

October 20, 2019 Let Us Pray Homily: In view of the gospel reading for this Sunday, the parable of the widow and the corrupt judge (Lk. 18: 1-8), a popular fairy tale comes to mind, “*The Little Engine That Could*”. It is a story of a large train that suffers a mechanical failure, a broken down engine and, as a consequence, is unable to reach the top of a mountain. Some larger engines are called upon to pull the disabled train over the mountain. For various reasons, they all refuse. As a last resort, an appeal is made to a small engine, who gladly agrees to try. After a laborious effort, it succeeds in pulling the much larger train over the mountain while repeating the words, “I think I can” over and over again. The small train earns the admiration and affection of the reader because of its gritty determination and persistence. Although the odds were not in his favor, he still prevailed. In the history of children’s literature there are few characters as endearing as the “little train that could”.

The widow in Our Lord’s parable is a picture of misery. She is a biblical symbol of all those who were destitute and without rights. In the cultural world of Jesus, judges had to be trustworthy and God-fearing. As one of the least protected in society, the widow must be shown impartiality. In the Torah, we are told that God executes justice for the fatherless and the widow. The widow shows no fear. Her only weapon is her persistence. She simply refuses to quit. She pesters the judge and rattles his chain. The weary judge eventually renders her a fair judgment.

The widow represents for Jesus all those who persevere in prayer. We are all emboldened to pray unceasingly and not lose heart. As Bishop Robert Barron notes, “Nothing great in this world is accomplished apart from prayer”.

The recent tragedies of mass shootings and murderous rampages beg the question of why bother praying at all. Is prayer an exercise in futility, a colossal waste of time and energy? After a tragedy it is not uncommon for elected officials to assure mourners of their thoughts and prayers. One especially bitter woman who lost a loved one in a recent shooting was clearly upset by what she considered to be a hollow gesture, a meaningless string of words. “I don’t want your prayers”, she thundered. “I want action”. Prayers must take a back seat to legislative action... getting something done.

One never prays in vain. It has enormous power to change the lives of people. The one remarkable thing about prayer is that it changes us and not God whose Divine Will is sovereign. “How unsearchable his ways and inscrutable his judgments”, declares St. Paul.

A story: Jacques and Raissa Maritain were two of the most prominent Catholics of the last century. Early in their marriage, they agreed to sign a suicide pact together if they failed to find a purpose in life. They had not the benefit of faith. One day they poured out their frustrations to a close friend, Leon Bloy, a French Catholic intellectual. Upon telling the great man of their grim plan to end their lives, he replied, “Pray”. They were taken aback. “That’s absurd! We are atheists and do not believe in God.” Bloy refused to back down. Again, he said, “Pray!” Reluctantly, they both heeded his advice. The dark clouds soon lifted and they both became faithful witnesses of Christ.

Jesus Himself gives us a shining example of unceasing prayer. Indeed, in St. Luke’s gospel, Jesus prays often. In an earlier chapter of the Gospel Jesus declares, “Ask and you shall receive, seek and you will

find, knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened". (Lk.11: 9-11)

The prayerful person trusts in God.

In a recent survey conducted by the Pew Research forum, the data shows that one in four Americans has no religious affiliation whatsoever. There appears to be a growing number of Americans who claim to be either atheist or agnostic. The life of prayer is conspicuous for its absence in their daily life. By abandoning prayer, the unbeliever cuts himself or herself off from the divine source of life, wisdom and power.

"Jesus told his disciples a parable about the necessity of praying always without becoming weary." (Lk. 18:1) In the fairy tale of the little engine that could and the parable of the unjust judge and widow, we are given inspiring examples of two characters whose relentless determination to succeed are surely worthy of our admiration and, what's more, our imitation, Amen.

Let us pray!