

Luke 18:1-8 Mary Mags

29th Sunday C 16.10.2022

I have this week been doing some reassessment. I am not the only one – our politicians seem to be reassessing whether or not government requires some basic level of competence. As far as I can tell, the answer appears to be No. The English cricket team has spent summer and autumn reassessing its relationship with victory. Long may that continue. But I am reassessing something else, thinking again about one of the more important relationships in my life. It's been going on in some sense for as long as I can remember, but – like so many things – it took on a new intensity when I was a student, an intensity it has never really lost. With his feast day due on Tuesday, the time is ripe to reassess my relationship with St Luke.

You see, I love him and I hate him. Not in equal measure, but he does sometimes drive me up the wall. So much of his gospel is all over the place. If Luke's text were an essay, we'd be scrawling "that doesn't follow" and "shouldn't this be placed elsewhere?" and "do you really mean that?" over and again in the margin. And even as we did that, we'd be celebrating the richness of his parables, marvelling at his characters, melting at the beauty of the infancy narratives, and delving into some of the fascinating details of the Acts of the Apostles, whilst also wondering why so much of that book is so relentlessly and dreadfully boring.

We don't know a lot about the author of Luke. Tradition identifies him with Luke the beloved physician, a companion mentioned by Paul in the letter to Philemon, and also mentioned in Colossians – which may or may not be by St Paul - and in 2 Timothy, which definitely isn't. Style and content suggest that whoever wrote Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, and since Acts occasionally breaks into the first person - we sailed away from Philippi or whatever - the assumption has been that

the author was one of Paul's associates, and Luke fits as well as anyone. The notion that one can tell he was a doctor from the way in which he recounts healing stories is, I fear, empty piety. But whoever wrote these two substantial books of the New Testament, is the person the church celebrates each year on October 18 as St Luke.

My frustration with his gospel is well evidenced by the parable we have just heard, the story of the unjust judge and the widow. There seems to be a lot wrong with it. The context is bizarre - we have just been hearing about the day of the Son of Man, the suddenness of coming judgement. The introduction doesn't match the parable - the evangelist tells us it's about not losing heart but being persistent, but the words of Jesus at the end speak instead of the contrast between the judge and God's speedy vindication of his own. And then, to cap it all, we end with "But when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Where did that come from? Surely that would make a lot more sense at the end of the previous chapter with the discussion of the imminent day of judgement.

Luke seems disorganised, putting the information he has received together in strange ways, and offering strained explanations of the parables Jesus tells. Perhaps. But perhaps Luke knows just a little more about the gospel than I do. He might just be sending me up, mocking my pedantry, provoking my attention, because Luke is masterful at communicating the overwhelming strangeness of Jesus' parables. Half the point is that we don't know what is going on, however much we'd like to. Is God really to be compared to a judge so selfish that only the seeming threat to his leisure time convinces him to do what he ought? Well, Luke is saying, yes he is. The previous chapter has ended with the words, where the body is, there the vultures will be gathered. This is hardly the stuff of homely comforts.

There is another place in Luke's gospel where we meet the right deed for the wrong reason. In chapter eleven, the man who disturbs his friend late at night is given what he asks for, not out of charity but

because the friend wants a good night's sleep. If you then who are evil know how to give each other good things, says Jesus, how much more does God. We are in the realm of simple contrast. Even a judge as corrupt as this one can be won over by the persistence of a someone as helpless, in worldly terms, as a widow, the Bible's favourite representative of all people in need. The judge's words are stark: "though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming."

Now the Greek here is very interesting. A closer look suggests Luke has slipped in a wonderful little schoolboy joke which catches us unawares. In English the judge says of the widow "she will wear me out". This Greek verb - *hupopiazō* - actually means to give someone a black eye. It appears in I Corinthians when Paul is talking about fighting, pummelling himself to keep his body under control. It's used in Aristotle to refer to a straightforward punch in the eye. The sense we need to hold on to here is something like "she will beat me black and blue by her coming." The judge is being battered by this extraordinary woman.

And it is with this bizarre and unexpected image that the unjust judge and our own heavenly father are at their closest. The widow keeps coming back, keeps buffeting the judge, rather like a boxer who batters a punch ball, sees it swing back, bashes it back again and so forth. This really is persistence. And thank goodness that the punch ball keeps swinging back. For so does the love of God. We batter our creator with our requests, with our desires, with our mistakes, with our half-truths, with our splendid isolation from the needs of those around us, and still and again he is there to be hit, his love swings back and swings back again undiminished, unabated, unrelenting.

But that is not all, because this boxing metaphor which Luke has left us as a trap, leads to the further and more striking comparison which he wants us to make. The widow is persistent, never giving up. We ought

to be like that, so we're told, but the fact is that most of the time we're not. Far from continual, far from unending, our prayer and our worship is apt to be minimal, slight, insignificant. Some of the time it seems our only consistent behaviour is that with which we try to resist the love of God. God, on the other hand, is persistence itself. It is not we who are bothering God with our concerns, but he who is bothering us, not with blows and buffets, but with quiet, insistent promptings, enquiring, questioning, daring us to respond. However firmly we fasten the bolt, the love of God will seep in under the door, gnawing at us, eating slowly into us, gently suggesting itself in our world and our worship, in those we love and those who are strangers, in word and sacrament repeating himself over and again: repeating *himself*, the refrain that is his unconditional love in Jesus Christ, the self which we receive in this eucharist. By one strangely chosen word, Luke has turned on its head our misunderstanding and left us not smug but uncertain, not so much pedantic as puzzled. And all this to ensure that the last laugh is not ours and, moreover, is not a laugh at all, but a question; not a question we ask, but a question asked of us: "When the son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?"