

Sermon for Sunday 16 October 2022 – The Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

Genesis 32.22-31; 2 Timothy 3.14–4.5; Luke 18.1–8

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, open our hearts and minds to your word. We pray in Jesus name. Amen. Please do be seated.

Well, for me, both of Paul's letters to Timothy are quite important in my calling to ministry, but particularly that passage and the earlier part of 2 Timothy. My grandmother was a lay preacher, my mother was a lay preacher, and Paul says the spirit that was on your grandmother, was on your mother, I believe it now is on you. You can be the judge of whether that's happened or not. But, you heard Paul's encouragement to a young Timothy about the Scriptures. That doesn't put any pressure whatsoever on the preacher this morning. Let's see where we go.

The Old Testament reading that we heard, this wrestling of Jacob with a man that we discover is God, whether that was an Old Testament appearance of Jesus, I'll leave the theologians to debate. But that our lectionary setters have tied that with this parable of the unjust judge and the widow who is seeking justice - can I ask you in your mind, just separate them, they're not really related. You can go to the commentaries, you can check it. The lectionary readers have got it wrong, forget the Old Testament - a great reading, a lot we can learn from it, but it is not reinforcing the gospel reading. OK? So we've got the ground rules this morning.

The other thing I'd like to say is that typical of our lectionary setters, they pluck a section of the Gospel out of its context and then we are trying to make sense of it. So if you'll indulge me, I'm going to put it back into its context. We heard Luke 18.1-8. The section that it involves starts at Luke 17 verse 20 and ends at Luke 18 verse 8.

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming. And he answered, the kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, look, here it is, or there it is. For in fact, the kingdom of God is among you. Remember right at the beginning of Jesus ministry, he stands up in the synagogue, he reads from Isaiah the captives being set free, those who are unwell being healed and so on. And he sits down and says today this has been fulfilled in your hearing. So often we hear on the lips of Jesus, the kingdom of God has come near to you. But the Pharisees were asking about the kingdom of God in the sense of what we know as Parousia, the Second Coming, when there would ultimately be judgments. So that's our context.

And then Jesus turns to his disciples and says the days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. They will say to you, look there, look here, do not go off, do not set in pursuit and he talks about becoming judgement, he talks about persistence. I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed - one will be taken, the other left; there will be two women grinding

meal together, one will be taken and the other left. Then they asked him, the disciples, where Lord? He said to them, where the corpse is, where the vultures will gather. Then Jesus told them this parable.

Why did he tell them the parable? Because that's the way Jesus taught. He's teaching about the coming of the kingdom of God. Please don't think that this parable is about our day to day intercessory prayer. It is about us praying for the kingdom of God to come. If you like, it's about us praying the Lord's Prayer - 'Our Father who art in heaven, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

So we move to the parable itself in that context of prayer, about the coming of the kingdom, the coming of the rule and reign of our Lord Jesus Christ in glory. He told them a parable about the need to pray, always, putting brackets there about the coming of the kingdom of God and not to lose heart.

Sorry, choir. The congregation have been very anti to this morning and they've left several rows. There was a great church in America in the 70s, but when you walked in at the back, there weren't any pews at the front, but there was a bench on the back wall and you sat on it. And then the steward, when it was full, pressed the button, and it motored forward to the front, and another one came up, and when you came in, you sat. But they found a problem with it because what happened was people were later and later getting to the services, they didn't want to sit on the front pew. I digress.

So here's the parable. In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. Didn't fear God, didn't have respect for his people. So we already know that this judge is to be seen in a negative light. Brothers and sisters don't think that this parable is an allegory where we put God in the place of the judge - classic mistake.

So this judge is unjust, we see him in a negative light. In that same city there is a widow who kept coming to the judge. Now this is strange; in that society, in that culture, women were not able to come to a judge. They had no voice. Women had no voice, even less so, a widow, and she is coming seeking justice from her opponent. Commentators tell us it's quite likely that what she was coming for was an inheritance or money so she could live. That the male heir who, her son I guess, who would have inherited from his father, the widow's late husband, was not providing for his mother. Think about inheritance, think about how what we receive as children of God is spoken of as an inheritance.

And she comes and she asks for justice. And this judge refuses. But the widow is persistent and he has a conversation with himself. Those of you who are visiting, you've not heard what we've been preaching through the summer and teaching, but this is a classic literary motif of Luke to show someone in a negative light - if they have a conversation with themselves, think of them negatively. So this judge says this, 'though I have no fear of God and no respect for anybody', at least he was self-aware. Yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out by continually coming. He is in self-preservation mode.

The words there, 'so she may not wear me out', they're really quite sanitised English. It's a term from gladiatorial battle, from boxing. It basically means the judge is worried that this widow is going to get so

frustrated about not getting justice, she's going to thump him one. You may like to look online - Bishop Martin and Bishop Mike have a blog each week on the Gospel. And Bishop Martin said, 'Bishop Mike, what would you say if I came in with two black eyes?' And the conversation is well worth looking at. The comedy between our two bishops is great. So out of self preservation, this judge in the parable gives the woman justice.

And then Jesus says to his disciples, listen to what the unjust judge says - 'And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day or night?' Will God our Heavenly Father not behave better than a human unjust judge? This is not about comparing God with the unjust judge, as so often you may have heard. I certainly have heard it, that we have to so pray to God that he gets fed up with our prayers and turns around to us and says, oh, for goodness sake, I'll answer their prayers because they might come and give me a couple of black eyes. No, this is a contrast, not a comparison, that God our Heavenly Father will answer our prayers if you pray.

Yes, there is persistence in prayer. We pray week in, week out, day in, day out, the Lord's Prayer, 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, here on earth as it is in heaven.' And then there's the question that comes about the delay. Why is it that there seems to be such a delay in the return of Jesus when there will be judgement? Have you ever thought about it? We see a messy world around us that so needs the kingdom of God, the rule of reign of God. And yes, we as the people of God, can be people who take the kingdom of God to folk that need the kingdom of God in social action, in compassion, in support. But don't we long for the time when, as we hear often in funeral services, from Revelation, 'there will be a new heaven and a new earth' when the former things will be passed away. There will be no crying, no tears', and we long for that. But why does God delay or seek to delay?

Could it be because in his grace and in his mercy he wants to delay judgement for as long as possible? But God knows the consequences of that coming judgement and so he delays. So we have this contrast between praying for the coming of the kingdom, and yet this delay because of God's mercy. Brothers and sisters, let's be persistent in prayer. Let's pray for the kingdom to come, but with the warning that when it does come, it will come quickly.

Amen.