

Thought for the Week 18th April 2021

READING: 2 Kings 4: 1-7

¹ Now the wife of one of the sons of the prophets cried to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the LORD, but the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves." ² And Elisha said to her, "What shall I do for you? Tell me; what have you in the house?" And she said, "Your servant has nothing in the house except a jar of oil."

³ Then he said, "Go outside, borrow vessels from all your neighbours, empty vessels and not too few. ⁴ Then go in and shut the door behind yourself and your sons and pour into all these vessels. And when one is full, set it aside." ⁵ So she went from him and shut the door behind herself and her sons. And as she poured they brought the vessels to her. ⁶ When the vessels were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another vessel." And he said to her, "There is not another." Then the oil stopped flowing. ⁷ She came and told the man of God, and he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your sons can live on the rest."

SERMON "Rags to Riches"

A couple of weeks ago Karl Frampton "threw in the towel." After a professional boxing career spanning 12 years during which he lost only 11 times in 114 fights and held the world championship at two different weights. He retired on failing to gain a third title on 31st March.

Have you ever felt like throwing in the towel? Maybe you feel like that now – after the difficult and challenging year we've just had. Or have you heard yourself saying, "I'm at my wit's end!" "I think I'll just give up!" In our bible reading today from 2 Kings 4 we are told of a scene of misery, poverty and despair. We read of a woman who was at her wit's end and was for throwing in the towel. Let's survey her problems.

There was a Death in the Family

Her husband had been one of the prophets in Israel but he had died and left her and her family in dire straights. He was the sole breadwinner of the family - women didn't work out in those days. He was her security and her protector as well as her partner in life, and no doubt she felt the loss greatly.

There was a Debt in the family

Despite the fact that, according to his widow, he revered the Lord and had served him faithfully, there was no widow's pension for her and no universal credit to try to claim so that she could support her family of two sons. Worse than that her husband incurred what must have been considerable debts and the creditors had come knocking. They had already taken everything to repay the debts and now there was the dreadful possibility that her sons would be sold off as slaves.

There was also Doubt in the Family

The language of verse 1 suggests that this woman was perplexed, perhaps even questioning God on why he was allowing such afflictions to fall upon her and her family. She had done nothing to deserve this. Her husband had been faithful in his ministry for the Lord as one of the prophets and she had supported him. Was God punishing her for something he had done?

The same problems are around today, and they raise the same questions. Everyone has lost loved ones at some time or another, but recently Covid 19 has added over 2000 names to the statistics in Northern Ireland. The pandemic has also brought economic problems. A recent report by the

Legatum Institute estimates that more than 15 million – 23% of the UK population – are now in poverty. The report also calculates that the pandemic has pushed nearly 700,000 more people in the UK into poverty, with some 9.6 million people's household incomes 25% or more below the official definition of poverty. Many will also be experiencing problem debt. Even before the pandemic, the Money Advice Service estimated that 8.3 million people in the UK were over-indebted, and that 22% of UK adults had less than £100 in savings – making them highly vulnerable to a financial shock such as job loss or large unexpected bills. Similarly, Citizens' Advice's data shows that roughly 6 million adults have fallen behind on at least one household bill during the pandemic.

We all face troubles and suffering at some time. So, what do you do, or where do you go, when death takes a loved one, when you are in financial or face other difficulties? What did the widow in 2 Kings 4 do? She brought her problems to Elisha the chief prophet in Israel. By turning to God's prophet Elisha, this woman was turning to God in her trouble as Elisha was God's representative. As Hebrews 1:1 reminds us, *"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways."* She turned to the one who spoke for God to hear what he had to say? In the new covenant, since the coming of our Lord, we don't have prophets, but we do have God's complete revelation to us in his word, the Bible.

The question for us is, "where do we turn for help when in trouble?" Do we seek to find out what God is saying in the scriptures or do we try to work it out for ourselves, or do we go to some of the "self-help" books or websites that proliferate today? Human agencies and professional people can of course, help us (don't get me wrong – I am not denigrating in any way what they can do to help us) and we should give thanks for them and make full use of them. But ultimately we can, and we should, turn to our creator, our maker, the one who designed us, the one who knows us better even than we know ourselves.

To go back to the story – notice that the widow "cried out" to Elisha – stating her problems frankly, honestly and relating all the facts. She conveyed her problems fully telling her whole story to the prophet. In the same way we can always cry out to God and bring our problems to him frankly, honestly and fully. There's no point in us trying to hide anything from God – after all he knows all about us and our problems before we say a word! In verse 2 – 4 the account outlines Elisha's response. He shows a genuine concern for this widow and her difficult circumstances. He has both the heart of compassion and the hand of practical helpfulness that all God's people ought to demonstrate to those who seek our help. Elisha was a busy man – he was involved in important affairs of national importance. In chapter 3 we read that Joram the King of Israel, Jehoshaphat the King of Judah and the king of Edom had come together to see Elisha and consult with him. (Read it sometime and you will see how fearlessly blunt Elisha was in bringing the word of the Lord to the kings!) Yet he had time to talk with this unimportant widow and bring a solution from the Lord into this situation. When Elisha asked her what she had, she replied, "Nothing at all except a little oil." But this unpromising little jar of oil proved to be the key to the situation. God, through Elisha was trying to teach the widow important principles from which we can also learn.

She had to do what she was told (vv 5-6)

The first thing Elisha asked her to do was to go around her friends and neighbours and gather together as many empty jars as possible. Then go inside with your sons and behind closed doors pour the oil from your jar into all the ones you've collected. I wonder what you would have said as you left Elisha? Maybe, "Well, that crackpot wasn't a lot of help. The last thing I need is a collection of empty jars. It's full ones I want! My little jar of oil isn't going to fill any other jars!" But no, illogical though it seemed, the widow immediately followed Elisha's instructions step-by-step.

She had to use what she had

No doubt it seemed silly pouring out the little precious oil she had into other jars, but she used what she had and as she stepped out in faith, God turned it into much.

She had to prepare for abundance

As she kept filling the jars one after another and setting them aside she asked her son to bring her another jar but he replied, “there isn’t a jar left.” And at that moment the oil stopped flowing from her original jar.

Exhibiting that sort of faith is not easy but I wonder how often we have failed to take God at his word and missed out on the flowing of his blessing. In our scientific, logical way of thinking we all too easily rule out the supernatural miracles of God and miss the abundance of God for our lives. We often think small, believe small, expect little and receive little.

I wonder if we in the church of today, facing as we do a decline in numbers attending church and a lack of commitment along with an increased antipathy toward the things of God – all of which has been amplified by the pandemic – need to take God at his word and believe and DO the little things – and maybe the strange and to us illogical things he may ask of us. It could be that our lack of expectancy is the limiting factor on what God is prepared to do for us.

When she had filled all her jars the widow returned to tell Elisha to tell him what had happened - which of course was no surprise to Elisha. He simply told her to sell the oil and when she had paid of all the debt, she and her sons would be able to live on what was left. God was able to meet her immediate need to satisfy the creditors and also her ongoing need to provide for her family.

Whether you are facing the death of a loved one, debt, some other crisis or even doubt that God cares and is in control, and that he can provide, deliver strengthen and save if we trust in God through he son Jesus Christ. Scripture assures of that, and Paul sums it up succinctly in what he says at the end of Ephesians chapter 3: *²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

PCI LET’S PRAY

Pray for the leaders of organisations who, in Northern Ireland, may be able to plan for a limited return to some face to face meeting. Pray for congregations in the Republic, where restrictions preventing meeting together remain in place.

Indonesia

Pray for Timor and nearby islands which were hit by Tropical Cyclone Seroja on Easter Sunday with severe winds, rains, floods and landslides causing loss of life and major damage to communications, roads, bridges and buildings. Pray for all affected, especially for the leaders and members of our partner, the Evangelical Christian Church in Timor.

Brazil

Pray for the people of Brazil who are suffering greatly from Covid-19. Pray for the witness of the Presbyterian Church of Brazil, that leaders and members will bring God’s comfort and strength to many.

St Petersburg Christian University, Russia

Give thanks for the mission trip by students and staff from the university to South Africa and pray that the students on the trip will have new vision and perspectives. Pray that God will bless all the work of the university and multiply it in the ministry of its former students.

Nepal

Pray for United Mission to Nepal as it works hard to conclude its new General Agreement with the government of Nepal, including obtaining all necessary work permits for both expats and Nepali employees.

Glenelly Congregation (Co Tyrone)

Give thanks that during lockdown the congregation was able to hold drive-in services. Pray for the regular preaching of the Word - that sinners would be saved and believers built up in their faith.

Louise Davidson (deaconess in West Church, Bangor)

Pray for the women's ministry in the church and for the key role Louise plays in this. Pray that all the women who attend online meetings and events will feel a warm welcome and the power and presence of Jesus. Pray all will have a real desire to go deeper in their walk with God.

Josh McCance (community outreach worker, Donabate & Balbriggan)

Praise God for a great response to the spiritual gifts workshop held online. Pray that this would help people think about how they can use their gifts. Pray that the members of the church family grow in faith as they look forward to meeting again in person.

University Chaplains

Pray for students coming towards the end of their last semester of the academic year and preparing for exams. Pray for PCI chaplains who continue to offer pastoral support to students and staff.

Social Witness

Pray for all who partner our homes/units – in providing food, maintenance, medical and nursing services, cleaning materials, PPE and all essential goods. Give thanks that they have maintained services through-out the Covid-19 crisis and have played a vital part in keeping our quality of care at a high and safe standard.

Businesses

Give thanks for people who use their talents and gifts in the business world. Pray that those working in businesses soon to re-open to the public would be equipped to make good and wise decisions following this long time of uncertainty.

General Council

Give thanks for the work of those who work in the General Secretary's Department in Assembly Buildings led by the Clerk, Trevor Gribben. Pray for those who are involved in answering numerous queries and fulfilling vital administrative tasks, often having to work from home and in challenging circumstances.

Council for Training in Ministry

Pray for PCI Conciliators at their training session this morning. They are trained to help people and groups work towards understanding and resolution in difficult situations, as well as leading courses on understanding conflict, healthy decision making, living with difference and managing change. Contact with the service is through email at deputyclerk@presbyterianireland.org