



# *Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright*



Sunday 16 October 2022

### READINGS

Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14—4:5; Luke 18:1-8

## *The Persistent Widow*

Before beginning, let us pray. May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Our Old Testament reading presents us with an iconic image. The anthropomorphic traits of God suggest that this story goes far back into Israel's history. It is etymological, not least because it describes how the nation of Israel got its name but, by extension, the hints at the birth of the nation itself.

Israel means "one who strives with God". It is helpful to read Genesis 32:22-31 in conjunction with our Gospel reading. In Jesus' parables, invariably the character occupying the position of power and influence is assumed to represent God. We cannot make that same equation in Luke 18:1-8 because the judge is described as "neither fearing God nor man" and as "unrighteous". Indeed, it is clear that Jesus is lauding the persistence of the widow in the hope that his disciples display similar persistence.

As I was reading this parable, another episode in the Gospels came to mind – that of Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman. The Syrophenician woman comes to Jesus with a request for him to heal her daughter. The story is a little bit controversial because, not only does Jesus at first refuse to help her, but he appears to insult her by comparing her to a dog. This however does not deter the woman and she persists, making a shrewd retort as to the deservedness even of "the dogs" to receive scraps from their master's table. At this, Jesus relents and heals the Syrophenician woman's daughter.

On pausing to reflect, one realises that there are a number of instances in the Gospels which highlight the virtue of persistence – the healing of the Syrophenician's daughter, as already mentioned, the healing of blind beggar Bartimaeus, where the disciples rebuke Bartimaeus for calling out to Jesus and he calls out all the louder, the encounter with Zacchaeus who, because of his shortness of stature, has to climb a tree to be able to see Jesus. There is also the parable of the man who asks for bread from his friend at midnight because he must set something before a weary traveller.

In some material I read, it was highlighted that, on least two occasions Jesus seems to change his mind. Once was, again, with the Syrophenician woman where seemingly he at first refuses to help and then relents. The other is supposed to be the wedding at Cana where Jesus seems to show a reluctance to

assist with the shortage of wine. If this is correct, on both occasions Jesus' mind is changed while in conversation with a woman.

Can you then guess what the longest one-on-one conversation is which Jesus has in the Gospels? The Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, which lasts a whole 19 verses. If you recall, though the Samaritan woman does not change Jesus' mind, in her conversation with Jesus, she is quite feisty and even challenges Jesus' ideas as to which is the legitimate worship centre, Jerusalem or Shechem.

It's strange that in what was supposed to have been an overtly patriarchal culture, the longest single conversation recorded between Jesus and someone else in the Gospels is that with a woman.

The first of the five promises is "life is hard". Most of us probably are fully aware of this. But life is hard, life is a struggle; sometimes even a struggle with God.

In that iconic story from Genesis 32, Jacob has to physically wrestle with God, and is wounded in the process. But in his persistence, he refuses to give up until he has received God's blessing. As a result, he both receives God's blessing and new name, or even a new identity if you like.

The widow in our Gospel reading (Luke 18) is, not only at the mercy of a patriarchal system, but in her particular case, potentially faces a miscarriage of justice due to the inept and unjust judge who is presiding over her case. According to the parable, and against such seemingly insurmountable odds, it is solely by her perseverance that she triumphs.

The short and simple message then friends is, "never give up". The night is always darkest before dawn; the finish line is closer than you think.

"And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Faith and perseverance, faith in perseverance: this is what we are called to embody this week in our readings. As we continue to contemplate these things, may God's hand of guidance, blessing, and protection remain upon you.

Amen