

**Homily for October 21, 2001
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle C**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Exodus 17:8-13
2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:2
Luke 18:1-8**

Do we have the guts to believe and pray ardently?

This parable of the persistent widow is found only in Saint Luke's gospel. It starts off talking about prayer but quickly moves to a much deeper and more profound issue: justice; and then to a still deeper note: guts, stick-to-itiveness.

The scripture scholar John Dominic Crossan has an elegant translation of part of this gospel: "A widow with no shame confronted a judge with no conscience. Time and again she pleaded for vindication before him. Finally he gave in because, even if ethics did not bother him, she did."

This passage, chapter 18, is perhaps the most forthright affirmation in the entire New Testament that the God of Jesus is indeed the God of justice. Jesus stands firmly in the prophetic tradition as he testifies to a God who will "secure the rights of his chosen ones" and "will see to it that justice is done for them speedily." If these words were addressed to a different audience, to a crowd of the powerful and the complacent, to the widow's adversary and the judge himself and their cronies, these words would function as a powerful warning against oppression and exploitation of the poor.

Are there circumstances in which we ourselves might be more properly identified with the figure of the judge than that of the widow? Do we more easily favor the status quo? Do we end up doing the right thing because we are forced into it? What we see here is Jesus as a Mediterranean Jewish peasant speaking to other peasants in the dangerous location of an occupied country and in the explosive circumstances of an economy booming for the upper urban classes through increasing indebtedness, land expropriation and destitution on the part of the rural lower classes." Furthermore, we know from historical studies that widows in Jesus' time were not just women grieving their dead spouses; these were uneducated outcasts, bereft of name, land, wealth and recognition. They were not seen as productive or important members of society; in fact, they often were denied basic membership in society, relegated to the edges of civilization along with orphans, the homeless and those with contagious diseases.

In this context the widow's success before the judge takes on surprising significance: here is this invisible person – not just a woman, but a woman who lost her husband and with him nearly everything she once had – obtaining justice in a legal dispute. More than merely an exhortation to faithful prayer, these

words of Jesus offer the presence and grace of God to the most invisible and destitute and despised among us. Justice for those who least expect it. A win for the losing side. Widows might not be in as sad a strait today in our country, but we know the reality of a two tier society of rich and poor, those on the inside versus those on the outside, the haves versus the have-nots.

The story has been used to illustrate the need for persistence in prayer and in the pursuit of justice. If the widow's persistence is finally successful in winning over the unjust judge, how much more so will the prayers of the faithful disciples be heard and answered by the God of justice. If the widow doesn't get discouraged even in the face of repeated rejection, the disciples should continue to ask God for vindication even if visible results are not immediately evident. Yet the final sentence of the passage seems to suggest that this may not necessarily be the case: "But when the Son of man comes will he find faith on Earth?" The assumption of the question seems to be that he may not find much, that people don't remain committed for the long haul, that they are inclined to lose heart when they don't get an immediate response from God to their cries for justice. As different as God is from the judge, the disciples seem to be just as much unlike the widow: while she doesn't give up despite the odds, they do give up when faced with hardship or persecution despite the fact that God is on their side.

But here's the third level of the parable study: the passage is deliberately left open-ended, unfinished. It's a question. It's up to us, up to Jesus' audience, to come up with the answer. The Son of man will indeed find faith

on Earth if we ourselves are faithful, if we pray day and night for the revelation of God's justice, God's reign, and work to enfold that justice in our daily lives. He will find faith if we confront the inequities of life, large or small, with a firm belief in the victory of the God of justice, visible above all in the risen Jesus who confronted and triumphed over the inequities of his execution at the hands of most unjust judges. Faith, as the saying goes, is believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change. Gaze upon the crucified and let us pray: Lord God, your scriptures have given us wisdom for salvation through faith. May your word continue to inspire us to persistence in Christ Jesus the Lord. Amen

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