

## Thursday March 18 Daniel 9:1-3, 18-23- keep praying

1 In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom—

2 in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years.

3 So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

18 Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy.

19 O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.”

20 While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my request to the LORD my God for his holy hill—

21 while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice.

22 He instructed me and said to me, “Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding.

23 As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed.

One of the things we stop doing when we're discouraged is pray. Some years ago I conducted the funeral of an old lady, not a churchgoer but whom I knew from visiting her in her home. She had given up on prayer, and even on faith itself, because of what she had seen in the news day after day, year after year. Jesus knew well that this temptation would threaten to overwhelm his disciples. Luke's Gospel chapter 18 records a story he told of a persistent widow who got an unwilling judge to grant her justice by her constant pestering. The lesson was this: what an example of faith!

When I think of how God's people can pray with confidence, I often come back to the exile in Babylon, a situation we've visited a number of times in these reflections. “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept.” Remember that? Along with Psalm 137, the Old Testament books of Lamentations and Ezekiel are set in Babylon; so is the book of Daniel. In chapter 9 Daniel is perplexed about the meaning of a vision he has had about the future; what exactly does it mean? He doesn't know. So he prays for guidance. In response God sends an angel, Gabriel, to explain it all. It's Gabriel's opening words that always strike me as significant – and encouraging:

“Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. “

Now it was actually quite a long prayer if you read it. That leads to the temptation of imagining that prayer is about trying to impress God by eloquent liturgical prayers in church, or long-winded extempore praying in a prayer meeting. No. “As soon as you began to pray ...” So if PERSEVERANCE (our theme for these few days) means anything, it's about persevering in prayer.

If you want a modern example of this, think of services in Belfast Cathedral you have taken part in, whether in person or on line. Every Sunday without fail this past year there has been a specific prayer for folk suffering from Coronavirus and for those taking care of them, and I know that other congregations will be doing the same.

“As soon as you began to pray ...” In other words, the answers to our prayers are being worked out. Can we see this happening? No instant solutions, of course, no magic wands. But answers nonetheless. Vaccines in record time, selfless health service workers, generous acts of love, new patterns of international co-operation, churches reaching new audiences with the Christian gospel using information technology. I could go on, and I hope you could as well.

So keep on praying. Please – keep on praying. Especially if you feel helpless, unable to actually get out there and *do* something. Keep on praying. That is as important as anything else. Thank you!