

Contexts

Luke's Gospel (in brief)

See previous Lectio Notes

Luke 18:1-8 – things to notice

- Does not follow on from the parable of last Sunday. It is separated by sayings about the coming of the Kingdom.
- Luke contextualises the parable which follows with the words: Jesus told his disciples a parable about the need to pray continually and never lose heart."
- The parable which follows, however, is very ambiguous – it is often called the Parable of the Unjust Judge' – but is he unjust?? Is the parable about the Judge or the widow or neither??
- the **Judge**: lives in a certain town and has neither fear of God nor respect for man. He refuses to give the widow 'justice' – however, 'vengeance' is a more faithful translation – does that make him unjust? Perhaps the widows claim for vengeance is unjust(??) The Judge decides to give in (listen to his internal monologue) because she keeps pestering him and may actually *do him violence* – 'worry me to death' is not a good translation of the Greek term used here, which is a boxing term – literally, 'she may give me a black eye'! Note: that justice through vengeance was part of both religious and civil law at the time of Jesus and in both Jewish and Roman law.
- the **Widow**: lives in the same town as the judge. Luke tells this parable against a background of many other famous biblical widows. We tend to think of widows as being poor and defenceless, lacking male agency in a patriarchal society. But very often the Biblical widows, who are definitely at a disadvantage, are revealed as strong-willed, enterprising, scheming women who know exactly how to get what they want. The widow in this parable is hell-bent on vengeance. The parable evokes an image that she is almost stalking the Judge and has clearly terrorised him into giving her what she wants.
- How does this relate to 'the necessity to pray continually and never lose heart? What image of prayer does it evoke – are we meant to terrorise God into giving us vengeance, or into answering our prayers? Having to bang continually on God's door is hardly a positive image of prayer!
- Interestingly, the words of Jesus which follow seem to talk about prayer as 'God seeing justice done'. Remember that Luke's community is being persecuted.
- The words Luke uses for Jesus' interpretation of the parable do seem to carry the idea that God will not delay in answering their prayer (seeing justice done) and in answering quickly (speedily). If the widow can triumph over the judge, how much more will Christians achieve in their prayer. God will 'right the wrongs' (see justice done) for Luke's community.
- The 'sting in the tail' – 'But when the Son of Man comes will he find any faith on earth?' The question is not about whether God will vindicate his persecuted people, but whether they will remain faithful over the long haul – remembering that the return of Jesus seems much delayed. Will the disciples keep faith, or fall away?
- The episode is not about saying unending prayers (praying always/continually). It can be understood as highlighting 2 essential parts of being in (and staying in) relationship with God: prayer and faith. The continual experience of prayer nourishes and strengthens faith in God and the disciple in keeping with faith with God through Christ.

- Using that lens as we look back to the parable, we can certainly say that the widow and the judge are in a relationship – the widow wants something that the judge has the power to grant. The widow's persistence indicates that she believes her relationship with the judge will get her what she wants, even if she has to threaten him(!) It is important not to try to 'force' the parable too much, on every point.
- Jesus' words seem to suggest that: if that is how things are between this widow and the judge, how much better will things be between the faithful disciple and God?

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on this Sunday?

One of the features of this second part of instructions is Jesus' use of parables. These parable stories (nearly all of them unique to Luke) have been chosen for the Sunday Gospels leading up to the end of the Liturgical Year (on 34th Sunday, the Feast of Christ the King).

22 Sunday – parable about Jesus' Kingdom Banquet

23 Sunday – Parables about readiness & commitment

24 Sunday – Parables about The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, The Parable of the Lost Brothers

(Prodigal Son/Loving Father) – God will search for the lost ones

25 Sunday – Parable of the Dishonest Steward – the right use of riches & wealth

26 Sunday – Parable of the Rich Man & Lazarus – A reversal of fortunes, difficulty of conversion

27 Sunday – Parable of the Servant & the Master – Humble leadership as service

28 Sunday – The Ten Lepers – A story of real faith from an unexpected source

29 Sunday – Parable of the Unjust Judge – Persistence will win the day / God readily acts

30 Sunday – Parable of the Tax Collector & the Pharisee – Being at rights with God

31 Sunday – Zacchaeus – A story of conversion

32 Sunday – The resurrection debated – God of the living or the dead?

33 Sunday – Signs announcing the end – Living now in anticipation of the end

34 Sunday – The Repentant Thief – an assurance of mercy

It seems a curious pairing at first - the story of a battle for a nation's future (first reading – Exodus 17:8-13) put together with the story of one widow seeking her just rights (Gospel reading). In both cases, God proves to be the one who delivers for his people who put their trust in him and who persevere in prayer.

Jesus tells this story of a persistent widow who wins the day against an unjust judge. St Luke says that the story is "about the need to pray continually and never lose heart". God is not like the unjust judge, who delays in answering and finally gives in only when threatened. God will hear and answer the persistent cry of his people.

We, too, can be tempted to lose heart as we live in the midst of the evils of our own day. When will there be justice for the poor, the hungry, the disabled, and the disadvantaged, we wonder.

Sometimes in prayer, we realise that we are called to play our part with concrete actions which help to relieve the suffering of others. We know we cannot do it all by ourselves, but perhaps there is something that we can do.

St Luke uses this story to encourage his community of believers – to urge them not to lose heart as, surrounded by the evils of their day, they wait for the return of Jesus. They should keep faith and rely always on God's goodness. Their persistence in prayer is an expression of their trust in God. Perhaps their prayer will show them what to do as they wait.

Just as Moses keeps faith with God in the battle against the Amalekites (first reading), so the disciples must remain in a faithful relationship with God. Prayer, understood as

nourishing our relationship with God, rather than 'saying prayers', keeps us in this faithful relationship with God as we wait for Jesus' return. That is the kind of faith Jesus wonders about in the final sentence.