

Trinity 18 - October 20th 2019 - Pauline Pearson

Its good to be here.. The first engagement of what you might call my farewell tour..

This morning, my son-in-law, Ben, is in York and nearby, running the Yorkshire Marathon. I am in awe of those who run marathons - and even more so, those who run ultramarathons... Such people run distances even longer than a marathon! I think that 13.1 miles is plenty far enough, never mind 26! The most usual distances for an ultramarathon are 31, 50 62 and 100 miles! Often the courses include mountains or coastal paths – which can be very challenging terrain. There are even examples in the desert heat, and in the arctic tundra. If you're interested, the next such Arctic Ultra starts on 27th February 2020, with distances of 120 or 380 miles! I think you might be a bit late to train... For all of these ultramarathons there are aid stations where runners can rest and eat, and some of the runs clearly have to take place over several days, allowing brief periods of sleep. However, I guess one of the things the people who do these runs need is what I usually think of as stickability. Other more traditional ways of thinking of it might be perseverance, grit, stamina, tenacity, endurance or persistence. And adequate training – over appropriate terrain and distances – is essential.

Stickability is something which many of us need to keep us going when life is difficult, or study or work is challenging... As I began thinking about this sermon some days ago, it was far from clear where we would be with the whole Brexit saga. [Do we actually know now?] I'm quite sure that whatever our views on the way ahead, most of us just wish the whole thing could be solved in a puff of smoke - but in reality it seems whichever way things go, our politicians, and we ourselves, will need stickability – persistence – to cope with the new questions and challenges which lie ahead in future days, and to work out how we can best love our neighbours – focusing particularly both on those whose views differ from ours, *and* those whose lives will be impacted upon most by the decisions going forward – love our neighbours and seek justice. I wonder how we can train ourselves to look at the needs of those around us, and take risks – let go of our comfort zones and look forward to new possibilities?

In today's gospel, Jesus talks about persistence. He tells the story of a bad judge – I don't know why but the person who came to mind was Donald Trump – a judge who doesn't respond to the desperate pleas for justice of a widow... A widow would have no one else to speak for her.. she would be poor and unimportant in the great scheme of things – but eventually, to get some peace, the judge does what he should – he grants her justice. And Jesus says to the disciples that if they

think about the behavior of this demonstrably lazy and unjust judge – who in the end does the right thing – how much more they should expect of God when they pray. And yet – he asks – will the Son of Man find faith here on earth? Do we really see prayer as likely to be answered with justice?

Prayer is defined by writers and mystics in many ways: -*Mahatma Gandhi* said Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. - *Mother Teresa* said God speaks in the silence of the heart. Listening is the beginning of prayer. -*Teresa of Avila* writes Prayer is nothing else than being on terms of friendship with God. *John Wesley* said I have so much to do that I spend several hours in prayer before I am able to do it. Because all these people, all holy in their own ways, make it sound easy, we don't usually think about prayer as challenging terrain - but it is.

There are many things that distract us - take our eyes off what we are doing and focus us somewhere else. Maybe our minds wander on to the priority of that deadline – or the meal we need to prepare – and the people and places we want to hold up for God's love and justice fade into the background. Maybe we are so pressured by lack of time or so focused on what we want from God that we present Him with a detailed shopping list, and forget to make time to listen. In Paul's words to Timothy, we often find ourselves with 'itchy ears': Listening to other people who tell us what justice looks like – perhaps journalists and commentators - and forgetting to listen to God, and to watch for God's justice.

But we must learn to be persistent. If you don't cover the distance during training, and build up to it on a systematic schedule, you will find it hard even to do a half marathon, let alone more. Just as distance runners must train to be able to complete their race, so we need to work to build up our confidence and capacity for serious prayer. One way in which many people do this is by adopting a daily pattern of prayer – that might start with a quite informal conversation with God as you listen to the news each morning, or review your day last thing at night, and perhaps move on to more formal frameworks like prayer during the day, or morning and evening prayer. Then, perhaps prayer will become a habit – a continuing conversation with God throughout the day, in which we recognize the landmarks, and have practiced listening to – and watching for - God, and turning away from the alternatives which come our way...

Then, as we look for a way forward to truly love our neighbours in our fractured society, as we take risks and seek to let go of our comfort zones and look forward to new possibilities, we will

know that God is running alongside us – and that He will always grant us peace and justice in his Kingdom.

*Run by my side; live in my heartbeat;
Give strength to my steps.
As the wind pushes me,
I know you surround me, challenging me
And loving me.
Help me to persevere in prayer for your world.
Amen*