

Persistence in Faith

Homily for October 16, 2022
29th Sunday Ordinary Time

In a certain city there was a corrupt bureaucrat who neither feared God nor respected people; and there was a welfare mother in the same city who kept coming to him and saying, "Make my landlord fix the furnace and insulate the walls. I can no longer afford to pay the heating bills and my children are freezing." For a while the bureaucrat refused to listen, but the woman kept coming to his office every day with her three children, and each day she would make her plea again. After several weeks of this, he thought to himself, if I don't give this woman what is right, she will pester me to death. An order was issued, the furnace was replaced and insulation was installed in the walls.

The next day the woman was back in the bureaucrat's office with her children. She thanked him for what he had done and then she said, "Now let me tell you about my plumbing problems."

I use this humorous retelling of today's parable to make an important point – persistence in faith is key in the living of our Christian life. This is because as we live in this world there are times when life's circumstances seem like one broken thing after another. Perhaps you know whereof I speak when you think of challenges you are facing right now. Maybe it is there is unresolved grief that causes you deep sorrow, challenges with finances in a time of high inflation, the pain of marital distress that seems to be intensifying, dealing with the consequences of abuse or other trauma that is leaving you just hanging in there; young adult children who are engaged in harmful activities that leave you unsettled and anxious. Maybe you are aware of an extraordinary spiritual oppression, chronic illness or depression.

In today's Gospel Jesus wants us to hear him say to us, "I understand and I know how it can seem like the way of faith is a challenge, and the words of prayers seem to go no further than the ceiling; does God hear; does he even care?"

Let's delve into the parable and see how Jesus really does understand how challenging it can be to live by faith, and hear how he wants to encourage us today.

Listen again to how the Gospel reading begins. St Luke tells us Jesus told this parable to his disciples about their need to pray and not lose heart". So here is the first thing to take from this reading. Jesus is telling this story to those who are his closest followers, the disciples, people that really wanted to learn from Jesus. And he tells this to them so that they would not lose heart, but pray always.

The actual word used for lose heart has as the root of the word in Greek, evil. So a more literal translation of this phrase would be "not to give up in the midst of evil".

What happens when we lose heart, when we want to give up in the midst of evil? We can enter into that dark place where we wonder, "Am I losing my faith, do I believe? Or perhaps the question is better expressed this way: Why carry on with attending Mass, sharing in the life of

the community? I feel so deflated and without motivation to carry on with the way of discipleship. All of us can find ourselves in spiritually deflated in the midst of evil in the course of this present life. So let's see how the example of the widow can inflate our faith.

This is the key to the parable. The woman in the story is a widow, she has no standing, and influence and no way to leverage with the judge - other than by her persistence. The judge is indifferent to her plight and is without faith in God or respect for people. The characters help us to understand something about the way of faith. It is this. In this world, there are many people who will be indifferent to our suffering and we will feel desperate and alone like the widow. Also the person with all of this influence and power, has no regard for God and lacks compassion for people.

This is often how it seems in a world like this. The person who is loudest is the one who is careless about the things of God and without compassion towards others. Because of this the world can so often appear godless and heartless.

But pause now and consider with me the widow. There is something that she has going for her that the judge doesn't. Her integrity. Her only words in the story are: "Grant me justice against my opponent". She knows that this is her due and so she persists, going back to the judge repeatedly until he concedes to her demand with these words:

I will grant her request so that she will not wear me out by continually coming

Now the phrase wear me out, is kind of tame. The literal way to translate this phrase would be: "lest she come and give me a black eye". It's a boxing term. St Paul actually uses this elsewhere when he talks about boxing the air or shadowboxing, this imagery of punching. So she's not the persistent widow, she's the violent widow, and perhaps you've known some old ladies like this, who you don't...you don't want to mess with them. That's the kind of woman that's being described here. Basically, this judge is afraid that if he doesn't give this woman a verdict, she's going to come and do physical violence against him. She's going to give him a black eye. So there's a bit of a humorous element here to the parable as well.

And here is the point, we are to be tenacious in our persistence when it comes to prayer and trusting in God, for he is not like the unjust judge, although at times from our limited perspective we might conclude this. Rather Jesus says of God: "Will not God grant justice to those who call out to him, day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you God will quickly grant justice to them".

Now here is the question we all can ask when considering what Jesus says here. You may be saying I have struggled with this issue in my life and repeatedly cry out to God and there seems no change in my circumstances. Things are unresolved - what does Jesus mean when he says God will grant them justice quickly. To answer this question we need to hear the end of today's passage: When the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth"?

Jesus wants us to see all of our present struggles within the larger picture of God's eternal plan and purposes for our lives. Many people my age, (I am 61) comment on how quickly the years

past, and our thirties didn't seem that long ago. Life goes by so quickly and Jesus wants us to realize that when we look back on our earthly years from heaven we will see in retrospect how God has answered our prayers. And so Jesus wants to encourage us during the few decades of our earthly life to be like this widow. To persevere in prayer, to allow for the community of the faithful to support us in our battle in the midst of evil, just as Aaron and Hur supported Moses arms in the battle against the Amalek. Amalek was a perennial enemy of the Jewish people and we are told that Joshua defeated Amalek. Joshua is another form of the name Jesus.

May we therefore be a people who in our prayer trust that Jesus will be with us in our combat against evil thankful that the day will come when the battle will be over, and there will be no more need to attend to the broken furnace or for that matter to the plumbing.