

Twenty- Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 18:1 - 8 in its biblical context

Luke introduces the parable of the widow and the dishonest judge by telling what is being taught through the story, "Jesus told his disciples a parable about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary." In the story a widow asks for justice against her adversary. For a long time the judge, who cared neither for God nor for humanity, ignores her. However, the judge finally decides to do the right thing, not because it is the right thing to do, but because he fears that the woman might come and strike him. The disciples are compared to the woman. The lesson is perseverance in prayer. This parable is a perfect example of the danger of allegorising a story that is not meant to be an allegory. If we allegorise this story the judge would have to stand for God.

As Jesus continues to explain his teaching, he does compare the judge to God, but not because they are similar. In fact, they are completely different. The main character used to illustrate the point is not an admirable person. The "dishonest judge " is not offered as an example of virtue, nor is the relationship of judge-petitioner meant to suggest God-suppliant, with God in the role of the unjust judge. Jesus tells his disciples, "Pay attention to what the dishonest judge says. Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night? Will he be slow to answer them? I tell you, he will see to it that justice is done for them speedily." The argument is this: if even a judge who cares nothing for justice responds to his petitioner, we can be certain that God will see to it that justice is done for his chosen ones speedily. God is a just judge who will respond to the prayers of "his chosen ones."

The passage ends with a statement that would seem completely unrelated to what precedes it if we were unaware of the larger context in which this passage appears in Luke's Gospel. Jesus says, "But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Remember that Luke is writing this Gospel around AD 85, after the expected return of the Son of Man. As Luke pictures Jesus teaching his disciples to persevere in prayer in the context of the second coming, he knows that the words Jesus is saying hit home for them: Those in Luke's audience are longing to see the day of the Son of Man and have not seen it. Through Jesus' words Luke is reminding his audience to continue to pray and to continue to have faith so that when the Son of Man does come he will find faith on earth.

Reflection

Persistence as presented in the first reading and gospel, is the attitude of one seeking justice. The widow's faith is a response to a God who delivers the just. By remaining persistent in her petition for justice, the widow exemplifies the steadfast faith sought by "the Son of Man." Both justice and faith have to do with our relationship with God. Justice sets us in right relationship with God and others; faith impels us to do whatever is necessary to establish that right relationship. Moreover, when we are in right relationship with God, we are cooperating with God's plan of salvation. Thus, by impelling us toward justice, faith is ultimately seeking salvation. Persistence in prayer, then, is an expression of our own personal striving for salvation.

Whether the response to our own prayer is delayed or speedily given, faith and hope uphold our efforts to "pray always." Persistence requires discipline, and it rests on the hope that the desired outcome of our efforts will be achieved. We persist in prayer because of our hope that God will hear us. This hope, nonetheless, is not merely future-oriented, concerned only with receiving what we request. This hope rests on the conviction of our steadfast relationship to the God who has always been faithful and who always listens to our prayer. If faith seeks justice and salvation, then hope spawns the confidence that our prayer will be heard and one day we will share in everlasting life.

Will God "find faith on earth?" God does find faith in those who persist in prayer. But what about those of us who feel like we are praying persistently for our needs...why is God not answering us? This raises the important issue about what we pray for. If our prayer is simply about getting what we want, then our focus may only be upon ourselves. If, instead, our focus is on "justice (being) done ... speedily," then persistence will get us that justice and, ultimately, salvation. The key is to remember that the answer to our prayers is not getting what we want now, but justice, that is, right relationship with God. Ultimately, then, our persistence in prayer leads to receiving more than we could possibly want or imagine. It leads to favourable judgment when Christ comes and our entering into eternal glory with him. This is not to say that we forgo praying for our own needs; for example, for the good of the family, secure employment, good health, sufficiency in retirement, etc. These needs, however immediate, are always prayed for within the larger picture: what we need to secure right relationship with God and salvation. In this, we are always assured that our prayer will be heard.

Discussion Questions

- How do you pray? Are most of your prayers petitions? What does it mean for you to "pray always"? Have you experienced the power of prayer? Explain.
- When is your prayer faith-filled and justice-centred?
- In what ways do you experience God's presence? Have you considered the possibility that others might experience God's presence through joy? Explain.
- What helps you persist through weariness and remain faithful in prayer?