



Revd Ro's Reflection on The 18th Sunday after Trinity Proper 24 Year C

2 Timothy 3.14 - 4.5

Luke 18.1-8

Our gospel reading today is the parable of the unjust judge and I must admit that since I watched 'Downton Abbey the Movie' I always smile at this story. At one point in the film it is made clear that a distant relation of the Granthams is not going to leave her estate to Lord Grantham, her nearest heir. The Dowager Countess of Grantham, Maggie Smith is naturally furious and announces she intends to 'challenge the will.' All she needs to do, she declares, is to find a 'friendly judge.' 'Friendly or corrupt?' asks another character, 'Whatever it takes,' she replies with that well known smile, another amusing bon mot from Maggie.

I dare say most of us haven't had much experience of court, I remember being called to give evidence once in a civil case, I was pretty young and very, very nervous. I got through it but the whole thing now is a bit of a blur. Better known are the TV judges who deal with civil cases. When I was recovering from a nasty illness which involved brain fog, I trained myself to think more quickly by watching 'Judge Judy.' It took a long time but eventually, when I began to be pretty sure what questions she would be asking next, I realised I was getting near to recovery!

A civil case is nearest to the story we have here. There is no jury; it all depends on the judge. Of course in the days of Jesus there was no police force to bring criminals to justice, no twelve people to give their verdict. It was left to the person who was wronged to deal with it all, to get the judge to deal with the case and to see that justice was done. The plaintiff had all the responsibility, even in the gravest of cases. This was tough enough in itself but the woman in this story is faced with another problem. In this parable the judge is anything but just.

² 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people.' He obviously had no compassion, no care for justice and no interest in God! The plaintiff was a woman, if he was likely to ignore anyone's plea it would be a woman's and she is a widow to boot. The poor woman was alone in the world, she had no help at all and women, we must remember,

could not give evidence in court. All the hope she has is this corrupt judge. What on earth is she to do?

We need to go back to the introduction to the parable.

¹ 'Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.'

'To pray and not to lose heart.' Is the key, this is a parable about petitioning God in prayer. This poor woman is petitioning the judge to act for her, to give her justice. The judge in the parable is standing for God. That in itself seems crazy, no one is less like God than this official who cares nothing for anything or anybody. But that is just the point. This man is the absolute antithesis of God, who is the embodiment of love, justice and compassion.

So then there is only one thing the poor widow can do, keep at this man and at him, till he is so sick of her he'll see she gets justice just to get a bit of peace.

³ 'In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." ⁴ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." '

Jesus explains the parable very clearly which is something he does not always do, often he lets his hearers work things out for themselves.

⁶ 'And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.'

God is as different from this man as it is possible to be and if that judge grants justice simply because she never gives up how much more will God, who loves humanity, grant the requests of his children. When they pray they are not to lose heart because God, who loves them, knows what they need and desires what is best for them. I guess that is the crux of it really. There is all the difference in the world in demanding things from God, trying to get him to do what we want, and asking humbly, trusting to him who loves us and knows what is best. One of my favourite bible verses is, 'Into thy hands O Lord I commend my spirit.' That is all about trust in God. When we pray to God we make our petitions, our intercessions then we need to wait in trust on the God who loves us. Our lives should be prayer centred, Jesus gives us this example, and he goes apart to pray to his Father, he teaches his disciples to pray. Paul explains how important prayer is, so often he begins his letters by saying how he prays for the people he is writing to. The early Celtic Christians based their lives around prayer and the relationship with God who was as close as their own breathing. Prayer is central to our Christian faith and in prayer we can be with our loving Father who desires what is best for us. It is a huge privilege and joy. We must have faith in God and in his justice and love for us.

'And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

Jesus has already come to earth, God and man, and yet tragically he found so little faith in humanity. The vast majority turned from him and the powers that be made their mind up to oppose and finally destroy him. Yet some heard his message in faith, some turned to him and from those few followers the word spread throughout the world. Jesus has been touching lives and turning lives around ever since and still is doing so. People throughout history have not only had faith in him but have been willing to suffer and die for the faith. Jesus will come again to rule the earth in God's recreated order. It will be Jesus who is the just judge who will come to judge humanity then. The world is in a sorry state now; it was then, but it is up to those who follow Jesus to live by the kingdom values, to make love, justice and peace their touchstones and to draw others to Jesus.

Here is the link between this gospel story and Paul's second letter to Timothy; this is how chapter four opens.

^{4.1} 'In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom,'

Paul knows Jesus will return to judge the earth. All Christians and particularly leaders like Paul and Timothy have a commission to not only teach the faith of Christ but to live out Jesus' way in their lives. We have already seen that this is not easy. Just prior to our passage Paul has outlined the persecution he faced, yet he counted it as nothing compared to serving his Lord and saviour.

'What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹²Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. ¹³But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived.'

There is no doubt that life was hard for these first missionaries, we have seen that it is tough for Timothy, young, shy, at times doubting his ability. He is in charge of the new church in Ephesus, a city whose people worship other gods. Persecution is a fact of life, not just for the leaders but for every Christian. Paul never hides that fact. He, like Jesus, is quite clear about the difficulties that Christians will face. He, like Jesus, had faced persecution and he, like his Lord, is soon to be executed by the Roman authorities. But his faith in salvation is sure and he knows that Jesus will come again, as we say in the creed, 'to judge both the living and the dead.' So his letter seeks to guide Timothy. All that Paul has said is true, life will be tough and people will oppose him, wickedness is all around as it always was but,

¹⁴ 'But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.'

Paul has already stated that Timothy has a Christian family,

⁵ 'I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.' (2 Timothy 1)

Ever since he was a child he has been raised in the faith, and he has learned from his teacher and companion Paul. Timothy has had the best grounding it is possible to have and against all adversity he needs to hold fast to that. Also he is grounded in the scriptures, the Jewish scriptures, which tell of the coming of the Messiah. Jesus is the fulfilment of the scriptures and Timothy has been grounded in the Christian faith too. He must hold fast to this.

¹⁶ 'All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.'

The Jewish scriptures covered many genres, written by many people, each writer with his own personality. But essentially what inspired them was God; it is as if God breathed the breath of life into them as Jesus did to the disciples in the upper room. From scripture we are able to learn, to teach and we have them as our guide to behaviour. Paul is referring to the Jewish scriptures, but looking at our New Testament, these characteristics are indeed true. Scripture teaches us, guides our behaviour, enables us to recognise when we go wrong. With the scriptures we are equipped to teach others. We need to remember though that the scriptures are written by people, also that we do not use them as a tool to get our own way. This is the main point,

‘everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.’

As we read the Christian teachings we need to follow the example of Jesus Christ who is the fulfilment of the Jewish scriptures. Jesus walked with humanity, felt as we feel, lived as we do and understood the emotions we feel. He left us the pattern to follow, summed up in these words, ‘Love God’ and ‘Love one another as I have loved you,’ Then he went and lived it. He loved us so much that he gave his life for us and won salvation for us. Our relationship with God was restored and we are loved by him. This is the teaching we not only need to pass on but to live out in our lives. So Paul writes to Timothy in chapter four,

^{4.1} ‘In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ²proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.’

I think one of the key phrases here is, ‘with the utmost patience’ I have quoted before the character who said, ‘You can only win people lastingly to anything by love.’ Well that is two edged; firstly what we say and what we teach must be motivated by love, love for Jesus and love for the people we come into contact with. To seek to impose your own will on someone, to bully them or to abuse power is simply not acceptable. It will have the opposite effect. People will be drawn to Jesus by those who truly love him and try to live their lives according to his teaching. There will be times to rebuke; poor Timothy will have to know when to do that. Things are difficult not only in society but also within the church but it needs to be done in love. He must also remember to encourage, as must all leaders. People are far more likely to follow, to work hard, if they are encouraged. Praise and a thank you are very important. People need to be built up not diminished. That is a quality of good leadership and it is important to understand that. Leaders who don’t need to review their behaviour. Paul goes on to outline the difficulties the church is facing.

³ ‘For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. Indeed we have seen that people are making up other doctrines, leading people away from the ‘true faith.’

People are following spurious teachings because it suits them to do so, because they think it is more akin to what they want to hear. Certainly to follow the true teachings of Jesus is not easy and persecution will follow so it is easy for people to water it down and for others to be lured into it. Of all this Timothy is only too aware but Paul is clear,

⁵ ‘As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.’

And to go back to Paul’s command at the beginning of the passage,

¹⁴ ‘But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.’

All this is true of the situation Timothy found himself in all those years ago; it is true of the problems facing the early church. However, if we stop and think about it, it is true now. All too often people seek to impose their will on others; sadly scripture is often quoted to back up what they want to do. No one has the right to ride roughshod. We are all valued and loved by God, in God’s eyes there is no status at all. All are one to him. When that happens it is up to us to stand up and be counted wherever we find ourselves. To act according to the teachings of Jesus and do what we believe to be

true and right. That will not win any popularity contests. People do not like opposition but it is the right thing to do. But we should remember the advice about, 'humility' and encouraging with the 'utmost patience.'

Timothy is the leader of a church; he is told to, 'carry out your ministry fully.' We may not all be ministers in that sense but I am a firm believer in every member ministry. We were all baptised into the holy priesthood of God's people. Wherever we are, whatever we do, people who know we are Christians will expect us to behave in Jesus' way. There is some mileage in the old adage 'Christianity is caught not taught.' Sadly it works the other way too, if people see Christians acting badly or selfishly or seeking to control others, the impression will not be favourable. We are only human; we can only do our best. I remember a head teacher of mine who was not a Christian, saying of a teacher, 'her Christianity shines from her.' What a wonderful thing. We all aspire to that.

'In your hearts enthrone him; there let him subdue, all that is not holy, that is not true.'

Caroline Maria Noel

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