

The 18th Sunday after Trinity, Proper 24, 16 October 2022

Genesis 32.22-31; Ps 121; 2 Tim. 3.14-4.5; Luke 18.1-8

Before we or should I say I get carried away let us remind ourselves of why Jesus tells the parable of the Persistent Widow. According to Luke he tells it to his disciples those whom he has called to follow Him to remind them to pray always and not to lose heart.

During our observance of Creationtide in September we had a guest preacher, Esther Handschin. She is a pastor of the Methodist Church in Vienna. Her brief was to remind Christians and their communities of their responsibilities to be good and wise stewards of God's creation, of all that God has given us. Creation is of God and is His creation, which he has entrusted to us who are "a little lower than the angels" as the Psalmist puts it. In her sermon Esther reminded us that we have a responsibility to pray in the face of the environmental challenges as they present themselves. She asked us who were gathered for worship on that Sunday a direct question, "Do we bring our concerns for the preservation of the earth in prayer before God and remind him of the promises he has made to us?" That was all she said about prayer on that occasion, but it has stayed with me. It has left a mark. To pray is to be responsible. It is to take responsibility.

Again 'Do we bring our concerns for the preservation of the earth in prayer before God and remind him of the promises he has made to us?' You can exchange our concerns 'for the preservation of the earth' with all sorts of other concerns we have as a global community, a nation state, a local church or as individuals or as families. This is especially pertinent when it comes to our continuing prayer for an end to the war in Ukraine, so that the loss of life might cease, likewise the destruction of people's homes and the accompanying infrastructure, that young men and women might not be drafted into a war that they do not support, etc., etc. I am reminded of men and women especially Germans who after the Second World War said our youth was stolen from us, as they were led astray by an ideology that had taken hold of Europe and found its most virulent manifestation in the Nazi ideology and its state.

It can and does sometimes feel foolish and often very foolish to keep praying in light of the enormity of the challenges we are facing. What can my prayer effect? And so it spreads – this debilitating attitude concerning prayer – from one person to another, from one community to another, from one church to another, from one nation to another and we in

the process truly become powerless. The agency that God gives us through and in prayer we forfeit. One of the telling versicles and responses of Morning and Evening Prayer is this one:

Give peace in our time, O Lord.

Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only thou, O God.

Without God we will not find that peace which we desire for ourselves and for the world.

Last Sunday *Ádám Bak*, the Christ Church Ministerial Experience Scheme intern for 22/23, reminded us in Paul's words and in his own to give thanks at all times. To give thanks at all times is an integral part of any Christian prayer life. It is God who has given us this tool whereby we remind ourselves of God's goodness and keep before us that even in our uncertainty, the present chaos, the impending threat, we need to keep seeing and acknowledging that there is much to remain grateful for. All the goodnesses and kindnesses that make up a good part of each day. It is never all gloom and doom. How did St Teresa of Avila put it

Nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten.

Those that seek God shall never go wanting.

Nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten.

God alone fills us.

These words of the great Spanish mystic of the Christian faith lead us to Jacob through whom Israel and the nations are to be blessed, leading us more precisely to Jacob's struggle with God of which we heard just now. It is a picture of prayer. It is a picture of our struggle with the discipline of prayer. It is a picture of our struggle with God in prayer. Jacob wants to know God's name and he persists. He wins the fight, but he is forever changed. Jacob's walk with God has changed him. It has taken on a new dimension. This is indicated rather awkwardly, but subtly in God touching his hip. His walk with God will now look different. It will feel different. It is different. Jacob and his walk with God will forever be informed by this encounter. He can't run from this night spent in prayer wrestling with God.

Few of us will have spent all night wrestling with God in prayer. The intensity of the struggle in prayer in a few sentences here is well conveyed. This is no calming meditation. It demands his whole body, every fibre of his body. He prevails. He is victorious, but he is also forever changed. His walk with God has marked him. In Christian terms this is somewhat like baptism.

He has become a new creation to himself. Can he in the words of one of our prayer collects, forsake what lies behind and reach out to that which is before. These words are based on words of Paul addressed to first century Christians living in the Roman city of Philippi in Macedonia as it then was.

That prayer requires commitment and that it requires discipline becomes clear when we turn our attention back to today's parable of the Persistent Widow. It is through her persistence that she obtains justice. It is a parable through which Jesus shows the disciples that he is aware of their and our inner prayer life. The struggles we have with prayer and our questions about its effectiveness, but as Luke indicates, Jesus instructs us not to lose heart and to persist. At the end of the parable he puts a question to the disciples. He asks it of each one of us. "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

I want to address this question by providing two answers. Both are straightforward to those who believe. Yes, I do believe that the Son of Man will find faith on earth, when he comes. I meet people in my daily life that exhibit signs of faith, of a faith lived honestly before God and in community with their questions, their uncertainties and their doubts, not claiming too much or too little. Who don't make a show of themselves as they are 'almost' always pointing away from themselves to God as made known in Jesus Christ. The second is theological. It too is simple. Really? A theological answer simple? Yes, because it has to do with God's reconciling work in Jesus, which is at the heart of our faith. The faith of the Church is none other than the faith of Jesus himself. In the baptism service we put it like this. If you have been baptised into a death like his, you are also baptised into a resurrection like his. Baptism is effective, because in it we come to know that we are utterly dependent on God's saving work. We throw ourselves onto God for there is no wholeness in us without God.

The faith of the Church, which is the Body of Christ, is always the faith of Jesus. The faith that God will find on earth is the faith of Jesus himself. It is this faith that each and every one of us is called to live and is mandated to commend to others. It is for this reason we look to Jesus as "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith", as we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews (12.1,2). It is for this reason that the celebrant says in the Catholic Mass, "look not on our sins, but on the faith of Your Church..." Here the celebrant is not referring to the church as an institution, but as the Body of Christ as the Book of Common Prayer puts it succinctly, "and that we are very (true) members of the mystical body of your Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people." (BCP 1662)

What are a few of the takeaways from this sermon?

Firstly, in this sermon I have referenced Scripture New and Old. I have quoted the BCP, the Catholic Mass, St Teresa of Avila, and I have referenced Esther and *Ádám* here. To be a Christian is to be in a conversation with the Christian community today, as well as the voices of the past, which are more present than some would want to make us to believe. Those voices of the past are often more relevant than the voices of today. The conversation that only seeks a conversation framed by the *Zeitgeist* is not a Christian conversation in its true and fullest sense and will be found wanting. The conversation of which I speak is attentive to the conversation that Christians have been having with each other down the ages and that predates the Christian era stretching back to the patriarchs and beyond.

Secondly, the need for prayer always and at all times must be accompanied by a willingness to change, to allow God working in us to change us. If the struggle is 'real' then be ready to be surprised, to be changed. If you remain the same, if you do not change then there are questions to be asked... Jacob's struggle did just that it changed him. He was marked.

Thirdly, 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?' I refer you to the above answers given and especially to the second one, for Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith and never we ourselves. Thanks be to God.

And finally can you guess? "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." May it be so. **Amen.**