

“When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?”

Lk 18:8

For many people, today’s passage from St Luke is one of the most problematic in the Gospel because it seems to promise something which our experience has taught us simply isn’t true. If we just persist, and keep asking God again and again, then sooner or later He will answer our prayer and set everything right. So how is it, we want to know, that when we ask for things that are clearly good in themselves – for example, an end to the suffering brought by violence or by cancer – nothing seems to change and suffering is not brought to an end? Does this mean we simply haven’t asked often enough? Does it mean that we should simply keep pestering God?

It is because this passage does not correspond to our experience that we – priests and people alike – tend to push it quietly to one side and ignore it, but that, of course, would be a mistake. Today’s Gospel passage carries an important message. The problem is, the message is more subtle and more nuanced than we first suppose.

In the preceding chapter of Luke’s Gospel Our Lord teaches us about different aspects of prayer. First, He speaks of the need to match our outward lives to our inner spirituality and so avoid causing scandal through hypocrisy (Lk 17:1-2). Then He presses upon His disciples the need to forgive (vv.3-4), and the need to increase the depth and intensity of our faith through prayer and through a life of dutiful service (vv.5-10). Then we hear the account of the Ten Lepers who were healed, but from amongst whom only one bothered to turn back to Our Lord to say thank you (vv.11-19). Then we hear about the end times, about not following this or that fashion but of the need, instead, of sticking with what we know to be true (vv. 20-24). And we hear warnings about not indulging ourselves in

worldly affairs and pleasures on the one hand whilst ignoring the affairs of God on the other (vv.25-32) for if we do this then when the end of the world comes with the Last Judgment of Almighty God those who have been faithful will be taken up to heaven and those who have not been faithful will be left behind (vv. 33-37).

Then comes today's Gospel passage about the persistent widow and the unrighteous judge. In the context of all that has gone before, today's parable is indeed about the need for persistence in prayer. Yet it is even more about the need to persevere in our appeals to the Just Judge in the face of the moral turpitude of a world that sets little store by justice and mercy, that has little regard for goodness and truth, and that considers the concerns of a higher realm to be of no account.

In other words, today's parable is about our need to persevere in our trust in God even in the face of obvious injustice; it is about our need to deepen our faith in the power of prayer even when nothing seems to change; and it is about our need to cling to God and the things of God even, and especially, when everything else is going against us.

In truth, today's Gospel passage sums up this Holy Year's theme of hope. As it says at the top of our parish newsletter every week throughout this Holy Year, *Spes non confundit*, 'Hope confounds not, because the charity – the love – of God is poured forth into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us' (Rom 5:5). Hope is not some vague expectation that things will get better in the future, or some ill-defined wish that such-and-such a thing will or will not happen. No! Hope is what anchors our souls in God so that whatever the storms that come on the surface of our lives, we know that so long as we continue to have faith in God – even when everything is going wrong, and *continues* to go wrong – still we can know that God hears our prayers and will bring mercy and justice upon us all.

Dare we believe this? Or will we only be fair-weather believers, trusting in God only so long as our prayers are answered how and when we want them to be answered?

The word ‘justice’ in today’s Gospel is translated as ‘vengeance’ or ‘to avenge’ in some bibles. In Latin, the verb is *vindicare*, to vindicate, which can carry the meaning ‘to make a claim.’ When the Gospel passage says the judge will give the widow justice, or when it says that God will give justice to the elect, it means that the claims of the one who persists in prayer will be recognized and upheld. But Our Lord’s question – ‘When the Son of Man comes [at the end of time], will He find faith on earth?’ – is a warning to us all not to give up just because our claims have not yet been upheld, but to persevere in our trust in God, to keep our souls anchored in God, and to persist in our attachment to God and the things of God come what may, for only those who persevere to the end will be taken up to heaven on the last day (see Lk 17:33-35).