



The Importunate Neighbour by William Holman Hunt, 1827-1910

The biblical readings today address the theme of God's intentions towards humanity. From the book of Genesis we hear of Abraham pressing God as to just how far his mercy will stretch when it comes to his response to the wayward activities of his people.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul makes the bold and wonderful statement that "the record that stood against us" has been erased completely. "He set this aside, nailing it to the cross."

Then in Luke's gospel, we hear the story of the "importunate friend" as it is traditionally called. This "friend" knocks on a door at midnight and asks for help in a persistent manner. Whilst not an attractive quality in human relationships, Jesus uses this model for us in our desire for the good things of God.

"Ask, and it will be given to you..." Read part of the story...

5 And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

Luke 11: 5-8

The quality of persistence can be very unattractive and then again, very attractive, in different situations.

Think of the well known phrase - If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.

But persistence can be over the top, failing to recognise human proportions and unable to back off to a more acceptable level. Such persistence creates the dug-in heels and the implacable opposition which causes so much human unhappiness.

Persistence which is attractive is seen best when a good aim is in view, an aim which enhances or benefits humanity, or especially, one human being in need.

In the case of the Gospel today, the importunate friend is not on a mission to make the world a better place! Rather, he has been inefficient and not provided sufficient food for a visitor to eat. He is embarrassed, but his embarrassment doesn't make him shrink back from inconveniencing his neighbour.

He even asks for three loaves, not just one! What cheek!

Whilst finding the person asking for help a bit of a strain, Jesus promotes the idea of pestering God, expressing our needs persistently, as a sign of the fact that we know our needs and really want to fulfil them.

“Ask and it will be given to you;
search and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened to you.”

Luke 11: 10

But we have to remember that this importunate neighbour may be the other side of the coin to the “friend in need” who genuinely needs our help and it is one of life's great skills to discriminate between the real needs of friends and those who are simply pushing their luck and having a laugh!

I certainly don't know how to do it!