

I was watching a movie a few weeks ago. Two men were talking about God. One man said “who is God?” The other man replied: You know when you close your eyes and wish for something and you don’t get what you ask for – God is the one who ignores you. As he saw it God is the one who ignores you, the one who is deaf and who gives you the cold shoulder.

Maybe you have felt like that sometimes too.

You pray – and nothing seems to happen, at least not what you wished. Over time that wears our faith down, our faith in a good God and our faith in the value of prayer.

“Jesus told his disciples a parable to teach them that they should always pray and never become discouraged”.

The reality is we do become discouraged in prayer. What if I pray and nothing happens?

How long should I keep on praying before I give up asking for the same thing?

Discouragement in prayer is not new. The psalms are the Bible’s prayer-book and often they call out to God asking if he is listening and ask “how long O Lord” will it be until you answer?

Jesus’ own disciples not only asked him how they should pray but Jesus recognized that they would become discouraged and stop praying.

Why does it happen?

A girl who is not from St Paul’s told me recently she had stopped praying. When I asked why she said she stopped years ago at about the time something happened in her family.

When life doesn’t go as planned, and when it seems unfair or unhappy we can stop praying. A child loses a pet, a husband loses a wife, an accident, constant pain that God doesn’t take away can all lead us to stop talking to him. Or it might be some unrepented sin in our lives that causes the blockage to prayer. If we are continuing in something we know is wrong don’t be surprised in honest communication with God is affected. Hard to look someone in the eye or talk to God when you know are giving into sin. Or maybe we simply prayed and God didn’t deliver, and we become disillusioned with him. We begin to think prayer doesn’t work so we give up on it.

But prayer is not a button you push to get God to act for you, nor is he a Santa you visit once a year for some goodies. Prayer is a relationship with God. And relationships are not always easy. We come to every relationship with expectations and if they are not met we stop talking and the relationship suffers. The same happens with us and God, at least from our side. We feel like we are talking to a brick wall and give up. Jesus was right. We become discouraged and lose heart when things don’t work out the way we prayed.

To encourage his disciples who were learning about prayer, Jesus tells the story about a woman and a judge. **“The judge neither feared God nor had respect for anyone”**. He was corrupt and an atheist too. The woman was a widow and probably poor and vulnerable with no power and no one to defend her. There was no free legal aid. But she wanted justice. She kept coming to the judge pleading her case. The judge did nothing. She had no power and influence, no money to bribe the judge or pay for top lawyers, but she did have a need, and she kept putting it to him. He was a judge, he was supposed to deliver justice. Today she would have left hundreds of messages on his answering machine, sat outside his office when he arrived for work, and contacted Today Tonight to get some action.

In the end he gives in. **“At last he said to himself: Even though I don’t fear God or respect anyone, yet because of all the trouble this widow is giving me I will see to it that she gets her rights. If I don’t she will keep coming and finally wear me out!”** (Literally: be the death of me!)

Mother Theresa is reported to have done that once. She went to a legal firm for a donation for a hospital for Aids sufferers. They declined. So she said “Let us pray” and proceeded to pray for a change of heart. They still said no. So she said “let us pray” and prayed again.

Three times she prayed in front of them. They gave her the money.

Jesus invites us to keep coming back to God like the widow and Mother Theresa. He invites us to keep coming back even when God seems deaf, cold and silent. 'Ask, seek, knock on God's door' Jesus once said. He invites us to an arm wrestle with God like Jacob did at the Jabok river and not give up until we receive God's blessing.

So why should we persevere in prayer and not give up? The answer lies in the nature of God, who God is, and that's what Jesus goes on to describe. God is not the judge in the story, cranky, cold, miserable, unfair, but movable if you bug him enough! No, just the opposite. Jesus loved opposites. **"Will not God judge in favour of his own people who cry out to him day and night for help? Will he be slow to help them? I tell you he will judge in their favour and do it quickly!"**

You don't have to twist God's arm, you don't have to wear him down, and you definitely should not believe God has judged against you because things haven't fallen your way. Jesus said God hears you, is quick off the mark to come to you, and he will judge in your favour when you cry out to him.

If you doubt that go and look at the cross of Jesus. Hasn't God judged in your favour there once and for all. Jesus dies instead of you, Jesus is raised up and you get raised up with him in your baptism and on the last day! Paul wrote **"If God is for us who can be against us? Certainly not God who didn't keep back his own son but gave him up for us all! He gave us his Son, will he not also freely give us all things. Who will accuse god's chosen people. God himself declares them not guilty!" Romans 8**

But where does that leave us when we ask for something specific and it doesn't happen? Remember it does not mean God isn't there, doesn't hear, doesn't care and doesn't judge in our favour. Remember God hears, cares, comes quickly to help and is on our side. But remember also that prayer is a relationship, a relationship with someone whose ways are so unlike ours, and who is beyond our understanding. Give God room to be God, to let things happen we would not have asked for, to bring good things out of bad, to teach perseverance, to stretch our faith. Remember God says in this life there will be trouble. He doesn't always pinpoint why or why you. And remember he promises a time is coming when things will be sorted out, justice done once and for all and you will know forever that he is on your side, because you will be at his side in heaven.

In the meantime we pray, pray to a loving and just God, and we don't give up. We may change what we pray for along the way, adjust our sights and have more realistic expectations, and we may get what we didn't bargain for. This is a relationship remember. And bit by bit hopefully we will grow in understanding him and his judgements and ways.

God always answers prayer, sometimes how we ask and what we want, sometimes he allows the opposite to happen. But if we persevere he will give us the glasses of faith to see his judgments and ways through new lenses. He will help us as we struggle to see things from his side of the relationship and not just ours. Prayer is a good barometer of the type of faith, the type of relationship we have with God. Through persevering in prayer we learn we can trust God in all circumstances of life.

Frank Fiebig died last Sunday. When I visited him one minute he would ask why God wasn't answering his prayers for healing. But in the next breath he would say how good God had been to him and told me to tell anyone who didn't believe in God to come up and see him in hospital and he would convince them God was on his side and got him through. He would also interrupt Communion when I took it to him, to ask his questions about God. Wrestling, struggling yes, but in the middle of communion, the best place to ask them! That's persevering faith, that keeps looking to God despite what's happening to us and we see around us. Now with Jesus he sees that God was on his side after all. It's Jesus who shows us God is on our side and who invites us to come to God and pray and not give up. God help you to persevere in prayer.