

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

2 Tim 4:7

Last week, in the parable of the Widow and the Unrighteous Judge, we heard Our Lord teach us the need for perseverance, to continue knocking on the door even when we get no answer, and even when we *continue* to get no answer. It is hard to carry on having faith in God when He does not answer our prayers in the way that we want or when we want, and yet this idea of believing even in the face of ongoing trials and tribulations is at the heart of the Christian life of virtue. In today's Second Reading St Paul takes up this same theme from last week's Gospel: 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.'

As the dark nights draw in, and the year edges towards its close, our thoughts turn once more to endings and beginnings. Spiritually, we may consider that we are no more virtuous than we were a year ago, or that we have not grown one jot in holiness, or perhaps we think ourselves even less holy than this time last year. And yet here we still are, coming to Mass Sunday by Sunday, lifting up our minds and our hearts to the praise and worship of Almighty God, giving Him thanks, repenting of our sins, and placing our needs at His feet.

Sadly, here as elsewhere, there are Catholics who, since last October, have given up, who have fallen away, who have lost interest or become more ensnared in the temptations of the world, or who simply can no longer be bothered. But you are not among them. You are here today. You have persevered one more year along the journey of faith that leads to heaven and eternal salvation.

You may well have heard it said that the life of virtue is not a glamorous one: it involves an awful lot of plodding on, and quite a lot of weariness. It is not by chance that when we pray for the dead, we usually ask that they may now rest in peace.

The world would have things otherwise. The world's priority is novelty: something new every month, every day, every moment. It is not by chance that we have all become addicted to the electronic devices of the internet age. Such incessant need – such compulsion – to tap and swipe and tap again gradually undermines the calm stability, consistency, and continuity of a healthy life of prayer and virtue. Such is the devil's latest scheme for getting us to abandon the path of perseverance. When we have come to expect immediate responses to our every whim, the persistence of last week's widow seems no longer relevant. But today, St Paul has different message.

When we find ourselves on our deathbed will we be able to say with him, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith'?

As we draw towards the end of Church's year, and the start of a new Advent in just a month's time, perhaps our attention should be re-focused inward. We are not in a position to judge whether or not we are holy. We cannot see how we stand before God. Only God can see the true state of our souls. But we *do* know what we have to do if we are to persevere on the right path: we have to get to Mass every Sunday, we have to go to Confession every month or even more often, we have to pray each day, morning and evening, we have to practise the virtues and shun the vices, we have to serve God and our neighbour with generous hearts. In short, we have to nurture our love of God and things of God.

Whatever your state in life, whether you are young or old, single or married, with a family or on your own, your chief responsibility is to your own soul. It is true that we must work for the salvation of the souls of those in our charge, children and grandchildren especially, and we must teach them the way to heaven, and help to lead them there. Nevertheless, our chief responsibility remains the sanctification and salvation of our own souls. We, and we alone, are responsible for getting ourselves to heaven. Almighty God,

through His Church, makes available everything we need to get to heaven, so there is a very real sense in which if we don't get there it's down to us.

This was the message of last week's Gospel: the need for what the spiritual writers call the gift, or grace, of *final perseverance*. That is, the persistence of sticking with the faith come what may, right up to the moment of one's death. And it is the message of today's Second Reading. Others may fall away; others may get tangled up in the snares of the devil; others may simply get bored with the whole project. But if we would rather end up in heaven after we die then we need to pray for the strength and the grace of perseverance to keep doing, day after day, what we know is right, whatever the distractions or temptations along the way.

And the first step along the path each day is to say with the tax collector, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'