

Today's gospel reading is a parable about the need to pray always and not lose heart. In fact, all three readings have the theme of perseverance in them, how important it is to keep trying, to keep at it.

I read an article all about prayer by an American pastor named Mgr. Charles Pope, and he gives us a checklist for prayer and each point begins with the letter "P", just like the word prayer.

The first item is "Problem". We often start to pray because we have a problem, sometimes it even seems that God lets us have problems, even though he loves us, so we won't forget to pray. Moses had a problem, he was at war with Amalek. The widow had a problem, she could not get justice done. We are called upon as Catholic Christians to bring our problems to God in prayer and admit that we need his help.

The world wants us all to be independent, to stand alone, to never need anyone else but that's not how God made us and that's not his plan. We depend on him and we depend on one another.

Problems shouldn't be the only reason we pray, but they can help us get started and get in the habit.

The second thing on the list is the "Priority" of prayer. We need to remember to pray first, not just as a last resort, not just when our own efforts have failed. You'll notice in the first reading, Joshua did not take the armies out to fight until Moses was in position and lifted his arms to God. Prayer came first.

We are called to pray before we rush into things and often God will help us know the direction he wishes us to take.

Mother Teresa, Saint Teresa of Calcutta, used to begin each day with two hours of prayer, and when people asked her how she could take so much time when there was so much to do and so many people to help, she would say, "If I didn't pray first, I wouldn't be able to do any of it!"

Prayer comes first because it establishes our relationship with God as the first priority, and when He is with us anything is possible. It also helps us to understand what should come first in our prayer list, what things take priority. We may start by praying for a small personal problem but when we put God first we soon learn from Him what actually comes first in his plans.

The widow asked for justice, and Jesus promises us that God will grant justice, not just the personal thing we asked for, but what is just and right, and that will help us know what our priorities should be, that what we are praying for is just and right and not merely selfish.

That brings us to number three, the "Power" of prayer. Our entire faith history, the whole of this book of scripture readings, is one long example of the fact that prayer changes things. Prayer connects us to God and so anything becomes possible.

When Moses prayed, Israel prevailed over their enemies, when the widow kept pleading, the judge decided in her favour, when we ask the one who made us and loves us to help us, Jesus promises, "God will quickly grant justice!"

So, we too, can expect to see the Power of God in action when we pray, and as Jesus told the leper in last weeks Gospel, it is our faith in that power that sets it free to work on us.

The fourth thing on our letter "P" list is the "Partnership" of prayer. Prayer is not meant to be a "lone ranger" experience but something that is shared as a community. Remember Jesus also said, "Where two or more of you are gathered in my name..."

Moses couldn't do what God asked all by himself, he grew tired, so he asked Aaron and Hur to support him and share the burden of his weakness. This is what it means to pray with each other and for each other. Pope Francis says that this is the type of spiritual life the Church asks of us, to win over evil by praying together.

I remember 20 years ago when I was in Hospital waiting for my first heart operation, I was weak, and feeling very down and too depressed and tired to even pray. And yet I had heard many of my family and friends and parishioners tell me they were praying for me, and as I lay there, I could feel myself being lifted up and I was comforted and I was filled with the peace I needed to face the challenge.

Praying for others works because it is the partnership at work, the partnership we are all part of. We do not journey alone, we should not just pray alone.

We are here at mass because the celebration of the Eucharist, the sacrifice of the mass, is the perfect prayer, because we are gathered together as community to pray to God and especially because Jesus himself comes among us in the Eucharist to pray with us and when we receive him in holy communion, to become actually part of us as the perfect prayer partner.

The second last item is the "Perseverance" of prayer. Moses hands remained steady all the way until sunset, the widow kept coming back and coming back. We are called to keep praying and never give up, to persevere in the face of trials.

In the same way, we can't go to mass once and then say, "Well, that's that taken care of!" We come here regularly, every week, some of us even every day. We have to pray right to the end, to the sunset of our lives, until our prayers are granted.

St. Monica prayed every day with tears for 20 years for her son, Saint Augustine, and her prayers were answered. It's hard to be that patient but when we know that when we are, God will hear us, and it will bring us the strength to carry on.

God doesn't ask us to keep praying because he is unaware of what we need, or isn't listening, but because he wants us to build up our endurance for the trials of life, just as an athlete practices the same thing over and over so that he can perform well during the race.

Finally at the end of our list, number 6, is the “Promised Product” of prayer. Moses prevailed, the widow got justice, our faith tells us that our prayers will produce a result and Jesus promises there will be a product from our efforts if we do these other things right.

Where our faith is sometimes tested is that we don’t always get to see the results produced by our prayers right away, sometimes not even until we get to heaven, but our faith assures us that those prayers will have an effect.

And so, when we know a just result is promised, we can confidently take our problem to God, make prayer the priority before we start to solve it, rely on the power of prayer and pray in partnership and pray with perseverance and we will see the promise fulfilled.

- Deacon Steve