

St Mary and St Peter's Church, Sunderland

Pontus Bramberg

18th Sunday after Trinity, AD 2022

May I speak in the name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Today's Gospel passage continues Luke's account of Our Lord's journey to Jerusalem and the theme of the preceding passages: the end times. Christ tells us that active reliance on God, as we wait for the end times, is essential even, maybe especially, as the world around us is filled with injustice and unbelief. The widow in Our Lord's parable is faced with this very situation; the judge is explicitly characterised as 'unjust' and from the statement that the judge 'did not fear God' we can conclude that his faith is non-existent or very weak. The widow continues to seek justice from him but the judge, at first, does nothing. Set in the context of first-century Judea, we find the judge's lack of action to be especially reprehensible; in Jewish society, as indeed throughout the Old Testament, widows are regarded as particularly vulnerable, with clear provision being made to help them avoid mistreatment. This particular widow is however seen to be taking matters into her own hands by 'bothering' the judge. The judge initially refuses to grant the widow's request: perhaps he is waiting for a bribe or he simply does not feel like dealing with the issue before him. Either way, the judge finally acquiesces so as to avoid being worn out by the widow 'continually coming'; it might seem like all the widow is doing is persistently asking for justice but a variant translation, which can be found in the footnotes of many Bibles, renders it 'I will grant her justice, so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face'. Whether this is meant literally or figuratively, the judge eventually decides to grant her request.

The Lord continues His parable by contrasting the unjust judge with God. If even an unjust judge eventually grants this widow justice, it is manifestly clear that God, who is infinitely just, will grant justice to His chosen people, that is to say the Church, whatever the state of the world around us. The chosen ones are described as crying to God day and night, reminding us of the prayer of Our Lord in the garden of Gethsemane. In the words of German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer 'every word of prayer must penetrate to a depth of the heart that can be reached only by unceasing iteration'. In the next verse Christ indeed affirms that God will not only grant us justice but that he will do so quickly. This is not to say that God simply acquiesces to the will of us fallen humans; instead, our human will is gradually conformed to the perfect will of God. Indeed even Our Lord has a human will which is not fully united with the divine will, which is also present in Christ, as in the Father and the Holy Ghost, until Christ's prayer in Gethsemane 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want' [Mark 14:36]. In this prayer it is evident that Christ has a will which is not yet united with the Father but by this prayer He unites His will to the Father, even accepting His own death. The human will of Our Lord is the perfection of our human

will and the prime example of what we should imitate. Even more importantly, Christ's humanity is the redeemed and perfected form of our humanity, which, through Baptism, is imparted to us as the beginning of the remedy against our tendency to choose evil over good [concupiscence]. Through Baptism, we become members of the Church, which is the body of Christ. As members of His body we participate in His humanity in a very real sense and by persistent prayer our wills are transformed to be more like His, giving ourselves entirely to the Father. Sometimes, this means picking up our crosses and carrying them, perhaps, as in the case of martyrs, even to death. Ultimately, however, this assent always brings life: as Saint Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' [Galatians 2:19-20]. That little passage contains an interesting translation debate [pistis Christou] but I shall not dwell on that now; the point is that by grace through faith in our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, truly and entirely God as well as truly and entirely human, we are crucified and resurrected with Him. Our faith and assent to God's will brings us to life and redemption, and makes our humanity more perfect. We should not make the mistake of attempting to bind God but we can rest assured that He will vindicate His chosen people, who believe in Him and continually pray to Him. In this secularised world, prayer is often ridiculed as powerless but this parable teaches us the exact opposite: prayer is a powerful and meaningful remedy, through which God makes everything possible.

So, when might we expect this vindication? Our Lord says 'Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' The final vindication will come with Christ at His second coming, foretold in the Book of Revelation, when Christ will judge the living and the dead with perfect justice, but also perfect mercy, and establish His eternal kingdom. Through faith in Christ we are adopted children of God and co-heirs in His kingdom, even if that means suffering in this world. Equally, the kingdom of God is already present here on earth: the Church is the kingdom of God and the New Israel, God's chosen people, the Body of Christ. As baptised believers, the kingdom of God is present in the world through us and it is our universal calling to work, with the grace of God and as His instruments, to grow His kingdom by proclaiming the Good News of Christ to the whole world. In order to be able to do this we must be firmly rooted in unceasing prayer, which gives us strength and allows us to discern God's will.

Thus we return to the original topic: prayer. Prayer is the key to true discipleship and to conforming our wills to that of God. Through prayer we are given the grace to be more like Christ in our whole lives. The Lord will vindicate us. Through baptism and faith we are made kings and priests. Regardless of any temptations of the world, the flesh, or the devil we must remain steadfast in faith and continuously committed to prayer. Prayer is our most powerful weapon against the enemy and what will ultimately vindicate us. Pray therefore without ceasing.

But how do we pray? What do we pray for? A good starting point would be the Lord's Prayer, in which we will join in a few minutes. The Psalms are another good place to go, as is the Book of Common Prayer or indeed a more modern alternative. A personal favourite of mine is the Jesus Prayer, extremely short, easy to memorise and repeat: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner'. Indeed the Mass, or Eucharist,

is the highest form of prayer, in which Christ is made physically present on earth by the priest acting in the person of Christ. It is true that only a priest can consecrate the Eucharist, making Christ present: body, blood, soul, and divinity in the elements of bread and wine (which are always consecrated together but reception under one kind only is still a full communion, although reception under both kinds with a common cup is preferable); it is however equally true that when we attend Mass and especially when we faithfully receive the Eucharist, our prayers are joined with those of the priest, the Church, and indeed Christ himself, making us partakers in this most exalted communal prayer of thanksgiving (which is indeed the meaning of Eucharist). Although the importance of church attendance should be stressed, as it is where we receive the sacraments and join in a more direct way with the community of the faithful, at the end of the day, the essence is not how we pray or what we pray but that we pray.

Pray therefore without ceasing, believe in God, and repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.

Amen.