

Homily by Monsignor Joe Shiels

Luke 18:1-8

In the gospel, Jesus said to his disciples, 'Pray continually and never lose heart.' He drives home the message by telling the parable of the widow and the unjust judge.

Some people do not see the value of regular prayer. They think it is enough to pray when they feel inspired to. For such as these the following story is told.

There was a small town which had all the municipal institutions: a hospital, a bank, a cemetery, a church, and a law court; as well as all sorts of craftspeople – tailors, dressmakers, shoemakers, carpenters, masons, and so on. One trade, however, was lacking: there was not watchmaker.

Now as the years went by, many of the clocks became so inaccurate that their owner's just decided to let them run down, and ignored them altogether. There were others, however who maintained them as long as the clocks ran. They should not be abandoned. So they wound their clocks day after day even though they knew they were not accurate.

One day the news spread through the town that a watchmaker had arrived, and everyone rushed to him with their clocks. But the only ones he could repair were the ones that had been kept running. The abandoned clocks had grown so full of rust that he could do nothing with them.

Why is prayer so important? What does it do? Prayer clarifies our hope and our intentions. It helps us to discern between the important and the trivial. It helps us discover our true aspirations, the pangs we ignore, and the longings we forget. It is an act of self-purification.

Prayer teaches us what to aspire to. It helps to implant in us the ideals we ought to cherish. Purity of tongue may float about as an idea in our mind, but the idea becomes a concern, something to long for, a goal to be reached, when we pray: **Lord guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking guile.**

Prayer is no substitute for action. 'It is a barren prayer that does not go hand in hand with almsgiving' says St Cyprian. Prayer is like a beam thrown from a flashlight before us into the darkness. It helps us to go forward and encourages us to act.

Prayer is not an escape from life but a journey into the heart of life. We learn to stand on our own feet before God and the world, and to accept full responsibility for our lives.

Its main purpose is to foster our **relationship with God.** This, and not our work, is the most important thing of all. This is the anchor of our spiritual lives. The spiritual life is not an extra. It is the life of the real self. It is not a matter of merely saying prayers.

Prayer is not a device for occasional use, a refuge to resort to when things are bad. It is an established residence for the innermost self. **Prayer is not asking things of God, but receiving what God wants to give us.**

Prayer is its own reward. It enriches us. It enables us to live not only more spiritually, but also more deeply, more fully and more authentically.