

Jeremiah 31:27-34
Psalm 119:97-104
Luke 18:1-8

Prayer and work

It is a sad thing that we must admit that the account in our gospel reading this morning of a woman crying out for justice is a thoroughly familiar and contemporary story. It is the same as the cry for acknowledgement and redress from someone who was abused as a child by a person they should have been able to trust. It is the cry of the Palestinian who wants some kind of resolution after decades of deprivation and suffering. It is the cry of any individual who finds that the "one size fits all" of government policy or the expectations of her community in fact does not fit very many, and so she finds herself excluded because of the oversimplification of that kind of approach to needs and rights.

It is a thoroughly familiar story. Perhaps a little less familiar, or a little less comfortable, is what Jesus does with the story. In particular, he draws a comparison between God and the dishonest or lazy or corrupt judge to whom the woman goes for assistance. Jesus is much less squeamish than we are about taking from the good and the bad of the world to give illustration of how God works and so we have to let him do what he does. The lesson which seems to drop out of this, though – in the comparison between God and this judge – something along the lines of the value of persistence in prayer. The woman comes to the judge again and again and again, so that in the end the judge throws up his arms and says "Alright". This seems to imply that this is how God responds to prayer: we are to pray and to pray and pray until such time as God finally gives us what we want.

This is a very poor understanding of the nature of prayer. It reduces our relationship to God to some kind of equation or formula. If we get the frequency or the persistence or the sincerity or just the sheer need in our prayer just right, God will give us what we want. Prayer becomes then a kind of magical incantation in which we push all the right buttons so that God response to us as we desire.

That is not only a wholly inadequate way of thinking about prayer. Most of us have also discovered that it just doesn't work. No matter how persistent or faithful or sincere we are, we very rarely, if ever, receive response we seek. Most of us have probably tried this at one stage or another. It doesn't work. And so we tend to keep prayer on the backburner and pursue justice by other means. We plan a society with just judges and good laws. We set up agencies like Hotham Mission to do the work of justice in the world. But in this process we fall into the same kind of trap as we can with prayer: the assumption that if we just get the formula right we can create a just society, a world in which everyone gets exactly what they deserve and need.

And yet if we reject persistence in prayer in view of evidence that it doesn't actually seem to work, the evidence about the possibility of creating a just society through working for justice is just as shaky; our efforts at a just society have also not worked. If we were just to mark Jesus' own words as the beginning of the project of a just society (noting, of course, that it is not since or following from Jesus that such efforts have been made) we would have to say that in 2000 years the very fact that the woman's story is still familiar and contemporary suggests that, for all of our best efforts, working for

justice does not create it. We still haven't got the formula right. And so still we strive, still we pray.

So what is going on here, or what our text has to say to us this morning about our condition and our situation, and God in relationship to these?

Jesus makes rather a strange remark at the end of this morning's reading concerning the coming of the Son of Man and whether or not the Son will find faith on earth. What is his point to here? I don't think he is asking, Will there be people in the churches or synagogues? Will there be people praying, believing in God? "Faith" has, in the scriptures, a variety of meanings. Here I suspect that it means something along the lines of, Will there be people who have *seen*, who have *understood*, who have *clarity* about the nature of the world and our place in it?

Quite apart from the woman's persistence in the parable is the sheer fact that she cannot generate for herself the justice she desires. As corrupt or lazy or unhelpful as the judge might actually be, she has to go outside her own capacities for the purposes of realising justice. I suspect that it is just this which Jesus indicates in the question about whether the Son of Man will find faith. The apocalyptic world view of the New Testament – the notion that the world is going to come to an end and all things will be set right – was a way of speaking about the incapacity of Israel to set the world right. It had to be *God* who did it. And, for all of their efforts unto justice – as important as they were – there was a constant looking outside of themselves to God, the just one, the one who would set things right.

Jesus asks, When the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth? That is, will there be those who have understood, that for all of the prayer and for all of the good works, it is, in the end, God to whom is the kingdom of the power and glory?

None of this is to say that we ought not to be praying. It is to say that our prayers are naming that source of healing – outside of ourselves. We are not trying to twist God's arm into doing things that God doesn't want to do. Our prayers are naming that God is the one who will realise in the end the justice we most desperately need and desire.

And it is not to say that we ought not to be working for justice and, in our actions, indicating that the world is actually not right, that there are people who are excluded. But it is to say that, in the end, we are not going to be able to fix it, of which we have 2000 years' evidence. This is not pessimism; it is just realism about our situation.

So what springs from this parable is that, yes, the question of justice is a pressing one and we have to work as if the answer to that question depended upon us. But at the same time, we ought to be praying because it does not.

So, let us pray, and work.
