

## Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> October 2022 – Apprenticed to Jesus #6 ‘Heard’ (Luke 18:1-8)

In June 2009 a Christian woman called Aasia Bibi got into an argument with her co-workers while they were harvesting berries in a field. Aasia lived in a village in Pakistan and her family were the only Christians in the village. She had been under pressure from neighbours to convert to Islam for some time, and the conversation began again while they were working in the fields.

Aasia defended herself stoutly – she wasn’t disrespectful but she was clear. She believed in Jesus as her Saviour and stated that Islam’s prophet Muhammad could not save people from their sins, which is why she was a follower of Jesus. Sadly, things escalated: after this conversation she was arrested for blasphemy and put into prison. A year later, in November 2010 a judge convicted her of blasphemy and sentenced her to death by hanging – the first woman to receive this sentence in Pakistan.

Word of Aasia’s situation got out, primarily thanks to Christian agencies who serve the persecuted church like Barnabas Fund, Open Doors and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, and a global outcry ensued. The attention delayed the execution, but Aasia remained in solitary confinement in an 8x10ft cell. In 2014 her appeal was postponed for the fifth time.

Still, Christians around the world kept praying – I’m sure some of you listening today knew of Aasia’s case and prayed for her – and finally in 2018, her conviction was quashed and she was pardoned. But still she was not released: further delays, and death threats to her and her family were she to be released, meant that she remained in prison for months after her acquittal and was only finally allowed to leave and re-settle in Canada with her family in May 2019, almost 10 years since she was first accused.

Sadly, Aasia’s case is not unique. If you support charities like Barnabas Fund or Open Doors you’ll read many such stories of Christians who suffer severe persecution and immense injustice for their faith. **Which is why today’s parable of Jesus is so important. Indeed this parable could have been written for cases like Aasia Bibi – always pray, never give up, justice will come.**

The context of Jesus’ teaching today actually goes back to the previous chapter, when Jesus is asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God will come. The implication is that it’s taken so long to arrive, how do we know that it’s finally come with Jesus? Why is God taking so long? I’m sure it’s question some of us have asked at some point – perhaps in relation to a particular need, or just more generally. We look at the world and cry out: how long, O Lord? How long?

And Jesus’ reply to the Pharisees reminds them that the kingdom is coming, and often surprises people. It’s easy to get complacent and think that God will never show up – but then he does – and this is how the final restoration of all things will be. But just in case people only think about the end of time, and somehow divorce what Jesus is saying from our lives here and now, he then goes on to teach this parable, which essentially is Jesus’ way of saying: OK yes you won’t know when God will finally put all things right....

**....but there are still ways to get involved now; God still cares about justice in *this* world**, he cares about the fate of his chosen ones living right now, and even if following me is hard, and the kingdom doesn’t seem to be coming at the speed or in the way we’d like, don’t lose heart! Keep praying: keep praying for God to reveal himself, keep praying for justice, keep praying for those who are persecuted and suffer injustice for their faith, because God sees and God cares.

So he tells the story of the widow confronting the judge repeatedly until the judge gives in. And the point is that the judge is *not* like God – that’s clear from the way the judge is described: ‘there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought.’ Basically he’s a grumpy old man, who is not minded to help anybody. And what Jesus is saying is: if this grumpy old judge still helps the widow for an easy life, then what do you think our perfect heavenly Judge will do? Of course he cares, and he wants to see justice done. As Jesus says, ‘he will see that they get justice.’

At this point it’s appropriate to address a couple of objections or queries: the first is whether this parable applies to all prayer or only certain sorts of prayers. **The context is very clear, these are prayers for justice, for vulnerable followers who suffer injustice.** Now that doesn’t mean that we should give up on praying for healing or for people to come to faith, or some of the other things that we might spend years praying for. If you’re like me, you’ll have spent years praying for certain things, and it’s right that we keep going. I think Jesus’ encouragement that we should always pray and not give up is general.

However, I do think we have to notice that this is really a parable about justice for the suffering church, and anyone who is treated unjustly because they are excluded from polite society and are taken advantage of as a result. This is primarily a parable teaching us to keep praying into those situations, which in itself is a healthy reminder to make sure we keep a balanced diet in prayer. If you only pray for healing and never for justice then Jesus would probably say that your diet needs balancing.

Second, Jesus promises that justice would be done quickly – but often it isn’t quick, at least by our standards. What do we make of that? Well, I think we have to go back to the original encouragement to pray and not give up. That implies that **often the justice we seek takes time** – think of Aasia Bibi, and many others like her. Which is not to say that Jesus doesn’t mean what he says later, but sometimes God’s definition of time challenges ours. We live in a high-speed society where we expect everything to happen instantly: it’s probably fair to say that most other cultures around the world have less of an issue with this particular definition of time than we do.

**So we come back to the basic point: keep praying, keep trusting, keep crying out to God, and never give up. God hears, God cares, and God’s heart is to bring justice for his chosen ones.**

So if you’ve prayed for a long time for something, don’t give up! Jesus is cheering you on: keep going, keep trusting.

That’s the general encouragement for today. But I think there’s a specific application too: this parable is really about justice for those who are denied it, especially followers of Jesus who suffer for their faith. It’s currently illegal either to be a follower of Jesus and/or to convert to Christianity and/or to own a bible in about 60 countries around the world, and there are an estimated 200 million followers of Jesus in those countries, or roughly 10% of the global Christian population.

If you’re not yet a regular pray-er for the suffering church, for these 200 million precious believers, then maybe now is the time to put that right. Get in touch with a charity like Barnabas Fund or Open Doors or Christian Solidarity Worldwide, or one of the big Christian agencies that have particular work in certain areas of the world. It’s not easy, once you head down this path you will read a lot of things that will make you sad and even angry: but **these are the ‘chosen ones’ that are on God’s heart.** Some of us can give practically, but all of us can pray. We can pray for justice, we can pray for protection, we can pray that the kingdom comes despite opposition and hardship. God is doing remarkable things in many places you would never expect – will we join our prayers to those of many others around the world, that ‘when the Son of Man comes, he would indeed find faith on the earth?’ Amen.