Pray always and don’t lose heart

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Pentecost + 19 – Jrm 31, Ps 119, 2Tim 3, Lk 18

One theme in today’s readings is *pray always and don’t lose heart*. We’ve heard it in the parable of a persistent widow who wears away at the indifference of an unjust judge, and in the parable of that hated species, a tax collector who dares to pray in public. This message about persistence is reinforced in 2nd Timothy where a veteran missionary writes to a younger colleague about endurance and constancy in the face of setbacks.

Alongside these encouragements to persistence is a second theme: God’s teaching – God’s Law – within us. We read about a poet’s love for God’s Law in Psalm 119, and then we heard Jeremiah’s promise that God’s law is written on our hearts. Persistent prayer and God’s Law; what links these two themes?

The widow and the tax collector both embody this link. They are both persistent in prayer, and we must assume that they get the strength to sustain this persistence from a deep-seated conviction that they will be heard. In the face of contempt and ostracism and deep trouble, they find something in their hearts – something written on their hearts that gives them the courage to pray – and to keep at it.

I sometimes meet people in trouble who won’t pray. They say, *If I couldn’t be bothered praying when things were going well, I’m not going to start bothering God now that things are a total mess. I’ve got my integrity, you know.*

I can understand people saying this. But they’re speaking as though there’s no integrity to our relationship with God

unless we feel like we have something to *offer* God – as though we're on an equal footing with God. But we're not God's equals; we're not expected to keep the balance-sheet equal between what God gives us and what we give God. We can't. Otherwise, that proud Pharisee would've had God's ear, and that painfully humble tax collector would've gone unheard.

When we hear these stories as comfortable middle-class Australians, it's amazing what our habits of self-reliance can filter out of them. Did we get the point of the parable of the widow and the unjust judge – the *reason* we should pray always and not lose heart?

It's because our prayer is *not* offered to a reluctant, petty official. It's because our prayer is offered to the matchlessly generous *God*; and God *will* grant justice and mercy. And as Jeremiah says, God puts that prayer on our hearts in the first place.

Today's parables tell us that our faith is not something we achieve or earn or do. It's something God writes on our hearts, and our part is to open ourselves to that. The widow and the tax collector do just that; they sense what God has placed on their hearts, and it gives them the courage to speak; to trust; to persist.

When Jeremiah tells us that God writes his Law on our hearts, it's not a statute book that's being put there; it's beautiful teaching about a promise of eternal love; eternal belonging. We mimic that forever thing with those hearts people carve into the bark of trees. But God has written eternal life onto our mortal hearts.

Prayer is a learnt thing; born of habit. Our weekly gatherings to hear scripture read and interpreted, and to pray together – they are meant to nurture that habit in us. And the daily office prayers of the Church have been shaped to strengthen and nourish that habit. They invite us to take our part in the

process of having God’s teaching inscribed on our hearts – taking that resource into ourselves – having our prayers nourished by daily scripture readings.

We often mistakenly think of prayer as something we have to *do*. And we don’t have time for it, or we don’t have a habit of doing it. We need to forget this ‘doing prayer’ idea. We need to change our thinking to prayer being something we hear, and something we join in with – like singing along with a much-loved song.

When I was commissioned in this parish, I was told that I must be among you as a person of prayer. It wasn’t the first time I’d been told that, but God has given me the gift of keeping that promise in a new way here. My daily prayers have grown and grown over the years here. And I am constantly amazed by what God puts in my heart to pray, and the ways in which God blesses those prayers. I need to help everyone here to discover the joy and the peace of this. The persistence thing: it’s not work. It’s another of God’s gifts. Choosing to pray is simply to open our hands to receive that gift; simply to open our hearts to let the blessing fall inside. Amen