

21/10/2007

Psalm 66

Luke 18: 1-8

Sermon by Wes Campbell

Shrew, the nagging mother; an interfering mother-in-law, the fishwife, Jezebel: we have inherited some pretty unattractive views of women. On the other hand when it comes to men there are many images of the *solid citizen, upright member of society, the wise judge.*

The widow today makes a nuisance of herself. She nags. She wants justice. The judge is her only hope.

We could easily miss the fact that the widow has no power. In those days the widow is defenceless. Her traditional name, *'The importunate widow'* conveys her insistence, persistence; but it doesn't say that she is perhaps young, and without a husband she is in danger of losing her life, *'destitute'*. We who are now used to stressing the equality of women with men can hardly grasp her desperate situation; although in this *Anti-Poverty Week* we are reminded that among the millions of people now in poverty, women and children are the majority.

In biblical times the poor widow was well known, as were the biblical instructions to take special care of the widow and the orphan, along with the refugee.

When I checked references to *widows* in this Gospel, I was surprised to find at least six widows or stories about widows, in contrast to significantly fewer in the other Gospels, Is it something about their precarious life-situation that catches Luke's attention? Does he expect that the destitute and powerless widow has something to say to us?

You know, of course that there are other woman present in Luke's account of Jesus' ministry. Luke alone tells us that they had financed Jesus' campaign.

With the other Evangelists, Luke recalls that women remained with him to the end.

How strange, then, that church interpreters have read of these women and found them to be demure, quiet, and accepting of their fate. Certainly that is not true of the widow in today's parable.

And it is gradually dawning on us that we have missed a strong note in Jesus' ministry. He declares that there is injustice in the widowed women's poverty. Later, when Jesus is in the Jerusalem Temple and observes the widow in the temple, he says of the male religious authorities:

They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

He points up a system that overlooks and treads down the poor. Yet not all the women are silent in acceptance! Today's widow is not silent and accepting. She nags and makes a nuisance of herself.

Perhaps, if the widow had been an Australian outback woman facing hardship, she would have learnt to accept her lot, as advised by Mary Gilmore in her poem, *Never Admit the Pain:*

Never admit the pain,
Bury it deep;
Only the weak complain,
Complaint is cheap.
Cover thy wound, fold down
Its curtained place;
Silence is still a crown,

Courage a grace.

Our widow knows nothing of such stoic virtue. She is relentless, some would say shrill, in her apparently hopeless cause.

The judge is another figure altogether. He, we are told, fears neither God nor has respect for anyone else. He is like that blindfolded Greek goddess of justice and law, holding the scales of justice in one hand and a sword in the other. She symbolizes the fair and equal administration of the law, without corruption, greed, prejudice, or favour. Likewise, the judge is impervious to influence, is impartial in judgement, and makes his judgements without influence from any quarter! There's a sort of indifference here. Perhaps those who are wealthy would have received a better hearing!

It would be a great shame if we missed the comic air of this parable. The Judge, so lofty and indifferent, begins to be worn down by the widow's persistence! We hear him talking to himself, reminding himself of his refusal to show partiality; and then we hear him beginning to weaken and, out of sheer self interest, he decides to give her what she wants. Perhaps it is the psychological barrage that turns the tables here; although one commentator says that the Greek verb describing the widow's action is used for boxing and refers to the blackening of the boxer's eyes. Could it be that the Judge fears the widow's physical attack? There is a cartoon image, the tiny widow hammering on the lofty judge to get her just dues, and wearing him down.

Notice that this parable is told as the urgency of Jesus' own mission is building as he heads toward Jerusalem. He tells a parable about a poor, protesting widow who claims a hearing.

As you will know, when Luke speaks of the poor, he means the materially poor, those who are without worldly resources. Poor. And yet, he would want us to hear in this parable echoes of the blessings announced earlier:

*'Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God'. (6:20)*

We ought to be shocked by that. The *poor* are blessed; God comes to them in a special way, just as the pregnant Mary sang out for joy:

*My soul magnifies the Lord...
He has brought down the powerful
from their thrones,
And lifted up the lowly; (1:46, 52)*

Luke is clear: Jesus is the blessing of God on the poor; he has joined the poor and declares that God is coming to the world, beginning with those who have nothing.

Frankly, this shocks us, because – faced with the poverty of the poor - the best we can come up with is that the poor ought to be affluent. Assuming we are sincere in this, it ignores that we are wishing on them the dis-ease of the wealthy: anxiety, self-interest and guilt?

And, can we who are rich hear the warning that if we are unwilling to share our wealth they will come to take from us what is rightfully theirs?

In all this, there is something more radical going on: *the promise that the poor will receive God!*

Am I reading too much into the widow who refused to stop pestering the powerful judge?

Jesus insists that she who seeks justice will receive it. And just as the judge has finally heard the pleading of this powerless yet persistent woman, so God is willing to listen, and to give justice on the earth.

Here we come to another astounding aspect of the church's life. For centuries the orthodox view of God was much like today's Judge: unmoved by feeling, without emotion. The technical word was 'impassable'. Such is *Divinity*, it was said, free from the imperfection of emotion.

A heretical view read the Bible and found in it a God who was moved by emotion, beginning with the Exodus God who heard the cries of slaves in Egypt, and acted to remove their oppression, to save them.

And there it is in Jesus who, as the Son of God, is moved to feel compassion deep in his guts for the poor and lost crowd. Jesus, who tells the parable, is showing that God is listening, and feeling, and, more, is acting to bring blessing to the poor, and so to all. That is why he tells this parable as he heads toward Jerusalem to claim it for his Father.

Finally, when Jesus begins to interpret this parable to his hearers, he insists that God will hear those who cry out, and will help them. Like the widow, their cause will be vindicated, they will receive justice; their oppression will be lifted from them.

Faced with the news every day, it is too clear that the world is filled with those who cry out. Consider Burma. Or the Africa that produces child soldiers, and the lethal mix of poverty and AIDS; and those voices of our indigenous sisters and bothers which refuse to be stilled. Faced with the overwhelming facts of these situations where the powerful crush the powerless, we are tempted to lose heart and to wonder whether all this talk of God and justice is a sham! And we are drawn toward putting our trust in the usual means of dealing with violence: military intervention, violence to meet violence, the death penalty to pay for a death.

That is exactly why the parable is placed here in the final days of Jesus' ministry – as he declared the coming reign of God. The parable is given for those who expect God to rule. So opening verse of today's reading said this:

'Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart'; or as in earlier translations *'to pray always and not to faint.'*

Jesus, as the living Lord, tells this parable so that those who aspire to follow him will persist on the Way. The widow is our model. Luke wants us to put ourselves into the story with the widow. You could say that he wants us to 'be the widow': to be as persistent as she was; to refuse to give up on God, just as the widow refused to give up on the judge. (But, if our wealth distances us too much from the widow and those who exist in utter deprivation, read on to Zacchaeus, who will show how the wealthy who benefit from injustice may give up wealth and follow!)

There is a little word embedded in today's reading that says why it is necessary to stress persistence: the word *delay*.

Where the first generation of Christians thought the reign of God would come immediately, Luke writes for a later generation which has not yet experienced the reign of justice and peace on earth, and knows the cost of persecution. But this is not cause for despair. Luke understands that we are now in the *'time of the church'*; and with that word *'delay'* he hints that the church can expect to wait for a long time for the final coming of God's kingdom.

In Jesus we have witnessed the reign of God breaking in; and yet, now is the time of waiting, of persistence, of not giving up.

In this world, where corruption, godlessness and injustice always seem to win, the special Christian task is to cry out, persistently. We are to learn from Jesus' own refusal to give up his certainty that in him the reign of God comes. We are now to take a firm grip on his certainty. To pray as Jesus taught his church:

'Father ...

your kingdom come!

So we are to cry out to God, reminding **God** what is promised. And we are to cry out **on behalf** of those who do not know how to pray, or even that it is possible. To call out for those whose voices are silenced by the burden of oppression, misery or loneliness.

We are commanded to pray in and for the world: *that is the only reason for being here.*

Simply put, we are to make nuisances of ourselves as we refuse to fall silent: nuisances both to God and in our human society, calling out for God's reign to come on earth.

Therefore, as persistent nuisances who will not give up, let us give thanks for the promise of God's reign in Jesus Christ, and claim its coming in him. AMEN