

One of the things I've found different here is the fact that the mail arrives in a box at the end of the path. Everyone's seems to be different – some are incredibly ornate (I've even seen one shaped like a Tardis) whereas others are very simplistic. In England, we don't have Mailboxes – we have holes cut in our doors with a flap to stop draughts for the postman to push our mail through. And we receive a lot of junk mail – offers for pizza's, credit cards and more besides. We once received four items from the same firm; one to Mr S McMahon, another to Mrs K.W. McMahon. The third was addressed to W McMahon and the fourth to Wendy McMahon. ALL ON THE SAME DAY. It's pester power in the extreme – ask often enough and you'll get your way.

Children are well aware of the influence which can be placed on parents by this phenomenon we call "pester power". The thinking is that if we ask often enough we will get what we want. The repetitive "Can I have an ice-cream?"s, "Just five more minutes?" and "Please please, want, want, please, dad, dad, dad, please, dad," will usually get its desired response.

How often have we looked into the eyes of our appealing children and felt our hearts melt so that we give in to their requests? (Rebecca has it honed down to a fine art.) Persistence is useful. If we ask often enough we will eventually get what we want. But is that true?

Consider the people we pray for. We regularly pray for people to be freed from their illnesses. And yet, despite our earnest prayers, they are still ill. It's not unreasonable to ask how many times do we need to pray for an answer to be forthcoming? Do we have to cry out day and night to God before He will, like the unjust judge, be worn down by our prayers and eventually give in to us?

It was to counter this argument that Jesus told today's parable. In it we have two characters. For starters there was the judge. Now it is clear that this was no ordinary Jewish judge. Normally, if someone had a dispute he or she would take it before the elders for them to arbitrate and wouldn't take it to the public courts at all. If things got so bad that it was necessary to take it to public arbitration, then the court would consist of three judges, one appointed by the plaintiff, one appointed by the defendant and another who was appointed independently.

And this judge, we are told, neither feared God nor regarded man. He was only interested in himself.

This judge was one of those paid for by Herod on behalf of the Roman authorities and they were notoriously corrupt. Unless the plaintiff - the widow in this story - had influence and/or money (or better still, both) in order to bribe the verdict in their favour, there was little chance of the case ever being settled. Such judges were known to pervert justice for very little. The widow, in her poverty, had no chance of having the decision fall in her favour.

The second character is the widow herself. In the parable she is the symbol of all who are poor and defenceless. She had nothing on her side of all and had no hope whatsoever of influencing the decision of the judge in her favour. She was a symbol of defencelessness having neither power nor money to influence the judge. She clearly had right on her side (she was appealing for justice after all!) but had nothing to overcome the corruption of those fighting against her. The only possible weapon she had was her persistence.

And as a result she gets what she wants. It is through her persistence that she is able to persuade the unjust judge that he ought to side with her - otherwise she will make his life hell.

Some mistakenly read this parable and see God being represented by the unjust judge. They believe that the message contained here is that God takes his time in listening to our prayers. But this is not the case. The parable is actually one in which God is *contrasted* with the unjust judge. Whereas it took persistence before the judge would condescend to listen to the widow, God listens to each of his children that appeals

to him. Jesus is saying that “If, in the end, an unjust judge can be wearied into giving a widow justice, how much *more* will God, who loves all of his creation, give his children what they need?”

This is all well and good, but some will cite a lack of evidence that God *does* give his flock what they ask for. And that is the key phrase - there is a distinct difference between what we ask for and what we need.

For example. a few nights ago Katherine asked me if she could stay up late to watch the delights that Australian television has to offer (other than Skippy the bush kangaroo). Despite her pleadings, I told her “no” because I knew what a hard day she’d had and that she was going to have a hard day the following day too. I said no. I did not give her what she *asked for* - I gave her what she *needed*.

Often a parent refuses a child’s request because they know that what the child is asking for will hurt rather than help. That is the same with God. None of us have a crystal ball with which we can predict the next year, month, day or even hour. We do not know what lies just around the corner. Only God can see the whole of time and therefore only God can know what is good for us in the long run.

Now it is very easy for us to be discouraged in our time of prayer if we do not see instant results. But it is perfectly possible that God is listening to our prayers and, despite our earnestness, is still saying “No” because that is not the best thing for us.

But that is not to say we must be discouraged in prayer. Jesus was well aware that if our prayers were not met instantly we may be discouraged - this is why he wondered if there would still be faith when he returned. He knew that there would be a delay before he came again and questioned whether or not the faith of man would still be strong before he returned.

And our faith will be tested if our prayers are not answered instantly and in the ways we demand unless we remember a salient fact as Jesus did. If you recall the agony in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed that the cup he must drink would pass away from him. As we know, such a request was not met with a straightforward yes, but rather, Jesus was impelled to go through with the agony of the cross because that was the only way by which we could be saved.

Jesus *realised* this as he prayed to his father - he realised it and agreed with it in the words “Thy will be done”. In all of our prayers, it is not wrong for us to ask for whatever we wish knowing that a loving father will give it to us if it is in our interests. But we should always remember that ultimately it is what God wants and knows is best rather than what we want and think is best that is important.

It is easy for us to make a shopping list for God in our prayers. This is not a bad thing. But we need always to caveat those requests by remembering that ultimately God, our loving Father, knows what’s best for us. And we pray that God’s will be done every time we recite the Our Father. Our prayers **will** be answered - even without persistent praying. But they may not always be quite the answers we expect.