

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	19 October 2025
Service:	Eucharist, 18 th Sunday after Trinity
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Dr Earl Collins, Chancellor

I'm sure that like me, you have all experienced at some time the frustration of what feels like unanswered prayer. I may be praying for myself or for a friend. It might be for someone in dire necessity. I pray and pray and apparently nothing happens. When that occurs, I might be tempted to give up, feeling that I have just been talking to myself, or even worse, directing my words into a dark empty void. That can be a frequent experience in prayer. It was captured very well by the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who also struggled with it.

He wrote,

"...my lament,

Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent

To dearest him that lives alas! away."

Faced with this difficulty that God seems to be far away, it is good to hear again the words of Jesus' parable in this Sunday's gospel. We are told that he addressed them to people as an encouragement to pray always and not lose heart. That suggests that he had been talking to people about this very experience, the anxiety that as prayer doesn't seem to be answered it might just be a waste of time.

We should listen attentively to Jesus when he speaks about prayer because what he says has a high degree of credibility. Uniquely, Jesus practiced what he preached. St Luke tells us that at every significant moment in his life, Jesus prayed: at his baptism in the Jordan, before calling his apostles, at his transfiguration and most significantly during his agony in the garden and agonizing death on the cross. He prayed even for those who were crucifying him, that his father would forgive them.

Luke also emphasizes that during his ministry Jesus would regularly go off to pray alone. Since he was the eternal Son of God he communed unceasingly with his heavenly father.

But as we know from those dark hours before his crucifixion, like us he was fully human and knew what it was to struggle in prayer, especially in the face of pain and suffering. St Matthew tells us that as he died on the cross Jesus even cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'

Jesus shared our life and suffering and knows personally the trials we undergo. Focusing on his example offers, I think, the best way to understand the perplexing problem of apparently unanswered prayer.

In this parable Jesus describes how the demanding widow went looking for justice from an unsympathetic judge and pursued him until she finally obtained it. Most likely driven by the poverty and insecurity that would have marked her state of life in ancient Palestine, she must have been desperate. She eventually forced the beleaguered judge to give in and grant her requests - simply to make her go away! It was hardly a sympathetic response on his part. She didn't melt his heart but risked driving him crazy with her pleading! But if he was to have any peace, he had no other choice – there was simply no way of shaking her off.

The parables of Jesus are disturbing, sometimes shocking ways to make us see something new, something we had not seen before. But we should not misunderstand this one. Jesus was not suggesting that God is such an unsympathetic judge. Jewish tradition before him and Jesus himself taught that though God will indeed judge us, but as a compassionate father who always judges in love. This parable is inviting us to make a contrast between the judge and God. If that rigid judge eventually had to give in, will not a loving God be even more moved to answer our requests?

The importance of this parable lies in its insistence on persistence. It hammers home the point that since God is our father in heaven, we can trust that our prayers will indeed be answered – notwithstanding all appearances to the contrary. All of which forces us to go a little deeper into the matter. What does it mean for God to answer prayer anyway?

We live today in a culture of immediate response. If we need money, we slip a card into a machine in the wall and out it comes (providing there is some in the account). We eat 'fast food', 'zap' readymade meals in the microwave, order things on Amazon which usually arrive very quickly and receive emails marked 'urgent'. If we need to know something we can just Google it and there we have it – instant information. That was brought home to me very sharply last week as we waited for Vodaphone to install our broadband: a mere two days

yet it seemed like an age simply because we couldn't communicate immediately. We have been trained to expect instant answers, instant solutions. But with God things are not like that. God is the infinitely mysterious one, the ground behind all things, who lives in unapproachable light. We humans would know little about God – just hints and guesses - if he had not reached out to us, supremely in Jesus Christ. We cannot touch or taste or hear or see or smell God directly. We know him only in faith, and faith is a kind of darkness, often symbolized by a cloud of unknowing. This infinitely mysterious God is the Lord, who cannot be manipulated or cajoled to give us what we want – or what we think we want!

Like the bridegroom in the Song of Songs, God comes to visit us by night, the night of faith. He invites us on a journey, out into the darkness, holding his hand in prayer. If we really do that, we will at times struggle with God, just as Jesus did in the garden and on the cross. But if we persevere in that struggle – that agony - then a new kind of understanding gradually emerges. In prayer, I do not change God's mind, bending his will to what I want – or think I want!

Rather God changes my mind, adjusting my understanding, bringing my will into alignment with his. In prayer God educates us, slowly, gradually, often painfully, until finally we begin see things not just from our all too limited, often self-centered perspective, but from his overarching vision of infinite love.

So, when our prayer seems pointless, when the darkness deepens, and my prayers apparently go, '...like dead letters sent to him who lives always! away,' we need to hear and heed Jesus's teaching on prayer: do not give up, continue to pray always as he did! There is in fact no unanswered prayer, though in the pain of the moment's suffering that is not usually apparent. Understanding only comes later. In all the pain and suffering of Jesus and in all my own pain and suffering, by holding on to God a meaning comes – God's meaning. That may not correspond to what I need – or what I think I need! But in every situation God wills our good and will never let go of us.

Educating us through patient prayer is God's way of aligning us more closely with him. Jesus knew what it was to cry out in abandonment, but he also ended his life commending it into the hands of his heavenly father, in hope of resurrection. God, whom he taught us to call 'our father' knows what we really need. In his own way and in his own time, he will give it to us.

The same Jesuit poet whom I quoted earlier also wrote:

'For I greet him the days that I meet him and bless when I understand.'

Therefore, as Jesus says today, we should pray always and never lose heart - because called or not called, God is always there.