NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST 20.10.19 Luke 18.1-14

Luke’s story was written in the period of the delayed, but sought after Second coming of the all-conquering Christ, in a period of persecution, hence there was a need for constant prayer in the early Church.

Luke’s Jesus poked fun at the then corrupt powers-that-be, seeking to upend the unjust judicial system which was stacked against widows, orphans, foreigners. Judges were expected to be partial to these unfortunates, and to champion their cause to ensure their rights. But, many judges were then notoriously lazy and faithless, unless plaintiffs had influence or money to bribe their way to a favourable verdict. Jesus infused comedy into a scene of a lowly widow pummelling a recalcitrant arbiter of alleged justice. This obnoxious judge feared neither God nor respected humans; he, the unjust power- holder was unwilling to hear the plea of the poor justice-seeking woman. With no male relative to plead for her, all that she had was the justice of her cause and loads of bothersome persistence.

It grew to a war of nerves. When the widow relentlessly persisted in her pleas for justice, creating sufficient pressure to influence his answer, his nerves gave way. Jesus would have raised a laugh by using a boxing term; the widow gave the judge “a strike under the eye,” the equivalent of a verbal “black-eye,” which would shame the judge in his public appearance. Only then, did he relent to shut up her incessant badgering. A helpless woman had exhausted him into equity, and received the justice that she sought.

The woman revealed the power of weakness over wickedness, as Jesus will do in his passion, death and resurrection, as he had done in his empowering encounters with the poor and the marginalized in his public ministry. Thus, he encourages us to be like the woman, never to lose heart and despair at apparent unanswered prayer, but to be persistent. If the judge gave in to the widow because of self-interest, so much more will our compassionate God do justice for those who persist in expectant, faith-filled prayer.

Jesus ended the parable, promising, “And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?” There is only one other use of the words “Chosen One” in Luke 23.35. Jesus, then dying on Calvary, was mocked by the religious leaders: ‘They scoffed saying “He saved others. Let him save himself if he is really God’s Messiah, the Chosen One!”’ In spite of their hatred, inadvertently, they got it right, for the Chosen One died, crying out just as the human chosen ones are to cry out day and night in prayer. Breathing his last, Jesus, the Chosen One, gave us the best proof of God’s justice, for God did not delay long, three days only, before granting justice to the vulnerable Chosen One who prayed from the Cross.

In the ancient world, widows were the most destitute and extremely vulnerable beings. They were assailable persons deserving of special protection, as they lived in the absence of family love and support. The God of the Exodus warns “You shall not abuse any widow. If you do, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their crying, and my wrath will burn” [Exodus 22.22]. Luke’s widow represents all the un-respected people, those who plead for justice to the point of creating sufficient pressure to make things happen in their favour.

Widows appear as prophetic and faithful. The first widow in the Christian scriptures was Anna, a prophetess for 63 years in the temple, who spread the news of Jesus’ birth [2.37]. Jesus praised a second widow, who gave her last coins, all she had to live on, as a model of faithful generosity. In Jesus’ eyes, she had given more than all the wealthier Temple patrons. Jesus remembered, too, the widow of Zarephath, who fed the prophet Elijah from her meagre, famine-reduced food supply. When her son was dying, the prophet returned him to life [Luke 4.26]. Jesus replayed this when he raised to life the only son of a widow [Luke 7.11].

In no way can God be compared to the reluctantly unresponsive judge. If even the most unjust of judges finally relents to the ceaseless petitions of the defenceless widow, then how much more will our God, who is a just judge, answer our prayers. Our God does not need to be badgered into listening; our Good God responds willingly. This is an encouragement to pray without ceasing, confident of God’s desire to respond.

Jesus taught examples to assure us that our God wants what is best for us. Jesus taught “Consider the ravens; that neither sow nor reap, yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds?” He went on “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin, yet, if God clothes the grass of the field, how much more will he clothe you? “[Luke 12.24-28].

In truth, our God is more like the widow in her relentless commitment, persisting until she received justice. The insensitive clod of a judge, could be bribed. To equate him with God is very shaky. We know that God hears the cry of the poor, and that God is eager and willing to give good things to those who ask.

Why not reverse the characters? See the widow as the image of God and not the judge. The widow, like God, determinedly resisted injustice, named it, denounced it, until right was achieved. The widow acted as God does; the widow was God-like. The widow can be Jesus, who came into this unjust world on behalf of the oppressed, seeking justice for them. Powerless as Jesus seemed on Calvary’s cross, he defeated the power of death, so the widow achieved victory for right. She/Jesus endured against all odds until justice was done.

Luke’s parable ends “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Surely, yes, in unexpected places and not among the professional religionists or the ones certain of their own righteousness. Returning Christ will find faith among the outsiders, the unlovely, the bleeding woman who reached out to touch Jesus, the unclean Samaritan leper who came back cleansed, the friends of the paralytic, who dug through Peter’s roof, the ones who are certain of their lowliness like the sinful woman who bathed Jesus’ feet with her shame-filled tears. These are the ones who persist in prayer against all odds for ultimate justice to be given.

How do we followers not lose heart in the hazy light of his uncertain return? How do we react if God’s justice is not delivered according to our timetable? How do we go on living in the face of injustice, and accept our fate in an oppression-ridden world? The widow’s prayer was not passive. It actively sought and pursued God’s will day and night. Whenever Christ will come we must be morally and spiritually ready, that is, we must live as if Jesus were returning today, with our lamps lit, as though we were waiting for our master, ready to open the door to usher him in. “When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart! Then shall I bow in humble adoration, and there proclaim: My God, how great thou art!”