

Proper 24C 2019 SSP

St. Luke 18:1-8

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Today Saint Luke tells us the point of Jesus's parable of the widow and the unjust judge. Jesus's disciples are to pray and not lose heart; persevere and not give up.

In the parable the widow keeps coming to the judge for judgment, vindication, against her adversary. We are not told the circumstances. But we are told the character of the judge. He is unjust because he doesn't care; he has no regard for God or for people. But the widow perseveres and keeps returning for his judgment in her cause: Vindicate me against my adversary! So the judge caves in. He says to himself, though I do not fear God nor have regard for people, I will give this woman what she wants. Otherwise she will wear me out. One distinguished commentator says the judge is worried lest the woman strike him and give him a black eye, and that Jesus meant to make his hearers laugh at the judge.

How much more, therefore, says Jesus, will God hear the prayers of his people and give them justice; yes, and do so suddenly. But then Jesus asks, and the reading closes with this question: Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth? So this is not simply an issue of one particular person and her request; it is an issue of the persevering faith of the whole body of Jesus's disciples.

One of the things commended by Jesus in the parable of the widow and unjust judge is how she hangs in and wears him down with her persistence. I think what he is saying is that we are invited by God, especially through God's Son as our Advocate and Mediator, to take hold of God – as it were – by the lapels of the jacket in our relationship with him.

We have a classic example of this in the old liturgy in the Prayer of Humble Access. I believe this is the quintessential Anglican/Catholic prayer. It arises out of a Gospel story and is the product of at least two famous Thomases: Thomas Aquinas and Thomas Cranmer. The Gospel story is the one where a pagan woman, a Syrophoenician, beseeches Jesus to cure her daughter who is vexed by a devil. Jesus demurs by saying his ministry is to the lost sheep of Israel. When she persists, Jesus roughly says that it's not right to give the children's (the Israelite's) bread to the dogs (the pagans). And she grabs Jesus by his lapels (or his tunic) and says, yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table. Whereupon Jesus commends her for her great faith (better than what he has seen in Israel), and her daughter is healed from that moment.

The Prayer of Humble Access concerning the Body and Blood of Christ reflects this exchange when it says we are not worthy to gather up the crumbs under thy table. And then it, like the Syrophoenician mother, takes the Lord by his lapels, reminding him that his very nature, his property, is to have mercy, and to grant us the full blessings of receiving Holy Communion. So here is today's Gospel right in the heart of the Mass.

When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth. There is a powerful story about the martyrdom of Saint Polycarp, who as a child knew Saint John the Evangelist. Polycarp became Bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor (Turkey) and lived to a great age. A persecution was unleashed against the church by the Roman empire, and Polycarp was invited publicly to disavow his faith in Jesus. He replied, All these years he has stood by me, and now I am asked to deny him? No indeed. And so Polycarp entered into his martyrdom.

After Mass today in the Guild Hall, Canon Dena from the Bishop's office will give the people of Saint Stephen's a chance to reflect on the life, and perseverance, of this congregation

over the several preceding decades. When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth? Well, he will find faith and prayer, here and now, at this beloved parish.

We are to pray, to believe, to love and serve, to persevere in our relationship with God through Jesus. We do not know the times or the seasons as God does. With God, a day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as a day. We are to understand that in Christ Jesus, we see the human face of God, to trust that revelation, to hold to it to the end. As I get older I more and more realize that time is short; eternity is long and presses in upon me every day.

The story of the widow and the unjust judge does not recommend a particular style or technique of prayer. It recommends a whole attitude of faith which expects its object, our Lord Jesus, to come through on the very basis of his nature. To come through at any moment. The unjust judge caved in because he was worn out. But God hears and relates to us with the empathy and passion of Jesus. Let us take him at his word.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.