

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.*

The parable, in today’s gospel reading from Luke is named, ‘The Widow and the Unjust Judge.’ But it’s more accurate to describe it as ‘The Persistent Widow.’ The reading addresses issues of faith in difficult times, and reassures the disciples that God hears their prayers. It calls us to maintain hope through the darkest of days. It tells us that discipleship is not an easy road, but reminds us that God will be there for us faithful disciples.

Luke was writing between 80 and 110 AD, after the destruction of the temple. Christians were longing for the Second Coming of Jesus, because the church was being persecuted. They expected the Second Coming to end their suffering. Christians were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their faith. Even in the time of Jesus, Christians were being persecuted. Thus, Luke brings this parable into his gospel which will help these Christians in distress.

The context of the gospel reading is that Jesus has been having a teaching session with his disciples about the coming of the Kingdom. Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was coming. He answers that the Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be seen. You cannot point to something and say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ But in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.

Today’s reading begins with the words, “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” This is a parable many of us need these days, in a world teeming with disappointment and hopelessness. But instead of explaining to us how we can continue to have hope, Jesus instead begins by telling a parable about the kind of everyday corruption that marginalizes those who can least afford it.

The parable is a story about the persistence of a widow. A corrupt judge has been refusing to hear her case. The judge doesn’t care about her situation – he does not fear God or respect people. Eventually, because of the widow’s persistence, he gives in. He says that even though he has no respect for God or man, he will hear the widow’s case and grant her justice, so that she won’t wear him out by continually coming. Another translation says, “so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face.”

The temptation here is to turn a parable into an allegory. That is to assume that characters in a story represent a person, or in this case, the judge equating to God. But a parable is a brief simple story that gives a spiritual lesson. Our loving God is nothing like the corrupt judge. Here, we should be focusing more on the widow in this story. Someone who, although without power and status, and probably without money, continues to boldly insist that her case must be heard. Her power is her persistence. She pesters the judge with her insistence that she receive justice in a case. We side with her, not because we know the details of her case, but because of the character of the judge, who neglects his obligations to justice. Because the widow will not relent, the judge does.

We know that Jesus is just using the idea of a ‘corrupt judge’ in the parable as a way of making his point. It would be unlikely that such a corrupt judge could exist in Jewish society. Judges were required to obey the law of Moses. In the book of Deuteronomy (1:16-17), it’s stated they were to give fair and honest decisions irrespective of the wealth or social standing of the petitioner. And it would be unthinkable for a judge to have no fear or respect for God or mankind. This judge would have been relieved of his duties long ago.

Returning to the widow in the parable: Her persistence is a badge of faithfulness. Her boldness is rewarded. Her courage to demand justice in a system that would ignore her and deny her justice, is to be admired.

Perhaps this is precisely the kind of faith Jesus wonders if he will find on his return - a faith that demands justice in a world coursing with injustice, a faith that persists in seeking life even in systems seemingly ruled by the forces of death, a faith that believes God's promises and lives as if they will be fulfilled today.

After telling the parable, Jesus says, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them."

Jesus argues that if the unjust judge will do the right thing for this widow, even if for the wrong reasons, can't we expect God to do the right thing for us? Can't we expect a loving God support "his chosen ones"? Jesus says that God will surely liberate them from their distress when they pray fervently for relief.

God also knows what we need and ask for without having to say a prayer. But sometimes we cry out in anguish in response to what is happening to us, or in our world. Jesus cried out in anguish in the garden of Gethsemane and his sweat was like blood dripping down. Our prayer is important as an act of faith. There is no question that persistent prayer, that is continuing communion with God, reshapes our heart to him. And when this happens, our hearts are cleared to receive God's grace. As Jesus said, "pray always and do not to lose heart."

Jesus says finally, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" This is the point of the parable. Jesus wonders if he will find faith when he returns at the end of time. Persistent faith is possible where there is persistent prayer. The faithful will pray, and their prayers will increase their faith.

And faith is recognizing that we don't need to lose heart when we don't get the answers we want. Because we realise that prayer is about a God who will answer our call in his time. A God who will give us justice. A God who will help us in our distress. Thanks be to God.

AMEN