

29th Sunday Year C

Fr Peter Groves

Luke 18.1-8

Luke's gospel is saturated by prayer. From the very beginning of his story, Luke shows us again and again the response of God's people to his saving acts expressed in words of hope and prayer and praise. Whether it's the remarkable prayer with which the young girl Mary greets the angel's words – Be it unto me according to your word – or the song of praise which the angels sing at the birth of the messiah, or the beautiful prayer of the ageing Simeon as he sees the salvation of the Lord incarnate in a baby, six weeks old and lying in his arms, we are conditioned as readers of the gospel, by the example of prayer and its centrality in Luke's narrative.

Many of Luke's parables do the same. This morning's gospel reading presents us with one which, in a sense, needs no explanation. It needs no explanation, because Luke tells us what it is about: he introduces the story by saying that Jesus "told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." And then we hear the surprising little story of the widow and the unjust judge, a story in which the indifference of power is juxtaposed with the persistence of need, as the widow – an archetype of vulnerability – wears down the

self-concern of the one who ought to be the protector and guardian of justice. We know the story – she keeps coming and asking for vindication, and eventually he says to himself that “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. In English the judge says of the widow “she will wear me out”, but this Greek verb - *hupopiazō* - actually means to give someone a black eye. It appears in I Corinthians when Paul is talking about fighting, pummeling himself to keep his body under control. It’s used in Aristotle to refer to a straightforward punch in the eye. Perhaps it is being used here in a deliberately double sense – she will give me a black eye, might mean, she will damage my reputation. But I think the principal 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 woman in her determination for justice.

Luke is telling us that, by coming back over and over again, the widow is buffeting the judge, rather like a boxer who batters a punch ball, sees it swing back, bashes it back again. This persistence is being held up to us as an example to follow. This parable is not chiefly about the importance of praying. That seems to be something which is taken for granted. Rather, it is about the ways in which we pray. Prayer is not

simply an aspect of the Christian life, a facet of our relationship with God. Luke is telling us that prayer is that relationship, it is the life which to which we are obligated if we encounter God in Jesus Christ.

In this instance, the aspect of prayer to which the gospel is referring is petition. The woman seeks vindication from the judge, she desires a particular outcome and she asks repeatedly for it. We should not be afraid of such prayer. Indeed, the writers of the New Testament talk of prayer as petition more than in any other way. But petition, or at least direct and specific petition, is far from the only form of prayer. The lessons learned from this parable apply to the whole activity of trying to live with God, the activity which we call prayer.

Jesus urges us to imitate the widow. If the boxing metaphor presents her as someone who is battering the judge until she gets what she wants, then the extension of that metaphor is that we are being encouraged to do the same with God, to batter our creator with our request and our desires. We ought not to find this hard. After all, we are no strangers to repetition. We do batter our creator with our misplaced desires, we batter him 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.

It is this relentlessness of God, the inexhaustibility of divine love, which underlies any and all of the prayer in which we engage. Prayer is not about seeking God out so much as allowing God's presence to make itself known. We do not journey a long way to find the activity of God in our lives, rather we become conscious of where we are, take the time to look around and listen and learn, to attain an awareness of what it is that God is already doing. Prayer, at root, is just living with God.

Next month in this church we shall begin an initiative which we are simply calling "Learn to pray". The idea is not a complicated one. Each day, at the end of the working day, we shall take ten or fifteen minutes to introduce, and to practise, a basic and traditional form of Christian prayer. The Lord's prayer, the psalms, the Jesus prayer, the lectio divina, and the rosary: each of these will be our task for just a short time every day, teaching those who wander in how we do what we do, why we do it, and why these simple and often repetitive practices constitute the life which we call prayer. Opening ourselves to God, becoming more conscious of our own place in creation, building a framework of devotion which makes the space in which we can hear God speak and see God at work, this is the task of Christian prayer. Knowing better how to be aware of God already at work in our lives, is

the truest form Christian learning, the vocation which Jesus calls discipleship.

If we learn to practise prayer, we can learn the important difference between simple repetition, and genuine persistence. Too often we go round in circles with our wants and our self-obsessions, but the persistence to which Jesus exhorts us is the gift of the God who invites that very persistence. The judge in the parable is not so much compared as contrasted with our heavenly father. If even the unjust judge grants justice, how much more will God vindicate his elect who cry to him day and night. The true persistence in this relationship belongs to God alone, to the one whose love works insistently in our lives, repeating itself over and again, refusing our attempts to shut it out, seeping in under the door of our self-protection and daring us to know love for what it is – the life of God at work in our world.

The gift of prayer is just that, a gift, but the giving does not end there. God unwraps his gift in Jesus Christ, draws us in to its activity, invites us and shows us how to live the life which he intends for us. The parable ends with a question: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” It’s almost as if Jesus is asking us, Are you going to do it? Is anyone actually prepared to be like that widow, will any of us

do more than smile at the nice idea of prayer and try to do something about it? Prayer means living with God. . It's so simple, so little a thing. But it will change your life.