

SERMON: Sunday – 21 May 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

JUSTICE WILL PREVAIL BUT WILL FAITH PERSIST?

Proverbs 7:6-23

Luke 18:1-8

JUSTICE WILL PREVAIL BUT WILL FAITH PERSIST?

How many will I find who have faith?

Jesus presents us all with a great challenge in that question. And commending the persistent woman in her prayers he is implying that faith is found in the persistent practising of the cry for justice before the ever living Judge of all. Let me say that again. I think what Jesus is saying is that faith is found in the persistent practising of the cry for justice before the ever living Judge of all.

The woman who appears before the judge in the parable Jesus taught is applauded for her persistence in prayer. Although not stated outright, it is apparent that she is a seeker of justice.

We therefore can assume that she is someone for whom justice was initially hard to obtain. In a society that often-excluded women from an equal sharing of justice and entitlement, the fact it is a woman, and possibly a widow, who is seen crying out for it is a key fact within the story. This woman comes as one likely marginalised in society, yet through her persistence, she is finally granted justice.

This is a teaching about the need for persistence by those who follow God. In praying for and working for a greater justice and access to the good things of life, being more freely and equally available for all.

Even though that cry might often go seemingly unheard, what matters is to never give up asking. Seek ye first. Ask and it will be given. Knock and the door will be opened. Not once, not twice but keep on seeking, keep on asking, keep on knocking.

Both of the Scripture readings today urge us to persistence in prayer. Pray always. Never give up.

The parable ends with a recognition that sometimes it appears that work for justice takes an awful long time to bear fruit. So much so, that some might start to lose faith that the promises of God to bring in new and fair Kingdom values will materialise at all.

Hence Jesus question, 'How many will I find who have faith?'. Will we give up before we see a solution? Or will we keep on like the persistent widow before the judge.

Jesus uses the parable of the widow and the judge to illustrate our need for constant prayer and to show that we must never give up because in the end justice will flow, and all things will be made right.

I don't think the parable teaches us that God is like the judge who needs to be worn down by our prayers like the judge in the parable who says that he neither fears God nor the woman but will make sure she gets justice because she is wearing him down with her constant requests.

No the lesson is that even he rendered justice in the end so how much more will God do so. In other words, when it comes to matters of justice, God doesn't need to be worn down by our prayers but is always just. God is the source of infinite justice as well as infinite love. And its that source that we are in communion with through prayer, joined by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus uses a similar illustration earlier in Luke's Gospel, in chapter 11, when he tells the story of someone going to a friends house at midnight to ask for bread and who Jesus commends to keep on asking, keep on knocking, for the door will be opened to everyone who knocks.

And as earthly fathers know how to grant good things to their children how much more will our heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask (11:13).

And the Proverbs reading beckons us towards staying stedfast on the path which seeks to do the right thing and see justice prevail. It counsels us all, maybe not just young men, not to wander, not to give in to the temptation to walk the path of ease or over indulge in the pursuit of pleasure to the extent whereby we might harm or exploit someone else.

We might say don't let your love wander towards adultery as in the giving of yourself - your body, your mind, your thoughts, your actions - to another god. To do so would be to break faith or to not live up to our true calling as followers of the Truth.

Prayer then can be both a joy and a burden. Perhaps it always is,

Sometimes prayer is a weeping cry of lament.

Yesterday saw the start of this year's General Assembly of the CofS. I am a virtual commissioner. In other words I take part via my computer at home. So you might see me this week walking meditatively around the garden with head

phones in and then rushing back into the house when I'm expected to vote on an issue or even to speak.

I mention this because in his outgoing address, last year's Moderator, Iain Greenshields mentioned lament. He said that much of the church today is in lament mode; that the church no longer enjoys its place in society that it once did. But that this didn't mean it was all doom and gloom. He didn't actually call on the church to pray through this time of lamenting but I think he implied it.

Because he said, and I quote, "that out of lament and grief comes new life and new identity (when we ask ourselves once more) what is it that Jesus is calling us to".

I know that God calls us to hope beyond times of lament to that same new life and new identity. The church is ever reforming and we are in the process of lamenting our way to new ways of being church; ways which are fitter for purpose, stripped of unnecessary pomposity, lighter on our feet, to become more and more Christ like.

Lament, then, is not the end, but part of the journey of us all.

The Hebrew Bible is full of prayers of lament, many of which are considered to be poems.

For example, in Jeremiah 31:15, we hear the weeping cry of Rachel at the destruction and exile of God's children, who are lost because of their waywardness, their adultery at going after other gods:

A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.

Ann Weems (1934–2016) suffered tragedy firsthand when her twenty-one-year-old son was murdered. She poured her grief into writing poems of lament, like this one called 'Jesus wept':

Jesus wept,
 and in his weeping,
 he joined himself forever
 to those who mourn.
He stands now throughout all time,
 this Jesus weeping,
 with his arms about the weeping ones:

“Blessed are those who mourn,
for they shall be comforted.”
He stands with the mourners,
for his name is God-with-us.

Jesus wept.

“Blessed are those who weep, for they shall be comforted.”

Someday.

Someday God will wipe the tears from Rachel’s eyes.

In the godforsaken, obscene quicksand of life,
there is a deafening alleluia
rising from the souls
of those who weep,
and of those who weep with those who weep.
If you watch, you will see
the hand of God
putting the stars back in their skies
one by one.

If you watch, you will see.

Daniel Berrigan is a Hebrew scholar who has a brilliant translation of Jeremiah 31:15-20:

Rachel, mourn no longer
I, mother Yahweh
large in loss,
assuage your tears
even as you
Comfort Me.

That son, the prodigal -
My heart stirs, I must
like Rachel
run headlong,
make of him -
(recusant,
slow returning,
against all chance
renewed)
firstborn of My love.

If you watch, you will see.

And the time will come to move, like Rachel or the Father running toward their
lost child returning.

But maybe there’s a lost of watching and waiting before any of that.

Watching and waiting are key words to describe the motion of prayer. We might add longing, crying, weeping, sighing, hoping, trusting - all types of prayer, and often a wordless pouring out of the heart in the presence of the ever present God who is Love.

Is this the kind of faith that Jesus hopes to find? I think it might be. And I think its a type of active being that is very much in the heart of every one of us. Its who we truly are.

Be patient. Persist. Pray always. Never give up. It's what we're made to do. Until all we ever pray for is consumed by the Love that holds all things and makes all things well and wipes away all tears from our eyes.

In the name of that God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.