

24 October 2010

Sunday 30C

Sermon notes:

Luke 18.1-14

Rev Dr Craig Thompson

[I don't usually go for the three-point sermon – probably only done a couple in the last 15 years! – but today it seems helpful to use such a structure.]

When it comes to speaking about prayer and its effectiveness, the first thing it is helpful to note is what prayer is *not*. In particular, prayer is not a kind of practice of magic. While that might seem obvious, a lot of interest in prayer seems to reflect a magical understanding. Magic is a tapping into the order of things in such a way as to influence the world around us. A magician is, literally, a *magus* – a wise one, someone who has studied and learned how the world works.¹ The magician – or witch or wizard – learns about what is required to make this or that happen – what incantation in what language, what combination of eye of newt, toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog is necessary in order to cause someone to fall in love, or to kill the king, or to see a debilitating illness swept away.

Prayer which focuses on getting the words right, the posture right, the emotion, sincerity and personal moral integrity right can be little more than just another form of magic, seeking now to convince God to act for us to change the world, to force God's hand because we've discovered and met all the criteria. Even sheer persistence in prayer – something which the gospel reading today would seem to say is critical – can become just another ingredient we throw into the mix in order to see things change as we would wish. But unlike the unjust judge in the parable, God is *not* worn down by prayer which comes like drops of water on a stone, eventually breaking through. *This* is not Jesus' point about persistence, or it does not involve faith but simply hard work.

The second thing we might helpfully note about prayer, taking our lead from the parable of the widow and the unjust judge, is that what prayer *intends*. Prayer is, properly, a seeking for justice. In the parable, the widow's cry is for justice – perhaps in this case a cry against someone who owes or has taken money or property from her. More generally, however, prayer can be understood to be a crying out for justice against

the enemies of life. To see how this can apply in the broadest way to prayer, we must understand that the sense of "justice" in the Scriptures is much richer than that which we normally associate with the word in English. The justice might be of the legal, social or economic kind, or it could be more personal – what we might call righteousness in English but in fact is covered by the same set of words in Greek as is our idea of justice. When the widow cries out to the judge for justice in the first parable, and the tax collector in the second parable prays for forgiveness, both are praying for the "same" thing. In both cases what is at stake is a "setting right" – a *justifying* of what is not yet just or right, whether it be our social and economic relations to each other, or our personal or moral standing before God.

And this brings me to the last of my three-points, which has to do with the purpose, or end, or effect, of prayer – what it is that praying, or not praying, *signifies*. Our usual understanding would probably be that a good prayer, or an effective prayer, is one in which the result or "answer" looks pretty much like what we actually prayed for: a man was desperately ill, we prayed that he get better, and he did. When the course of events matches our prayers, we might rightly have cause to celebrate and give praise to God. But seeing this change *happen* as we desire it to occur is *not* the sign of our faithfulness in prayer.

The importance of prayer is not in its magic-like ability to effect change in the world but in prayer's expectation that only God can finally put right what is wrong in the world. The widow has a case to be dealt with, and will not have justice until it is, and so she pursues the only one who can put it right. The tax collector in the Temple knows himself less than he should be, and so seeks mercy from the only one who can give it. The only player in these two parables whose prayer is empty is the Pharisee, for his prayer is not about what is lacking in the world but about his own self-satisfaction. When he prays, "I thank you God, that I am what I should be", he declares not only that he is righteous but also that he finds his place in the world to be right.

To put it around the other way, those for whom the world is already sufficient, or who consider themselves already to be sufficient, have nothing really to pray *for*. Prayer is a protest against the world as we now experience it. It signifies a lack. Prayer is honesty about incompleteness, sin, or suffering. And so we pray for those who are sick, or whose lives are in turmoil on account of war or natural disaster. Or we pray for forgiveness, because we are not yet what we should be. And if our prayer is in fact praise or thanksgiving, it has to do with the promise of wholeness or some sacramental experience of it.

¹ And so, to recall a story familiar to us all, the magi (plural) study the stars, and read in them news of the birth of Jesus.

Persistence in prayer, then, is not a matter of squeezing out of a reluctant God this or that occasional favour. It is a judgement that the world is not yet as God has promised that it will be. We do not know real justice, or real righteousness. We are afflicted by disease, death, threats and fears, political and social struggles, difficulties in being together and in being apart. And in prayer we remind God and ourselves that this is so. This Pharisee mis-takes himself and the world, and so has no prayer. The widow and the tax collector get their prayers right because they are right in their assessment of themselves and their situation – which are, as yet, unjust and unrighteous. Their very act of prayer speaks of the possibility a different situation – one in which righteousness and justice are known, and they look to God to make that situation their own.

At the end of the first parable Jesus asks a fairly ominous question: when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? This is not a lament about whether anyone will remain who “believes in God”. There has always been, and doubtless always will be, believers in that trivial sense. But to lack the faith which Jesus seeks in us is to fail in prayer, is simply to be *complacent* – to be satisfied with ourselves, our situation, and the world in general. It is when we imagine that all is well with the world that we fail at faith, and have no need to pray.

Let us, then, learn to pray. Let us learn of a deeper justice and righteousness than we yet know, one which we have seen in the person of Jesus himself and which God would freely give us as our own. Let us learn to desire this justice and righteousness for ourselves and for all. And, in words and in actions, let our lives become prayers which look to see God realise such wholeness for us all, that the Son of Man may indeed find faith when he comes.

Amen.