

## **Year C Proper 24**

### **Luke 18:1-8**

CS Lewis was the author of the widely read children's books, The Narnia Chronicles, as well as many novels for grown-ups and books on issues surrounding the Christian faith. The movie Shadowlands (directed by Richard Attenborough and produced in 1993) told Lewis' story, focusing in particular on his relationship with his wife, Joy Gresham. Gresham and Lewis met while Lewis was a don at Oxford University.

After Joy was diagnosed with cancer the couple married. The movie invites us to witness their love, their pain, their grief, their struggles with faith and God. Eventually Joy died.

At one point in the story a friend said to Lewis, “Christopher can scoff, Jack, but I know how hard you’ve been praying; and now God is answering your prayers.”

Lewis replied; “That’s not why I pray, Harry. I pray because I can’t help myself. I pray because I’m helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and

sleeping. It doesn't change God, it changes me.”<sup>1</sup>

O what problems we have with prayer! Jesus told a story that would have brought a smile or maybe even a chuckle to the lips of his hearers. Here we have two caricatures that are typical of people in his parables. The persistent widow who would not stop trying to be heard and to be taken seriously. After all, if she didn't stand up for herself who would? There was no social security or charitable organisations in those days to which she could turn. She had to go to the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/prayer/>

one in authority every day and plead her case. In addition to her persistence she had a feisty way about her. At the end of verse five the remarks of the judge can be literally translated; “so that she may not finally come and slap me on the face”! She was certainly not going to be messed with. Then we are presented with the unjust judge. No doubt the listeners would have had their own ideas about whom Jesus was referring. They would know what some of the judges were like and it would be amusing to consider the discomfort that a persistent woman was causing him. An amusing scenario until we

step back and think about the reason Jesus told the story. He told the story so that they would keep praying and not give up. Smiles would soon disappear from faces when the serious business of the story takes a grip.

O what problems we have with prayer! - prayer that is not answered. As I was preparing this sermon I flicked over to the BBC news website and there I saw striking pictures of a young boy rescued from a destroyed building after an air strike in the divided second city of Aleppo. I knew that Christians had been praying for some time for this indiscriminate bombing to cease and

the incessant maiming and killing of innocent people could not be part of God's will. But then there was this report and it went on as follows: "Video and photos of the boy sitting dazed and bloodied in an ambulance were shared widely on social media, with many expressing shock and outrage. A doctor identified him as Omran Daqneesh, 5, who they said was treated for head wounds. It was not immediately clear what happened to the rest of his family. Fighting between Syrian government forces, backed by Russian air strikes, and rebels has escalated in Aleppo in recent weeks,

reportedly leaving hundreds of people dead. The pro-opposition Aleppo Media Centre said the pictures of the boy were taken in the rebel-held Qaterji district of Aleppo, after air strikes that left three people dead and 12 injured. The video shows the boy being carried out of a damaged building by a medic and then placed on a seat in the back of an ambulance, covered in dust and with a blood-covered face. The medic then leaves the vehicle and the boy is left sitting quietly, appearing stunned by the ordeal. He runs his hand over his face and looks at the blood

before wiping it on the seat.”<sup>2</sup> Five years of age, prayed for, longed for by his family and friends and yet he found himself in the middle of all of that. As I look out this morning I feel the weight of your collective weariness on this matter. How many times have you prayed and your prayers have not been answered? The cancer did not go away. The prayers for safety in travel were not answered. Prayers for successful exam results were not answered and so career hopes were dashed. I could go on and on referencing the very serious to the less

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-37116349>



serious to the trivial, even, with the same response: nothing, absolute silence. And then the widow going back again to the judge with her petition, again and again and again. It's as if Jesus was encouraging us to keep walking down the road of silence and failure. Yet, of course, there is so much more going on. The Bible records many examples of prayers that were not answered. For example, David prayed earnestly for the healing of his sick son. "He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground" (2 Samuel 12:16). But his son died anyway. Jesus prayed to be spared a

violent death on the cross. “My Father,” He pleaded, “if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me” (Matthew 26:39). But shortly after that He was arrested, tried, and executed. Three times Paul prayed for relief from a “thorn in my flesh,” but God’s only answer was, “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Corinthians 12:7, 8). The thorn in his flesh remained. The reality of unanswered prayers is an integral part of our faith experience and it is faith that takes us back down onto our knees to pray yet again. When he comes back will he find faith on earth? This parable assures us that God is

not like the unjust judge. He does not ignore the prayers of his people. His answers may surprise or confuse us. We can easily misinterpret his answers but he will answer. Philip Yancey in his book, *Disappointment with God* wrote the following. "In an essay on prayer, C.S. Lewis suggested that God treats new Christians with a special kind of tenderness, much as a parent dotes on a newborn. He quotes an experienced Christian: "I have seen many striking answers to prayer and more than one that I thought miraculous. But they usually come at the beginning before conversion, or soon

after it. As the Christian life proceeds, they tend to be rarer. The refusals, too, are not only more frequent; they become more unmistakable, more emphatic." Yancey goes on.

"At first glance, such a suggestion seems to have it all backward. Shouldn't faith become easier, not harder, as a Christian progresses? But, as Lewis points out, the New Testament gives two strong examples of unanswered prayers: Jesus pled three times for God to "Take this cup from me" and Paul begged God to cure the "thorn in my flesh." Lewis asks, "Does God then forsake just those who

serve Him best? Well, He who served Him best of all said, near His tortured death, 'Why hast thou forsaken me?' When God becomes man, that Man, of all others, is least comforted by God, at His greatest need. There is a mystery here which, even if I had the power, I might not have the courage to explore. Meanwhile, little people like you and me, if our prayers are sometimes granted, beyond all hope and probability, had better not draw hasty conclusions to our own advantage. If we were stronger, we might be less tenderly treated. If we were braver, we might be sent, with far less help, to defend

far more desperate posts in the great battle."<sup>3</sup>

C.S. Lewis reminded us at the beginning of this reflection. "I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God, it changes me." Like the persistent widow we keep going back and as we keep going back we are being changed into the people that God would have us be. And so when Christ returns he will find faith on earth.

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<sup>3</sup> Yancey, P. 1997 *Disappointment with God* Zondervan p208

