

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 19th October 2025

Readings: Jeremiah 31:27-34
2Timothy 3:10 – 4:5

Psalm 119:97-104
Luke 18:1-14

The opening line of today's Gospel suggests that early communities who believed in Christ needed to pray always and not lose heart. It's not surprising, for we know that the early Church experienced persecution from the Jewish community, and from successive Roman administrations. The letters of the New Testament also indicate that there was significant tension between some leaders of the early church, and even within some church communities.

As Paul heard reports about disagreement and conflict in the early Corinthian church I wonder if he ever lost heart as he wrote them two letters - letters that continue to speak to communities of faith in our time because we have our own experiences of disagreement and conflict.

In the familiar words of his first letter Paul affirmed the importance of love, and even the primacy of it. For he wrote, *"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but **do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal**. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but **do not have love, I am nothing**. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but **do not have love, I gain nothing**. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. **Love never ends...**"* (1Cor. 13:1-8a)

Of course, there are things happening at an international level, in places far from here, that can cause us to lose heart. The ongoing conflict between Israel and Gaza – even though a ceasefire is now in place; the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and the photos we see of people being killed in their own homes. Closer to home, the incidence of domestic and family violence in Australian society, can cause us to lose heart. The indifference that many in our society have to the religious faith that inspires and nourishes us, can cause us to lose heart; and, the situation faced by friends or family members who are not responding to medical intervention, can cause us to lose heart.

However, it's not just the things happening in the lives of others that can cause us to lose heart. If we lose a job and wonder how the mortgage can be paid; if we're diagnosed with a disease that diminishes our capacity; if those we love move on and leave us behind; if the hopes and dreams of our younger selves get lost... we can lose heart!

In such liminal spaces, God can feel a long way away. Intellectually, we may acknowledge that God is close to us all the time, even in the midst of each breath and heartbeat, but in the painful reality of lived experience we can lose heart, and God can feel far away... or even absent.

In today's Gospel Jesus is remembered telling a story about a judge who gets tired of a widow's persistent request for justice from someone who has wronged her. No matter how much he ignored her, the widow persisted. We are told that the judge in the story eventually gave in and granted her request not because it was the right thing, but because he just wanted a quiet life! He did not want to be bothered by the woman anymore!

Understanding God to be like a grumpy judge, who grudgingly gives in to the requests we make in prayer seems to be at odds with the understanding that we can, *'Ask, and it will be given; search and we will find; knock, and the door will be opened...'* (Matthew 7:7). These familiar words, found in the Gospels of both Matthew and Luke, do not say, 'Ask, and keep asking, no matter how long it takes, and eventually it will be given...' They say, *'Ask, and it will be given...'*

The Australian New Testament scholar, William Loader, helpfully suggests that we will miss the mark if we treat the parable of the widow and the unjust judge as a general teaching about intercessory prayer. He suggests that *"...it is primarily about the yearning for change."* I love that! *"...it is primarily about the yearning for change!"*

I think this insight has the potential to reframe our initial understanding and encourages us to pray always and not lose heart. For when we lose heart we can be tempted to give up and think that change is impossible. We can be tempted to think that no matter how much we pray, or how hard we work with others, the odds are stacked against us, so why bother?

We can be tempted to think that Israel will destroy Gaza; that Russia will occupy Ukraine; that the high rates of domestic violence in Australia will remain high; that Christian Churches in Australia will continue to decline; and that there is no hope for sick friends or family.

However, I think we yearn to see positive change in each of these situations, and in the personal challenges we face.

Saint Paul yearned for change in the Corinthian Church, so he prayed for them, and he wrote to them. There is something important for us in Paul's response for he not only prayed for the Corinthian church, he took action. He wrote and explained that there was a better way to relate to those who are other; he wrote explaining that they were accountable to a wider community of faith; and... he promised to come and visit.

In the things we each yearn to see change in, there is a reminder in today's Gospel for us to pray, not lose heart, and, like Paul, take some action which will play a part in bringing about that change. It could be through letter writing, or visiting, or other actions that use the unique gifts and abilities and networks we have.

Let us be persistent like the widow of the parable; creative and willing to do the necessary hard work like Paul; and clear about the yearning for change that God's Spirit inspires in us.

As we consider the challenge of this,
please join me in prayer...

"God of grace, we give thanks for the gifts of our lives and of your love. In your mercy give us wisdom to recognise the need for greater wholeness in our lives, and in the lives of others. Help us to yearn for this; pray for this; work for this; and never lose heart. We ask in the name of the one who calls us to follow, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen"