**Sermon – Persisting in Prayer (St Paul’s, 30.03.2025)**

**Luke 11: 5 - 13**

When we think of persistence in a campaign, what examples come to mind?

Dame Lisa Carrington in her pursuit of excellence in sprint canoe racing?

The Silver Ferns in their desire to be world champions and beat the Diamonds, Australia?

King George, Queen Elizabeth’s father, and his perseverance to overcome a bad stutter so he could address the people of the UK (the Kings Speech)

William Wilberforce in his battle in the English Parliament to abolish slavery from England or Nelson Mandella in his perseverance for freedom and winning the right for all South Africans to vote in elections?

Before we jump into the parable of the “Friend at midnight,” a parable about persistence in prayer, there are a couple of features of Middle Eastern culture that provide background to the story.

Firstly M/E culture is an Honour/ Shame culture rather than a right/wrong culture. A parent in NZ may say to their child, “Don’t do that Trevor, that is wrong.” In the M/E a parent would say “Don’t do that Joshua, that is shameful.” Or “Well done, that is an honourable thing to do.”

Secondly, hospitality is very important. If a guest arrives, the host must always serve them food, most often more than they could eat. It is understood that the host is hosting on behalf of the village. If the host is low on supplies, they couldn’t just nip down to the supermarket. The custom is that they would borrow from their neighbours. This is understood and normal. An English couple living in a M/E village were invited to a meal at a neighbour’s house. They may well eat some of their own food which may well be served on their own dishes. This is strange to us but normal in M/E villages.

Retell the story: Luke 11: 5 – 8.

This is a real “Charlie Brown” cartoon parable. Who could imagine a neighbour like that? This would be a “laugh out loud” moment at such a shameful character! No one in the village would act so rudely. In the morning the whole village would know of the neighbour’s shameful actions.

The sleepy neighbour doesn’t rouse himself because of friendship – but rather because of shamelessness or we would say to preserve his honour and integrity. The alternative reading in the NIV is preferable and consistent with M/E culture. The sleepy neighbour would give as much as was needed and probably more than just bread.

The underlying question in this parable is, “What is God like, what is the nature of God’s character?” Is God like the sleepy neighbour? Surely God is honourable, a God of integrity which He will not violate. We believe in a God who is faithful and generous, who loves and cares of us.

If a person can be confident of having his needs met by an unfriendly yet honourable neighbour, then HOW MUCH MORE will our needs be met by our loving Heavenly Father!!!

Following the humorous parable that Jesus told, he goes on to speak of persisting in prayer. We are familiar with his words, “Ask, seek and knock.” The Greek is stronger, the verbs are present continuous tense that is; “Ask and keep on asking, Seek and keep on seeking, Knock and keep on knocking. “ Persevere in asking, not to an unfriendly neighbour, but to a generous, honourable, loving and faithful God.

There are examples of persistent praying in Scripture. You may remember the OT story about Abraham, Sarah and Hagar (Genesis 16). Hagar’s son was called Ishmael. Ishmael means “God hears”

Think of Abraham, he was 75 years old when he left his home. He was promised that he would be the father of a great nation. How many times did Abraham pray for a son? Whenever God reaffirmed his promises to Abraham, Abraham reminded God that he needed a son and heir. It was not until Abraham was 100 years old, that he held his son Isaac.

Consider the Syrophoenician woman who lived in Tyre (Mk7: 24 ff), begging Jesus to drive a demon from her daughter. Jesus challenged her, likening her to a dog. Yet she persisted and Jesus uncovered remarkable humility and faith.

I am preaching here about prayers of intercession. There are other prayer practices such as meditation on Scripture or silence in God’s presence that are also important.

Is there a time when you persevered in praying for a need? If you are willing, share an example with your neighbour? (Ken’s story)

Why would I preach on the need for persistent praying? While I don’t know any details, I sense that St Paul’s is a praying church. There are weekly prayer meetings, Tuesday and Sunday mornings. The Elders pray when we meet, and sometimes schedule extra meetings to pray. I would be surprised if the homegroups didn’t pray. And individuals persist in praying at home as part of their devotional practices.

Part of the City-to-City pilgrimage that St Paul’s is on, is a renewed call to prayer that God will lead us, guide us and enable us to go deeper with Him.

A group of leaders last year discerned a frenewed vision for St Paul’s: **In response to God’s grace and leading, by 2030, St Paul’s Katikati will be a church that intentionally forms disciples who are growing deeper in their relationship with and experience of God. Helping identify and use strengths, gifts and opportunities, St Paul’s will equip, support and encourage all members to provide gospel leadership in EVERY area of life (family, church, community and beyond), to bring God’s blessing and, by His grace, enable others to know, love and serve our God.”**

I think this is a big and challenging vision. Does anyone think we can move forward towards achieving this vision by our own efforts? I don’t believe so. We will only be able to move forward to see the vision fulfilled through persistent prayer.

Everyone was given a copy of the vision statement. What have we done with it? Have we placed a copy on in a place where we are reminded of it? Perhaps on our fridges or in our journals? Do we have a copy by our beds or the place where we regularly have our devotional time? Or did we put it in file 13 as another piece of waste-paper?

I believe we can learn from Paul’s praying for the Churches he planted through his letters to the Churches in Asia Minor. Paul often begins his letters to these Churches with a blessing, “Grace and Peace to you from God the Father and the LORD Jesus Christ.”

Then goes on to pray for the Churches. I looked at the letters to the Churches of Ephesians 1: 15 - 23 and 3: 14 – 19; Philippians 1: 9 – 11; Colossians 1: 9 – 14; 1 Thessalonians 3: 1 – 13 and 2 Thessalonians 1: 11 – 12 to search for common elements in Paul’s prayers.

What follows is my attempt to summarise the common features of Paul’s prayers for the Churches:

1. Paul always begins with giving thanks to God for some feature of church life. For their faith, love, patience, witness. When we pray for St Paul’s, what would we give thanks to God for?
2. Paul prays for the people in the church to have a “Spirit of Wisdom and Revelation” so that they grow in their knowledge of God. He prays for them to know the boundless love of God in their hearts and the hope to which He has called them. In other words, Paul prays for God’s people to go DEEPER in their knowledge and experience of God.
3. Thirdly Paul prays for their love for one another to grow. He prays for them to know the awesome power of God available to those who believe; that God will strengthen their hearts. I believe it is fair to say that Paul prays for the Christians to grow STRONGER in Christ, that they may have endurance and patience in their life together and their witness
4. Fourthly Paul prays that followers of Jesus will live a righteous life (basically a life of right relationships), a blameless life, that they would live to please God and bear fruit in every good work. In effect Paul prays for God’s people to exercise Godly ministry in every area of life: home, work, play church, community, that is to go WIDER.
5. Finally, Paul adds that he prays constantly for all the churches! Here is the PERSEVERANCE, the asking, seeking and knocking.

In our CtC pilgrimage it has been discerned that we, the community of St Paul’s Katikati, are called to establish an intentional rhythm of prayer for the vision. We are called to prayer, giving thanks, asking that we go deeper with God, seeking that we grow stronger in Christ and knocking that we go wider in serving the one true living God.

I want to add 2 further topics that seem to me to be vital in our intercessions for Katikati, The Western Bay of Plenty, NZ and beyond.

In Jeremiah’s prayer for the exiles that have been shipped off to Babylon, he calls on them to, “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which God has carried them. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” (Jeremiah 29: 7). It is right and honourable for us to pray for God’s blessing on Katikati and the Western Bay of Plenty where we live. To pray for its productivity, its businesses, its schools, and health centres, its serving ministries. WE ask God to prosper each facet of community life that all may share in the provision God gives, a just sharing of resources. We can pray for the rivers and harbour that they will become clean and good for recreation and productivity.

Finally, Paul teaches us in 1 Timothy 2: 1 – 4 to make “intercession, prayers petitions, and thanksgiving for all those who have some authority over us, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” Here is that call to pray for our local Councils and our Parliament. Whatever your political leaning, the current government and the opposition need our prayers that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. NZ faces many challenges with the cost of living too high for many, with an over-burdened health system, demands for more social housing, more teachers and support staff, improved infrastructure, the list can go on.

I have to confess that I don’t think I’m very good at this interceding for the Church, for the peace and prosperity of the place God has planted us or for those in authority over us.

However, let us remember that we are not alone in this praying venture. God has given us His Holy Spirit to help us pray, especially when we don’t know exactly what to pray for (Romans 8: 26 – 27). Further, Jesus is at the right hand of the Father sticking up for us, that is interceding for His People (Hebrews 7: 23 – 25). The LORD our God helps us in our weakness.

So, in conclusion:

Let us never forget who we are praying to; The LORD our God is NOT like the sleepy neighbour, but rather a loving heavenly Father who is generous, faithful and hears us.

Jesus teaches us to ask and keep on asking, to persist in seeking, to never give up knocking that the doors may be opened.

WE can be confident that praying for St Paul’s to go DEEPER with God, to grow STRONGER in Christ and to go WIDER in serving is entirely consistent with Paul’s praying for the infant churches he helped plant.

Please pray for the leaders who will gather next weekend as we seek to identify strategies that will enable us to move forward in the vision for St Paul’s.

Let us take a moment when we consider what we will do in establishing a regular prayer rhythm.