

Readings for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

16th October 2022

First Reading: Jeremiah 31:27-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. In those days they shall no longer say: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Second Reading: 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

Gospel: St Luke 18:1-8

Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

A Reflection for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Injustice is all around us it seems, we only have to look at the news bulletins. For a number of weeks, women in Iran have been protesting following the death of a young woman in custody for violating what we might regard as discriminatory laws, and demanding what many would see as their human rights. Their protests have sparked demonstrations of support around the world.

During the Season of Creation, we thought about climate injustice – how, so often, the actions of wealthier nations impact adversely and disproportionately on the lives of those in poorer nations. We see the effects of that at the moment in Somalia, where a famine has been declared following drought and crop failure. We see there the injustice of some people starving while others in the world have more than enough. We see climate injustice in Pakistan as people strive to deal with the after-effects of the recent floods with inadequate resources. And we see economic injustice in the United States, where the nation has the resources to clear up and rebuild after the recent storms, but not everyone receives equally.

There are so many examples and it's certainly not easy to discern the right course of action in every, or even any, case. These are complex situations.

Today's Gospel reading tells what is known as the Parable of the Unjust Judge and the Persistent Widow; two contrasting characters and it is important to consider both. We aren't told what the widow's complaint against her opponent was and cannot therefore determine what a 'just' outcome for her might be. However, we do know that, in the society of the time, widows symbolised powerlessness and vulnerability. The Jewish Scriptures describe them as precious to God because they were totally dependent on God. The Law demanded that people show special care for them and the Psalmists depict God as a judge who will help widows.

By contrast, the judge was an official of the Jewish system of religious law. Such judges were supposed to be wise and reputable, commissioned by God to shepherd his people. The judge's role was to make God's will known through the Law, and to demonstrate the righteousness and holiness of God. But this judge was corrupt. We are told that he had 'no fear of God and no respect for anyone'. No-one would get justice from him. He is the antithesis of all that he should have been and opposed to God's will.

The powerless widow accosted the judge and used the only weapon she had, her persistence, relentlessly demanding justice. She succeeded, but he gave her justice due to his own desire for peace rather than any respect for God or the Law that he was supposed to serve. He was worried that she might wear him out!

At the beginning of this parable, we are told that Jesus related it to the disciples to teach them about the need to pray always and not to lose heart. But, of course, it should not suggest to us that somehow God will answer our prayers if we nag him enough.

The unjust judge in the parable is a caricature that is the exact opposite of God. God always stands by the cause of justice and vindicates the innocent. And God is never wearied or irritated by the repeated, prayerful petitions of the faithful. The value of repeated prayer is not to coerce God into action, but to sustain and strengthen us in our faithfulness to God. The theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

Prayer is not a matter of pouring out the human heart once and for all, in need or joy, but of unbroken, constant learning, accepting, and impressing upon the mind of God's will in Jesus Christ. (from Life Together)

It is prayer with faith that will help to overcome injustice, and prayer should always be our first response. Prayer strengthens our faith and the will to undo injustice and wrong in the world. Jesus shows us that by his own example. In his Gospel, Luke portrays Jesus as a man who prays often and encourages his disciples to do likewise to overcome the trials that face them.

At the end of the parable, we are assured that God will grant justice quickly. To make sense of this, we need to remember that 'quickly' is from the perspective of God who is outside time, and is not measured by our brief human perspective. We also need to remember that the parable was related by Jesus while he was on his way to Jerusalem, but is re-told here by Luke many years later. Those hearing or reading it would know, as we do, that after the injustice of crucifixion, God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead. Justification for those who follow Jesus begins from that point, so justice has already begun.

In the last verse of today's Gospel is the question 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' The early church expected that the *Parousia*, the second coming of Christ, would come quickly (there's that issue of God's time again). When this didn't happen, and this seems to have been a particular concern for Luke's community, and as they faced opposition or even persecution in some places, Luke wrote to encourage them not to give up, not to stop praying. God is not indifferent to our situations. The critical issue is not whether God will be faithful to us in bringing justice but whether we will be faithful to God. Of course, our faithfulness will never match up to God's. As we wait for Christ's coming, we are called on to do the best we can, to persist, and God's mercy through Christ will accomplish the rest.