

Perseverance

Let me begin today with words from Rev. Raheel Arif who shares some of his own journey of refuge, but also about finding comfort and strength in God:

His words..."Remembering my story today, when I reflect on it again, I think when life gets tough, where do you run? In our lives, even as Christians, whenever we feel hurt, disappointed, confused – whenever life gets difficult, we often flee from God rather than running towards God. Yet the Bible tells us that God is our stronghold, our stability, our security. (Nahum 1:7)

"I have personally experienced and lived the hardships and agony which many Christians in Pakistan suffer every day in various forms of persecution. When I looked at the title for this Sunday, I thought that it needs to be called "Asylum, Refuge, and Sanctuary" as it was in my case, because whenever somebody like me arrives to seek asylum in another country, it is the asylum process that he/she goes through first which itself is a very tough, challenging, and horrible. Once you are granted asylum, you are then called a refugee and find a refuge – the story can become one of sanctuary. I was warmly welcomed and started working as a support worker in a care home. When I responded to my call to become a minister to serve God and His people in Scotland, sanctuary (church) welcomed me and offered me all the support, resources, and training that I needed to fulfil God's plan for my life. And now I am God's servant, serving God's people in the west of Falkirk.

"The Church celebrates Refugee Sunday once a year, but our call as Christians is to act every day. It is an opportunity for Christ's body to reflect on God's heart for refugees, and to pray and provide for the millions of struggling refugees and displaced people around the globe."

During lockdown I have been putting videos into Meadowburn Primary Schools for Assemblies, at key times in the year, and the Head Teacher emailed me last week asking for another one for the P7 leavers' service. She said, "Your videos and kind messages throughout the year have been very much appreciated, so we would be delighted if you were able to be part of the Virtual Service."

So, I thought that they have seen enough of the Campsies, and so I took the opportunity last Saturday when I was down visiting the mums to do a little bit of filming at Tarbert Castle. The Castle was rebuilt in 1325, on the instructions of King Robert the Bruce, and parliaments were held in the Tarbert castle where Robert the Bruce tried to subdue the Island war lords.

So, I would venture to say, that he enjoyed coming to Tarbert.

There is the wonderful story of Robert the Bruce encountering a spider and many places claim this story to have happened in their locality. But Tarbert has a strong case for

saying it happened in the dungeon at the castle, and you may remember he was about to give up and he watched the spider fall 6 times, and on the seventh attempt the spider made a web and Robert took encouragement from this and the Battle of Bannockburn is now history – so you will have gathered by now that my video to the P7's was on the theme of Keep on Going.

Keep on Going is the theme of the parable in our reading this morning.

It begins with the words, "Jesus told his disciples a parable that they should always pray and never give up. "

"When the going gets tough, the tough get going" is an old saying.

In the parable, Jesus makes a widow the main person in his story.

She is a very tough resilient person.

She was a widow, and in those days widows, were very likely friendless and helpless. She would have had few to turn to and would have had no finance and no benefits. Much like refugees coming to our country. But she had something; she had guts, she had courage, she had belief and she persevered.

What the injustice is in the parable, we are not told, but she kept coming to this unscrupulous judge and repeating her plea, *"Grant me justice against my adversary"*.
"Grant me Justice..."

We do not know what the injustice was, but she felt passionate about it, she had been wronged and she was like a dog with a bone, she would not let it go.

She is someone to be admired. She pursued righteousness and I'm sure that she believed that there is justice at the heart of the universe and she wasn't going to give in until justice was granted.

Jesus uses her as an example of how we should pray and how we should have faith, persevere and never give up, even when the odds are against us.

Why does Jesus tell this parable and why does Luke include it in his Gospel?

To understand this we must notice, where the parable is placed.

It comes after Jesus speaks about the second coming. Chapter 17:20-37. This is in response to a question from the Pharisees, *"When will the Kingdom of God come."*

He finishes this explanation of the coming Kingdom with the story of the persistent widow.

Why?

Well, the widow represents his followers, many persecuted, many facing injustice, and facing fierce trials and they needed to be encouraged. Perhaps some were even turning back.

Jesus reminds them that justice will prevail and that he will come back. There is justice at the heart of the universe for there is God at the heart of the universe!

The other character in the story is the unscrupulous judge, a dreadful person, who is to be contrasted with the generosity and favour of God. God was not like the unjust judge, He had her back and was on her side.

But, the disciples must learn from this parable and they must persevere in prayer and hold on in faith, that justice will be given eventually.

It is a message for our generation also, for all who face injustice, for all who are going through tough times, for we are being reminded by Jesus to hold on, to persevere, to go the extra mile.

Jesus is telling the disciples that as they await his return, and the world becomes like the days of Noah and Sodom and Gomorrah, and wickedness seems to be triumphing, it's then that they have to persevere in prayer, it's then that he will return.

The judge in the story had a change of heart, not because he cared about the situation, not because he repented of his wickedness, but because he grew weary of hearing her pleas.

He took the path of least resistance, because the widow was wearing him out. The Greek word used is a term used for boxing. The judge was literally on the ropes and he had received a full blow, just under the eye. So he finally gave in and ruled in her favour.

Of course, no one knows when the Lord will return, but we take him at his word and because of that we are confident that he will return. What will that day look like? Nobody knows. There is no timetable said Jesus, other than to watch eagerly and to wait patiently for his return.

In God's scale of time, *"one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day"* – 2Peter 3:8.

All of history is a blink of the eye compared to eternity. But from our perspective, time can drag and from the perspective of the widow, as she awaited the judge's final vindication, it probably seemed like an eternity.

And to those early disciples, some who expected the Lord to return imminently, they needed to be encouraged to pray, to persevere and not to give up.

I'm sure deep down, that there is a longing in our hearts also for God to return. For God to come to us again in Jesus and for him to put an end to all ungodliness and oppression

that we see around the world. When we look around the world and at times we see such a mess, our prayer is often, *“How long O Lord...until you come back and sort things out.”*

God of course is nothing like the unjust judge. If such a depraved judge and wicked magistrate can be coaxed by sheer perseverance to grant justice to a widow for whom he had no regard and no compassion, shall not God support those who cry out to him day and night. Of course he will, God has the back of his people. God has your back if you are his child. He is your loving Father....

Jesus finishes the story with the words, *“Will he find faith on the earth when he returns?”*

What a challenge he sets his disciples, and a challenge to us also today. When he comes back, will he find us faithful?

Well two thousand years have passed since his first time on earth. Our hope is that we are still burning brightly when he returns – that our love for Christ is still true and our confidence in him is fast and firm.

The bible begins with the words, “In the beginning God” and finishes with the words, “Come Lord Jesus” and so we wait for his coming again and that will bring all things into renewal and a new start for us all.

The old hymn sums it up well,

*“Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,
when the clouds unfold their wings of strife?
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,
will your anchor drift, or firm remain?”*

Refrain:

*We have an anchor that keeps the soul
steadfast and sure while the billows roll;
fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
grounded firm and deep in the Saviour’s love!*

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Amen