

Reflection on 16 October 2022

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

(Readings: 2 Timothy 3.14 – 4.5 & Luke 18. 1-8)

Persistence

I met Chris Bonington once.

That makes me sound like a London taxi driver, doesn't it? "I had that Chris Bonington in the back of my cab the other day."

For those of you who don't know who Sir Chris Bonington is, he was Britain's top mountaineer back in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. He climbed in the Himalayas 19 times and was on four Everest expeditions. I met him at a conference I was chairing, so I was lucky enough to have a private conversation with him.

He told me that it wasn't until 1985, when he was 50 years old, that he finally made a summit ascent on Everest. His previous trips had been as team leader, not ultimate climber, but he had organised the British expedition in 1975 that saw the first British mountaineers reach the summit - Doug Scott and Dougal Haston.

Bonington said that making the ascent on his day was the hardest climb of his life. It was snowing, almost blowing a blizzard. A howling gale threatened his every step. And then, with less than 100m to go, Bonington suddenly heard the voice of his one-time climbing partner and great friend Doug Scott.

Scott was saying to him: *'Don't give up, keep on going, persevere and you will be rewarded'*. Bonington made it and became the oldest climber, at the time, to conquer Everest and return safely.



I was reminded of this story when I read this morning's gospel. The parable of the widow's persistence is introduced as a parable about prayer and not losing heart, then moves into a story about justice and ends with a question about faith. It's a short but powerful parable and packs a real punch.

Some of you may recall the reflection I gave the last time I was up here, talking about praying for a new model theatre when I was nine years old; praying and praying until I'd almost given up, before God decided the time was right to grant what I wanted. I'm not going to go back over my childhood again now (because then Steven Spielberg won't have any original material left when he makes the film of my life)...

But, I have known, in my life - as I'm sure you have - people who have prayed persistently the same prayers for the same thing. Friends who have fought illness and recovered; people who have faced difficult economic situations and pulled through, people who have been in difficult jobs with awkward bosses, people whose children have struggled at school, people who have moved house for the wrong reason or lost their home.

When I left college (oh, here he goes again), I joined Amnesty International. The group that I joined used to meet in a Convent and one of the key members of that group was a nun called Mother Augustine. I don't know how much you know about Amnesty, and it has changed over the years, but back then, the work of local groups was to adopt individual political prisoners or people who were victims of injustice, the wrongly accused, opponents to the governments in tyrannical regimes; widows seeking justice.

Our only weapons to help these people were to raise money to support their families, many of whom were living in poverty, and to keep writing to the politicians of the offending country; to keep writing to the prison authorities, to keep writing to the prisoner, to keep writing to the prisoner's family to give them hope. We never let up on the pressure.

Mother Augustine, who was in her 80s at the time, said that you can chop down an oak tree with a penknife, you just have to keep going.

And that's one of the key messages of today's gospel: keep on keeping on.

The other messages that resonate with me are: God favours the humble and meek and God is rather partial to justice.

In Biblical times, a widow was on the margins of society; often very poor, with no-one to protect or support her. There are 11 stories in the Bible that feature widows and today's reading is one of them. You will recall the story of the widow who gave her last mite, all she owned, to the Temple in praise of God and, in doing so, gave far more in the eyes of God than the rich Pharisees who could donate much more but not feel the sacrifice of the cost.

And justice. Back in my Amnesty group, we kept writing to the authorities in what was then Ian Smith's Apartheid Rhodesia. We were campaigning for the release of Jacob, who was a black prisoner of conscience, arrested under a 90-day anti-terrorist law that allowed the white regime to detain anyone they suspected of being against the government. After 90 days of interrogation in prison, which was not a pleasant experience, Jacob would be released. And as soon as he left the prison, he would be arrested immediately for another 90 days. He had been in prison for three years.

We supported his wife and five children and prayed for his release. We kept on praying. We were persistent with our penknife. And, eventually, this particular oak tree fell to the ground and Jacob walked free.

God likes persistence. God likes the humble and meek. God likes justice. Amen