

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)  
(Exodus 17:8-13 / Luke 18:1-8)  
20.10.2019

If I can see you from where I am standing, it is fairly sure that you can also see me. This leads me to say that if Moses could see those battling on the plain below, in all probability those engaged in fighting on the battlefield could see him. Looking up from their place of combat the Israelites – as, indeed, their enemies, the Amalekites – would have seen Moses with his arms raised in prayer, sustained in this gesture by Aaron and Hur. What the Israelites would have understood as they looked to the heights and caught sight of this spectacle was that Moses was calling to the Lord on their behalf.

If we were to go to look for today's first reading in our Bibles we would discover that one of the big question the Israelites had been asking themselves on their Exodus journey was whether or not the Lord their God was with them.

Today's reading begins in verse 8 of Exodus 17, but, immediately preceding today's text, we read how the Israelites posed this question in verse 7: *Is God with us or not?*

A response to their question was given in today's first reading. God was seen to be with His people as Moses prayed for them. In short, God was shown to be present to His people in and through prayer!

God's people deployed in battle came to understand that their victory depended upon the power of intercessory prayer.

What the Lord manifested to the Israelites through Moses' intercession on that famous day of combat was surely intended to be an encouragement for them to have recourse to prayer for themselves at all times – not just in times of crisis.

Just as God's people needed the sign they were given on that day of battle, so we all need to be given signs at different times in our lives to encourage us *to pray without ever giving up*, as the gospel passage we heard this morning puts it.

It is important for us to grasp that the power the Israelites experienced to have been released in their favour came from the One to whom Moses' prayer was addressed and not from the patriarch who was praying on their behalf. The Israelites' strength in battle and their victory were not dependent upon Moses, but upon the Lord. It was the Lord's own power and might that the Israelites

What was true in time past remains true in time present.

Divine power is available to us in and through recourse to prayer: our prayer with and for others, their prayer with and for us, without denying that power is also to be found (by which I mean that divine strength will be given to us in our weakness) in and through the prayer we offer for ourselves, as well as in and through prayer other people offer for themselves.

What has to be concluded from the incident concerning Israel's victory over the Amalekites is that God's empowerment is the fruit of prayer. Moses' arms raised in prayer offered the Israelites a visual aid, helping them to understand God's role in the whole event. Evidently, Moses' gesture pointed beyond himself to the One to whom he raised his arms in prayer.

Why have I have hammered this point home by repeating it over and over again in what I have said so far?

Because it needs to be underlined!

We have to be firmly convinced of our need to be engaged in prayer. We have to see the necessity of prayer... and to be praying for ourselves, rather than just relying on other people to be praying for us.

There is a real danger – even in the Church – for some people to imagine that prayer is something in which others are called to be engaged, in a way that might dispense their own efforts. There are some people who value prayer as an activity to be exercised by others, seeing it as something from which they can draw strength by extension, without realising their own need to pray.

How often have I not heard it said that *it is so important that there are monasteries of monks and nuns whose members are totally consecrated to a life of prayer?* Frequently, visiting bishops and priests, as part of the pious discourse they offer to their listeners when visiting contemplative communities, will say something along these lines: *Thankfully monks and nuns, like yourselves, are here to provide a real power-house of prayer for the rest of the Church.* What is implied by such statements is that they are so busy doing things for others that they rely on monks and nuns to do the praying in the Church. These well-meaning visitors will often liken our monasteries to electricity power stations. They will speak of monks and nuns as generating the current that keeps the vast machine of the Church fuelled and ready for action. The more biblically aware among their number might allude to today's first reading and say that monks and nuns are akin to Moses figures who keep their arms raised in prayer and thereby sustaining the Church's 'hands on' ministers who are engaged in warfare on the battle-field.

While these undoubtedly well-meaning people I refer to here (as I have said, often kindly clerics) would probably agree that all should pray and none can totally dispense him or her self from prayer altogether, they can still foolishly imagine that the *real work* of prayer is more someone else's task and concern rather than their own.

It isn't!

Indeed, the Second Vatican Council makes it clear that the first mission of Bishops and Pastors is prayer. They are to pray for the people confided to their care. Prayer is fundamental to their ministry of service.

If monks and nuns have taken to heart the Scriptures call to *pray unceasingly* – by which it should be understood that they will be striving to live always consciously aware of God's presence – the same call is addressed to all Christians.

When Paul writes as he does, in so many places, advocating incessant prayer, the apostle is speaking to whole Christian communities and not just to some limited number – some little elite group – within their membership.

There was a notion which was prevalent in the middle-ages that because some people were too busy or too important to engage in the labour of prayer themselves, they could offer patronage to others who would carry out this ministry on their behalf. This led many secular lords or important prelates to make monastic foundations which had for mission to assure that prayer was offered constantly in their particular secular realm or ecclesiastical jurisdiction. While many famous monasteries came into being as a result of this concept – the idea of their monks and nuns existing to live a serious and fully committed Christian life, as if vicariously, for others – the underlying concept was not helpful.

Fair enough, monks and nuns do seek to live their baptism in a radical way, but it is all the baptised who are called to live their baptism as fully as they can, and, as part of this commitment, it is all the baptised who are told to be persistent in prayer – in the image of that poor widow we meet in today's gospel passage.

If Jesus is depicted as having come forth from the waters of the Jordan at His baptism with His arms raised in the gesture of prayer, just like Him, all the baptised are called to give themselves to prayer.

The woman we meet in today's gospel story was not a professional holy person; she was simply a poor and needy member of the community. It is as such – as poor and needy people, as simple members of the Christian community, whatever our particular role or rank in it – that we are all called to live our lives, as she lived hers, *persevering in prayer*.

The invitation to live incessant prayer is one that has been heard and responded to with fresh vigour by many in the Churches today, right across the denominational divide. It has been heard especially by many young people who have coined such phrases as *Twenty-four Seven* to describe the phenomenon of perpetual prayer movements they are part of. I see these incessant prayer movements – as do their members – as something of a follow-on from more ancient monastic and later Religious life initiatives. Indeed, the young people will talk of their prayer movements as manifestations of what has been called *new monasticism*.

Over the centuries we have heard various titles given to incessant prayer movements.

In Eastern monasticism we hear the terms *Acoemtae* or *Akoimetoι* employed to describe the *Vigil Keepers* or the *Sleepless Ones*: those who kept vigil, even through the night, in a prayer of hope and expectation.

In the Western Church – especially in monastic circles – we see how the term *Laus Perennis* emerged. This term is often associated with Cluniac Benedictinism. It described the unceasing round of praise that went up to God in the long Offices which were celebrated in relay in the great abbeys of the tradition of Cluny.

In later Religious life circles – especially among communities of women – we see the emergence of the idea of *Perpetual Adoration* (particularly adoration of the Blessed Sacrament) as a way of fostering continual or incessant prayer.

While all these notions and movements of uninterrupted prayer had and have something positive to offer, there can also be a certain downside to them as well. They sometimes became and can still become the domain of a privileged elite – a sort of reserved practice for the chosen few.

The important thing for us to retain when it comes to incessant prayer is the point made by today's gospel passage which places the emphasis less about technique employed by someone or the quality of that person's prayer than it does on their perseverance in and attentiveness to the practice of prayer. Humble perseverance, not performance, is what matters; simply *sticking with it*, just *hanging in there*, however poor the quality of our prayer may seem to be in our own assessment.

Perseverance in prayer is the point of today's first reading when we examine it. It is clear in the story that every so often Moses' perseverance flagged. When Moses let his arms fall those on the battlefield weakened. When he kept his arms raised in prayer they retained the upper-hand over the enemy.

In his Rule for Monks, St Benedict insists that if we are to do something good, then in whatever we undertake, *we must pray instantly and ask the Lord insistently in prayer to bring to its completion the good work we have started*. He also tells us in his Rule for Monks that *we should petition the Lord God of all things with humility and pure devotion* – assuring us that *our prayer will be heard not by our multiplying words, but by our growing in humility and purity of heart, accompanied by tears of compunction*.

Hildegarde of Bingen – a woman of our Benedictine tradition – reminds us that *wordiness* (even in prayer) *counts for almost nothing before God*.

For John Trithemus to draw to our attention that *we should pray without ceasing because we cannot complete anything without God's help*. (That thought is rooted in today's first reading.)

Turning to more contemporary authors who were/are people not so far removed from us – men and woman who were consciously aware of the need to communicate their message to

ordinary folk engaged in the life of the world, I am led to think of lines from Thomas Merton's *Contemplation In A World Of Action*.

Speaking of the important part and the power of prayer and meditation to open up new ways and new horizons for the world, Merton writes: *God will act in us and through us to renew the Church by preparing in prayer what we cannot yet imagine or understand. For Merton all true and good activity is prepared in and stems from prayer.*

A very grounded Benedictine woman explains to us just what the function of prayer is. Sr Joan Chittister writes: *The function of prayer is not to establish a routine; it is to establish a relationship with God who is in relationship with us always... The function of prayer is to bring us into touch with ourselves, as well. To the ancients, 'tears of compunction' were the sign of a soul that knew its limits, faced its sins, accepted its needs and lived in hope.*

To what Joan Chittister has written, I would add that prayer also brings us into touch with others. Our late abbot Paul Grammont spoke very movingly of his experience of prayer in communion with the world. I quote: *There is a communion with the suffering of the world which the monk is led to experience and which is extremely difficult to live... so heavy is the burden we are led to bear. We find ourselves in symbiosis with the world. And I must admit that it has often happened to me, especially in silent prayer, but also in the recitation of the psalms... all the more poignantly during the night, to hear the cry of the world. It wells up within you and it is a weight which is heavy to bear.*

A real sense of communion with the world in prayer is a value which Abbot Paul transmitted to us; it is one which we seek to live here at Holy Cross Abbey. Fidelity to the spirit of communion born of a truly listening and compassionate attitude of heart leads us into intercessory prayer for the world. As we listen to others, we hear their cries of distress and we tune into their deepest longings... seeking to present the yearnings of their hearts to the Lord in our poor prayer offered on their behalf.

To the extent that we are present to God we become present to our self... so present to our self as to become a present/a gift to God... and a present/a gift to and for all our brothers and sisters in humanity. We find ourselves led to want *to give our lives* for our brothers and sisters, just as *Christ gave His life*. In this way we engage ourselves to live the greatest love, for, as Jesus taught us: *There is no greater love than this, than to give one's life.*