

Trinity 18C 16/10/2022

I love this parable in our Gospel. I love this parable because the most vulnerable, least powerful person gets vindicated. The widow with no real recourse, no protection unless it is granted to her, no official status or leverage, gets justice. The underdog wins and this is such a rare occurrence I want to celebrate it to the fullest and high-five her and say, to quote Roy and HG: Go you good thing, girl!" — maybe even wear a t-shirt that says, "And yet, she persisted." She who was likely so beaten down by the world, beats down that unethical, callous, uncaring judge through her tenacity and unwillingness to give up. How satisfying is that?

And maybe it is okay to have just a moment of shouting: "In your face!" to the system that has exploited and rendered her dependent upon the kindness of strangers. But I think Jesus' point is much bigger and less self-congratulatory than that. He tells us flat out at the beginning of this Gospel that his point is for his followers to always pray and not lose heart. The very occasion of this parable should cause us a moment or two of introspection given that it comes directly after Jesus' talk of the coming kingdom that notes that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected. The last line of Luke chapter 17 instructs those watching for God's reign to look where the vultures are gathered around the corpse. Funny, I've never seen that verse of scripture written and hung on the wall. "Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather." Sounds more like a line from Alfred Hitchcock than Jesus, but there it is.

This parable today is more about our not losing heart in the face of circling vultures than running a victory lap around the sanctuary. If we want more evidence of that, we need only keep reading in chapter 18. It is a study in contrasts with the persistent widow and the unjust judge, the tax collector, and the Pharisee and their respective assessments of themselves, the children coming to Jesus and the disciples who want to turn them away, the rich young ruler who cannot give up his wealth to follow and then another prediction from Jesus about how he must be "mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him and on the third day he will rise." The writer of Luke added, "But they understood none of these things."

Even when Jesus told us explicitly what to expect, we seem not to get it and to lose heart rather quickly as a result. We like the prosperity gospel a lot more than the one Jesus proclaimed. We want karma, not grace. We join the collective beating down of those we think need to learn a lesson instead of being merciful, forgiving, and wanting good for all.

What does this widow's persistent pleading to the unjust judge have to do with prayer? What does prayer have to do with justice? In ethics? In not losing heart? What does it have to do with us as we come toward the end of a really difficult year. Don't we get and give a collective eye roll when someone mentions I'll keep you in my thoughts and prayers?

And yet Jesus prayed a lot, didn't he? He was praying at key moments of his life in ministry; when he was baptised, transfigured, and on the cusp of his arrest and crucifixion. Jesus went off to pray alone, he left the needy crowd and went up the mountain to pray. He talked about prayer, taught his disciples to pray, warned us not to pray for show, but instead to pray to God. The heavens opened up when Jesus prayed and he did not lose heart in the Garden of Gethsemane as he prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me, but not my will but yours be done."

Jesus told this parable to teach us, that it is necessary at all times to pray in order to not grow weary. Without prayer we are bound to give up, give in, throw up our hands, feel sorry for the widow but

do nothing to help her or change the circumstances that render her desperate. Without prayer, we may well grow not just weary but callous, high-fiving when our enemies fall from grace and commending ourselves for our own righteousness. Without prayer we lose our orientation toward God and desire not God's will, be done on earth as it is in heaven, but assume our will is divinely ordained and not subject to correction or critique. That's why ultimately we have had the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of our parliaments in Australia.

Prayer enables us to advocate for the widow and honestly hope that the judge is changed in the process. Prayer allows us to persist in working for justice and walking humbly with God and loving kindness even when it feels like a perpetual Good Friday with no resurrection in sight.

Here we sit in this magnificent, veritable House of Prayer- Holy Trinity Kew- God's House. And for 160 years people have prayed to the Divine in this building and I suspect people prayed on this site for millennia before that. In fact this site is a holy and special site in Kew. I might be biased, but I feel it in my bones. The birthplace of two schools, Kew Primary and Trinity Grammar School and a place of long association and affection for another, Ruyton Girls School, and the current home of the Holy Trinity Early Learning Centre. That's quite a record and the symbolic fruits of persistently praying and not losing heart, if I ever saw one.

The restored Memorial Lanterns first placed in the Church in 1953 and all of the memorials of this Church of which there are dozens and dozens bear testimony to a significant slice of Kew community life. Some show connections with world events: You only have to look above the organ and look at the Archangel Michael with flaming sword in memory of a Trinity boy, who wrote letters to his mates back at school, who crashed in a bi-plane in 1917 and died a boy in World War I. The Memorial Chapel to the 59 Kew boys, mostly Trinity boys who died in the same war plus the 17 men and women who died in the next. A piece of the bombed Coventry Cathedral in the UK from World War II, a whole large window paid by the people of Kew in 1864, part of which went on in 1984 to be the Australia Post Christmas postage stamp which is dedicated to the memory of a Prince, champion of the Great International Exhibitions which led to our great Royal Exhibition Building in Carlton, Our Celtic cross containing pieces of HMS Victory, the flag ship of Nelson and symbol of the Celtic Saints. Alongside those, the many personal and family memorials in our stain glass windows and of course our Memorial Lanterns.

One of the many things all these memorials hold in common is a deep belief that in prayer and persistence mountains were moved and can be moved and eternity obtained. They symbolise, celebrate and witness to that fundamental fact.

These memorials point to the fact that prayer is not so much a detached, disembodied, spiritual endeavour. Rather, it is a long term, perpetual relationship with our God and the God of our children, who opens the heavens, comes down to earth and relentlessly works alongside us as we seek to beat down all that thwarts the abundant life, Jesus came to earth to give to all people. Prayer springs from the depths of longing and comes to our consciousness, unbidden, at times when there is nothing left for us to do.

Jesus instructs us today to pray without ceasing, reminding us of the end of the story, which these memorials symbolise and represent- the sure and certain end of God's salvation story and therefore, ours. That is the divine telos of justice, reconciliation, resurrection, as well as life eternal and abundant. Amen. Fr Robert Newton