

Pray always and do not lose heart

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Pentecost + 19C – Lk 18 1-8; Jer 31 27-34

Today's gospel says that Jesus told his parable of the very persistent widow to teach us to pray always and not lose heart. *Not lose heart* is an interesting expression when we see how today's reading from Jeremiah says God will write the law on our hearts. If that's where God's law is kept, you can't lose it, can you? But back to the widow. She's been wronged, and her access to justice blocked by a judge who doesn't revere God, and doesn't care less about his own public image; someone with no heart. It doesn't look as if that heartless judge will ever listen to her.

Yet she persists. She visits him repeatedly. She knows that the shame of her predicament is a scandal. She knows she's entitled to justice, and so she'll go on badgering the *judge* until *he* goes blue in the face, not her.

Where could she have got her inner conviction of justice from? What gave her the heart to persist? I think it's because of something she did that we do too. As a Jewish woman, she joined in her community's worship of God. She'd have learnt of God's commitment to justice in the Scriptures she heard (Micah 6.8)

and learnt of God's particular care for her as a widow. (Exod

22.22-24, Deut 10.17-18) She acted on her trust in the God she'd heard speak *to her* directly through the scriptures. She acted on her trust in the God she met in those readings. It's as if, whenever she confronted the unjust judge, she talked over his shoulder directly to God as she persistently demanded justice. It was time this heartless judge learnt *God's* ways.

Jeremiah identified the source of her conviction in today's passage from chapter 31.³³ *this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: **I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.*** Jesus presents us with a widow who has God's law written on her heart. From that teaching inside her, she draws courage to persist in her demands for justice.

I think we can find written on *our* hearts that we belong to God; that we can also find a heart within us that persists in prayer. And like that widow, we can discover God at work in us, persistently supporting us from within. But where inside us?

Prayer is the place in our lives where God meets us, embraces us, talks with us, and takes us seriously no matter what our circumstances. Prayer is a gift – a spiritual gift which comes to us because of the Holy Spirit living in us. In the conversation of prayer, we find that we are permanently invited eavesdroppers; eavesdroppers listening in on a conversation between our Mother, the Spirit and our loving Father, with the example of our brother Jesus before us to encourage us; to give *us* heart.

That intimate conversation is one which goes on whether or not we're conscious of it. But from our baptism on, we can grow in our sense that this conversation includes us; that this conversation connects us with the true Source of our Being. The Holy Spirit speaks to God from deep within us. She searches our hearts and offers our deepest prayers from there. So we have the Father speaking to us through the Scriptures, through the Church, through friends and through creation. And we have the Holy Spirit replying; crying out from deep within us.

It's a lifelong-skill, learning to hear her voice. But by giving us the gift of the Holy Spirit at our baptism, God ensures that we are equipped to learn to hear that voice. Like

any little child, we're born with the faculty to learn our parents' language.

God the Holy Spirit dwells within us. She's the mother and teacher of our hearts. Because of her dwelling within us, our hearts gradually learn the life-giving nature of this divine conversation. It's something within us, written on our hearts, says Jeremiah. And St Augustine teaches us that whatever it is feels empty and alone until we're engaged in this conversation. He prayed it this way; *God, in whom we live and move and have our being: you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*

Jesus walks before us alive in the gospel, and invites us by his love for us, and by his own example, to join in that conversation. He makes it easier because he's one of us. Choosing to join in this conversation can change us utterly. Once we accept the invitation, God persists. So when I'm talking about persistence in prayer today, there's the real persistence. God never gives up on us. God is the one who persists.

What comes of eavesdropping on our divine parents? This morning's gospel sheds an interesting light on this aspect of prayer – having God's law written on our hearts; having the Spirit within us. She gives us new heart; gives us courage. And that shapes the way we live; the way we see ourselves.

Remember that widow! Most people would probably have viewed her as deluded, stubborn and hopeless. But frankly, I see her example as inspiring. She subverted everyone else's delusion of her powerlessness by her God-given belief in her own dignity and worth. That belief was a free gift which God wrote on her heart; a heart nourished by her regular encounters with God through scripture and prayer.

If you ever wonder why we give such prominence to hearing scripture together, the example of this persistent widow and

her reminder of Jeremiah's prophecy shows us the importance of letting God's teaching get written on *our* hearts too. Amen