

## HOW SHOULD WE PRAY? NEVER GIVE UP

Luke 18:1–8

For the next few weeks we're going to be thinking about how we should pray and today we're looking at Luke 18:1–8.

Much of the story of Jesus in Luke's Gospel focuses around his last journey to Jerusalem. It's a kind of travel diary and it begins right back in chapter 9 verse 51. 'As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.'

What we have from that point on is not a random selection of stories and sayings but the account of a journey, the last journey which Jesus took in his earthly ministry. Every word is calculated to instruct the disciples and prepare them for what lies ahead. We can take sections out of the narrative and get a great deal from them but we will understand them much better if we see them in the context of everything else around them.

The passage we're looking at today comes in a section which began at chapter 17 verse 11. 'Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee.' The first story in this section concerns ten men who were in great need. They had leprosy and as a result they had to endure great physical suffering. Not only that, they were social outcasts. They had to live on the fringe of society, without access to either market or synagogue, bereft of both physical and spiritual sustenance.

Luke 17 verses 12 and 13: 'As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"' Jesus was confronted with the suffering of the world, a suffering which he himself was to endure in undiluted form. It's easy to become so familiar with these words that we lose their impact. It was real suffering and Jesus responded to it. If you are going through suffering this morning Jesus has a special concern for you.

'When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed' (verse 14). This story reveals something of the heart of Jesus. But it also reveals something of the human heart. Ten men were healed but only one came back to say 'Thank you,' and that one was not a Jew; he was a Samaritan, a despised half-cast. Jesus said, 'Where are the other nine?'

If you're using the NIV you'll see that the next section from verse 20 to the end of chapter 17 is entitled *The Coming of the Kingdom of God*. Jesus was asked when the kingdom of God would come and he said it does not come visibly. 'The kingdom of God is among you.' The kingdom of God is not a geographical area or a political entity. The kingdom of God is wherever the king reigns and Jesus is that king.

That was the point of the previous story. Ten lepers were on their way to the priest when they were cleansed. They all gave thanks to God, but only one of them came back to Jesus. 'One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him' (verses 15, 16). Do you see it? Praising God and thanking Jesus. In order to give true praise to God he had to return to Jesus. In verse 18 Jesus said, 'Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' What was wrong with the other nine was not that they were ungrateful but that they failed to realise that the way to give glory to God was to come and give thanks to Jesus.

The kingdom has already come because Jesus has come and whether we are part of that kingdom or not depends on our heart-attitude to Jesus.

Jesus went on to speak about his second coming. There would be a period during which he would be absent. Verses 22–23. 'Then he said to his disciples, "The time is coming

when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. Men will tell you, 'There he is!' or 'Here he is!' Do not go running off after them.'" This is the period of history which we are living in. Jesus is not here on earth in the way he was two thousand years ago. But he will return and when he does no one will be able to miss it. Verses 24 and 25: 'For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.'

Jesus then gave two illustrations of what life would be like in the period between his first coming and his second coming. It would be like the days of Noah. It would be like the days of Lot. The thing which is picked out to characterise these days is not excessive wickedness, though that was a feature of those times. What Jesus points out is a total lack of concern. 'People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage ... People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building.' Jesus said, 'It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed.' People will not be ready. They will be oblivious to the danger they are living in.

Jesus gave a number of illustrations to show just how quickly it will all happen when he returns. The disciples finally asked *where* it would happen (verse 37). Jesus gave an enigmatic answer. 'Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather.' He was saying, in effect, I'm not telling you where, but it will be a scene of death and devastation. When it happens the vultures will be there. Noah was saved but thousands were lost. Lot was saved but thousands were lost. Those who are trusting in Christ will be saved but thousands will be lost.

Now we come to chapter 18 verse 1. 'Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.' Is this a change of topic or is Jesus saying something more about living in the light of his second coming? Let's jump to verse 8. 'However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?'

This is important. This parable is as much about the second coming of Christ as it is about prayer. Let's read it again.

He said, 'In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, "Grant me justice against my adversary." For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, "Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!"' And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?'

Some preliminary questions: Is this saying that God is like the unjust judge? No. The whole point is that he is the very opposite of the unjust judge.

Is this saying that we have to pester God if we want to get answers to our prayers? No. Jesus himself said, 'When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him' (Matthew 6:7, 8).

What is it saying? It's saying that before the return of Christ his followers may be like that poor widow, suffering injustice, persecution and suffering. They will find themselves crying out to God night and day for justice and it may seem that there is no answer.

Corruption in government, greed in business, exploitation of the poor and vulnerable, the whole catalogue of evil from beginning to end – where is God in all this? Why doesn't he do something? Why doesn't he stop the rot? It's a real test of faith, and Jesus has two things to say.

Firstly, God will see that justice gets done. There will be a day of judgment. But secondly, when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on the earth? In God's own time he will intervene quickly, he will bring about justice for his chosen ones, he will not keep putting them off. The wrong will fail, the right prevail. That word 'quickly' is deceptive. It refers to God's scale of time not ours.

Do you remember what Peter said? 'Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance' (2 Peter 3:8, 9).

Until that day when Jesus comes again and the Son of Man appears there will continue to be injustice and suffering and we will need faith, faith that goes on believing not because prayer has been answered but even when it seems not to have been answered, faith that trusts in God because he's not like that unjust judge, faith that goes on praying, goes on trusting, knowing that in God's timing right will be done.

'Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal' (2 Corinthians 4:16–18).