children, and lived there for 20 years. Time for Esau's anger to abate? Hmm.

Relationships with his relatives then broke down, and Jacob decided, and had it confirmed by God, that it was time to return home with his now large family – but therefore with the prospect of facing Esau. And in preparation for that very difficult and potentially life-threatening encounter, and unsurprisingly, he prayed. And he prayed that God would save him and his family from attack by his brother. It was a very specific prayer, and a very personal and a very intense prayer, and one with a very obvious answer one way or the other. And Jacob would find out the answer soon enough – God either would or wouldn't grant him his desire. But the stage was set, and God would have to decide very quickly what His answer was going to be.

And that's where our passage picks up the story. Jacob tries to protect his family by sending them across the river, and then he waits alone. And then, oddly and apparently in response to his prayer, a man comes and wrestles with him. It's not entirely clear whether it's an angel or God Himself, though Jacob is convinced that he has seen God face to face. It's also not clear who starts the wrestling, though we can probably take it that the man (angel / God) does. But why? What's going on here?

And, again, it's not entirely clear, but it might be something like this. The physical wrestling is also symbolic of a spiritual and perhaps psychological wrestling. God is saying to Jacob, OK, you've prayed, now let's take each other seriously, let's square up to each other. How much do you want a positive answer to your prayer? How much do you want my blessing? Are you prepared to face Esau face to face, are you prepared to face your rather despicable past, and to seek reconciliation and forgiveness? And Jacob proves his

¹ See Genesis 25:19 – 35:29 for the full story.

determination such that even when he receives an under-the-belt blow, and has his hip dislocated, he still will not let go until he receives the blessing: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." And he prevails and gets his blessing.

And just to complete the story, Esau does come (hurray!), with 400 men (Oh dear!), and Esau "ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him, and they wept" (Genesis 33:4). A happy ending. An answer to prayer.

So what can I take from that story? Well, at least three things. The first is very simply that God did come. God entered very directly into that very intense and very personal situation. The second is that God took it very seriously, and wanted to be sure that Jacob was doing so too. Do you really want this? Are you willing to wrestle with me in order to get the blessing? Are you really serious? And the third point is that Jacob was changed as a result. The dislocated hip, the limp, was a physical effect that meant he wouldn't forget this encounter quickly; but he was doubtless changed in other ways as well.

So I find I get some rather uncomfortable advice from both these passages about prayer. Am I sufficiently persistent? Do I cry out day and night for justice? Am I serious about wrestling with God until I get a blessing? Am I prepared to be changed in the process?

One of the things we've experimented with recently is doing prayer stations here in Church, and there will be another opportunity to do so during Advent. But these passages suggest we might try a rather different prayer station – a boxing / wrestling ring. Am I ready to get in and go three rounds with God?

"Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." And in response to that I want to say, "Lord I do believe, but I need to have more faith, and I do want to see answers to my prayers. Help thou my unbelief". And then, just maybe, my mulberry tree will join yours.

Amen