

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 28th July 2019

10am Revd Peter Cornick

Jesus describes a man searching for bread; a metaphor for persistent prayer, or a shameless, disordered individual – the antithesis of praying for the Kingdom?

Luke 11: 1-13

Speaking of the new Prime Minister, Max Hastings writes:

*He's got that quality that causes his believers to be prepared to overlook all the things people traditionally ask about. Is he truthful? Is he honest? Is he nice to his wife?*ⁱ

Commentators looking for the qualities of humility or diplomacy in our new Prime Minister, seem to agree they are in short supply. Given as John Pienaar writes, his 'sense of entitlement to both make up and play by his own rules'ⁱⁱ, one might say, the Prime Minister has the quality of shamelessness.

To be 'shameless' is to be unashamed of something others might consider, unacceptable. To be 'shameless' lacks modesty, is brash and barefaced. From childhood, Boris always wanted to be Prime Minister. His career, including being Mayor of London, all designed to lead to this moment. One could call this quality 'persistence', but given his self-interest and opportunism, perhaps better to call it 'shameless.'

Curiously, Boris is not unlike the man in the parable Jesus tells. The man discovers, late at night, that visitors have turned up at his house. He has no bread to offer them. It would certainly have been shameful not to offer a visitor bread. So, the man goes to his friend – it's midnight remember – and starts banging on his door, asking for some bread.

We often hear that the man who goes off looking for bread, waking the neighbours, is being held up as a virtuous example of 'persistence' – someone who wants to maintain the honour of hospitality – so is persistent. The friend he wakes, who is none too

pleased, gives him the bread to save his friend's honour. Persistence has triumphed.

We hear sermons about being persistent in prayer. Pester God enough and you'll get what you want. Really?

If we look a bit closer, it is undoubtedly the man's persistence that delivers him the bread to feed his unexpected guest. But far from being virtuous in his pursuit, is Jesus rather, suggesting this man is greedy and ill disciplined. The Greek word translated here as persistence, is *anaideia* (Anna-e-dyer). It might be better translated, not as persistence, but as 'shameless'. Perhaps, one could say, 'a shameless persistence to get what you want.' So, the man searching for bread at midnight, and our Prime Minister, each exhibit the meaning of the word *anaideia*. And, being a classicist, the Prime Minister will be well aware that *Anaideia* was the Greek goddess of ruthlessness and shamelessness.

So, consider Jesus' parable in this way. A man is surprised by unexpected guests. The man has not had the foresight to keep a little bread back for such emergencies as his culture would expect. The subtext here is, he's eaten the lot himself. You might say he has been self-centred. So, in order to get what he wants, he pesters the life out of a neighbour, waking the kids and everyone. This man is 'shameless' in achieving his ends.

I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence – or shamelessness – he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

Jesus offers us a picture of someone actually getting what they want when motivated by self-interest and greed. Someone who is shameless and represents disordered humanity. It is a reality with which we are familiar.

Contrast then, God, the giver of every good and perfect gift, giving with generosity to those who ask, seek and knock, looking for the Kingdom. But giving not out of frustration at a persistent knocking at the door but giving out of gracious love. Read in this way, the parable is less about persistence in prayer, and more about the contrast between disordered greed and the order of a selfless Kingdom.

The response of Jesus does pose us some problems though. There are many who might pray for fish, and, contrary to today's scripture, receive a snake. Pray for an egg and, contrary to today's scripture receive a scorpion. This parable doesn't address the uncomfortable truth that our prayers are not always answered in the way we would like. We pray for peace daily, but the news reports violence. Jesus' parable on prayer, appears over simple. But is it intended to make the contrast between those who pray in a self-interested, greedy way, and those who pray for the wider good of the Kingdom; those who pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is not trying to deal with the difficulty of unanswered or frustrated prayer here. He is trying to invite the listener into a relationship with the living God – and the medium is that of prayer.

*Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.*

Jesus invites us to ask for the bread we need, rather than taking the bread we want, often from others.

Give us each day our daily bread.

He prays forgiveness for our self-interest or shamelessness and compels us in the prayer to forgive others who have been shameless to us.

*And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.*

And do not bring us to the time of trial.

... do not bring us to the time of trial ... the trial of cutting ourselves off from God by refusing to confront our own shamelessness.

ⁱ John Pienaar, Boris Johnson's Battles, 2019, www.bbc.co.uk/news/extra/2gvE3Pa8Gv/Boris_Johnson_battles

ⁱⁱ Ibid.