

Prayer, justice and mercy: the wonder and danger of prayer

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Luke 18.1-14

Introduction

I am the proud grandfather of a young grand-daughter. She is four years old. And do you know what? She is very persistent.

‘Mum, Grandpa, Mum, Grandpa.’ ... ‘Wait a moment darling.’ ... ‘Mum Grandpa, Mum, Grandpa.’ ... ‘We are talking darling.’ ... ‘Mum, Grandpa ...’.

And the other parable, the Pharisee and the toll-collector, reminds me of sitting next to a blowhard and braggart at a dinner party. I cannot escape. And I want to scream. There is no possibility of conversation or engagement. All we get is a long hymn of self-justification and comparative self-aggrandisement.

Like all Luke's stories these cleverly crafted little tales take us into a world of metaphor and picture that we can inhabit in our imaginations. And like good stories every time we inhabit them we will find something new. And I should remind you that, just before this, Jesus had spoken of a world about to fall apart, when Rome would overrun Palestine with unparalleled ferocity. How should disciples pray?

So let's inhabit the world of the judge and the widow for a start and see what we can learn about prayer.

The corrupt judge and persistent widow, 18.1-8

The parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow turns on the disparity of power between the judge and the widow.

The Judge

Judges were meant to act to declare God's judgement and establish God's shalom among the people. Judgment was about the character of God.

The care of widows was grounded in God's mercy and justice and, therefore, in the law. God is a father of the fatherless, and a defender of the widows. Those who abused such powerless people suffer judgement themselves.

The judge had to hear all complaints and to represent God's justice so that peace could come between the people of God (Deuteronomy 1.16-17).

The judge is a man of notable status in the community. He occupies a position of power and privilege in the world of his day. He is described ambiguously as not fearing God and not respecting people. On the surface and in our cultural context this might mean he is unbiased, objective, neutral. But the context in Luke (6) makes it plain that in this cultural context he is a man of intense wickedness. In Jesus' world not fearing God and not having regard for persons signified one's thorough wickedness.

The judge's understanding of justice fell far short of God's notion of justice as described and expounded in Israel's scriptures. God was partial and expected judges to fear Him in showing partiality to the poor and oppressed: the orphan, the widow and the alien (refugee) (Leviticus 19.9-10; 23.22; Deuteronomy 24.19-22 and see James 1.27).

The widow

Jesus' world was one in which a widow was deprived of her husband's support but could not inherit her husband's estates. She had no economic clout.

The widow has no intrinsic standing in the community. Widowhood represented total vulnerability, status deprivation and need. That this woman is before the courts which were a world of men it means that she has no kinsman to bring her case and be her advocate.

Nevertheless, the widow gives the judge a battering, a beating, a poke in the eye ('bothering' is far too weak a translation). She should have accepted her place but she does not and surprises the judge with her powerful petitioning.

The widow represents here all the people at the bottom; foreigner, the orphan and others at the bottom of the ancient pile.

Obviously persistence is her thing. It is all she has. She belongs to the poor of the earth. She will not be put off by even the greatest rebuff and humiliation. She will persist night and day.

Losing heart, growing weary is not on her agenda.

As we read the parable we need to realise that the widow is a model of prayer because she helps the reader expand the idea of prayer to include the whole life of believers including their crying out to God in protest against injustice.

Persistent prayer for justice and right is an act of faithfulness, of faithful living in a highly stressed environment, not God-bothering as it is sometimes described. Talking to one's family and friends is not a bother but a delight. Hearing one another is essential to communication and understanding.

Her persistence is grounded in hope and assurance. In the end God's shalom will come and she will share in it. Her hope and assurance is so strong that rejection, corruption, ridicule or her poor social standing will never put her off.

And this is what Jesus describes as faith. Faith is an active of the kingdom of peace. Faith is joining with God in God's of shalom and putting things to rights.

The parable reaffirms the picture of God as impatient with injustice and oppression. God remains a "... defender of the widows..." and expects that such impatience will characterise the people of God.

If a widow can wear down a corrupt judge to do what is right, how much more will God, who loves to grant justice to his people respond to us, and that quickly.

God will respond to the prayers of his people. And the parable makes the point clearly that God responds to the need of the powerless and oppressed. How does God hear our prayers if they are self-centred, concerned with trivia and irrelevant to God's redemptive purposes for justice and right for the poor and oppressed?

And it is this that connects the two stories.

The Pharisee and the tax collector, 18.9-14

Once again the scene is different but it invites us to inhabit it for a while. Again two characters dominate the parable this time set in the place of prayer, the Temple courts.

One man stands by himself. That is suggestive. He is separate believing that is the way God wants him to be in order to serve God. He is deeply religious. He is probably moderately wealthy and he is at home in the Temple.

The Pharisee behaves exemplarily; praying, fasting and giving and living a life that is not corrupt. All good.

He begins his prayer with a thanksgiving to God like a psalm but what does he thank God for; himself it seems. He divides himself off from the tax collector and 'others' counting them as belonging to a class of reprobates guilty before God and deserving of God's judgment.

The second man is not at home here in the Temple. He is quite out of place. If anyone knows his occupation they will avoid him. They do not wish to contract defilement.

Both pray, both leave the Temple. To the outside eye nothing has changed. Somewhere, however, a seismic shift has taken place. Once again we are invited to contemplate the complex nature of prayer and faith. Both address God. Both speak in first person prayer.

Only one is vindicated.

The Pharisee

Self-absorption corrupts prayer. This man's own virtue corrupts him because he is absorbed by it. He does not lead a life of criminality true, or social disgrace. In fact he can thank God for himself. He is a good citizen who does not harm anyone else.

Contempt for others corrupts prayer. Only to be able to see the rogue, the adulterer or tax collector and express contempt for them corrupts life. Setting up others as enemies, singling them out, weighing ourselves up against them is a sure way to corrupt the spiritual life and the life of faith.

Religious activity is no sure indication of a serious life of prayer. Religious activity such as giving and fasting are only helpful if they are linked to empathy, mercy, and justice.

Religious life, as the history of the church shows only too well, can be a cover for self-absorption and contempt, for pride and self-righteousness.

The tax collector

The tax collector matches the Pharisee; he stands apart, he prays, but what a difference there is between the two. This man is of low status, a deviant, who has no place among others and no honour to trade as does the Pharisee. He can only take refuge in God's grace and mercy.

In the world of the story the tax collector takes a simple stance. I am in need of mercy. I bring nothing except myself, broken and confused by the part I play in society and I cast myself on mercy. In mercy maybe I can find life. His humility places him among God's people; his relation with God has been him to Godself as only God can do.

I am not as good as the Pharisee. I cannot match his status or religious life. My need is mercy that I might be set free and find peace.

Conclusion

In the modern search for spirituality characteristic of our age one danger stands out: self-absorption; the meeting of my needs can become a mantra of post modernity. These two stories make us reflect on a spirituality that is not about me but about God and my neighbour, about justice and peace, and not about separation and contempt. These two stories help us with the corrupting effects of power and status, religion and self-justifying virtue in the spiritual life. They warn us that prayer is a beautiful and dangerous place because there we must be true or we risk having our truth exposed. We have to take the place of the tax collector and the widow, speaking from the bottom of the pile with the bottom of the pile.