

The Widow and the Judge

A sermon by Rev John Castle
given on 16th October 2016 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Jeremiah 31:27-34; **Luke 18:1-8**

(Proper 24, Year C in Revised Common Lectionary)

A song of protest

This week the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to someone many might regard as an unlikely candidate [any guesses? ...] - the American singer-songwriter Bob Dylan. Now I wouldn't wish to claim that the lyrics of pop songs should necessarily be treated as good literature, but if one of the features of good literature is its ability to inspire, to challenge, to lead the reader or listener to explore new ways of thinking, then Mr Dylan was certainly instrumental in many of the changes of public attitudes and social policy that have made our world how it is today.

In case you're wondering what this has got to do with the Parable of the Widow and the Judge, let me give you a clue: the title and words of one of Dylan's songs has for me a real resonance with the story Jesus told and the teaching he gives with it. Can you guess which? It's *Knockin' on heaven's door*. It reminds me of the widow knocking repeatedly on the judge's door and of us knocking on God's door wanting an answer to our prayers.

Of course, that is not what Bob Dylan was referring to in the song. It was written for a film *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* and is used when a deputy sheriff is dying – metaphorically knocking on the door of heaven. In the song he gives up his badge of office and his gun, which he won't need any more. On the face of it, it's not a protest song at all. But I discovered that in a rare departure from his usual practice, Dylan gave permission for additional words to be used when the song was sung to commemorate the shooting of the schoolchildren of Dunblane by a gunman in 1996. The additional words pick up the theme of taking guns away and plead that there will be no more repeats of the violence which devastated the Scottish town. And so it became a song of protest against the injustice of young lives mindlessly taken away, a song that went to no. 1 in the UK charts. Interestingly, this version also included words from the hymn, *The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want*.

The widow and the judge

The parable of the widow and the judge is, on the face of it, a story about prayer. Luke introduces it with these words :

*And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.*¹

But at the heart of the story is the theme of injustice, and so it chimes very much with the themes of many of Bob Dylan's songs. It also addresses the issue of suffering and the response of God.

Let's look for a moment at the characters in the story. First, the widow. In Jesus' time, as we all know, there was no welfare state and no National Health Service. Families provided care for their vulnerable members. And in a time when economic activity was almost entirely in the hands of men, a woman without a husband to provide for her was in a precarious position. Widows are portrayed in the Bible as disadvantaged, often poor and open to exploitation. The widow in Jesus' story is clearly in this situation, and so she goes to the judge to get justice and protection against her adversaries.

The judge himself couldn't be a greater contrast. He's a man with an influential and well-paid job. The widow is powerless, the judge is powerful. But instead of simply doing his job and granting the widow justice, he does nothing. Jesus' description of his attitude says it all: he neither fears God nor has any respect for people. The widow is not going to pay him any money for helping her – certainly no fat bribes. So he really can't be bothered with her. And yet in the end he gives in. It's no credit to him that he does so

¹ Lk 18:1–2 *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (2001) Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

– he has simply got fed up with this woman constantly knocking on his door. He'll give her justice simply to get some peace and quiet.

Although Jesus isn't seeking to make a comparison between the judge and his listeners, I do wonder whether there isn't a bit of a challenge to us here. How many times do we have to be reminded that there is a famine in Africa, disaster in Haiti or refugees needing our help before we get off our comfortable backsides and make a donation to Tearfund or sign a petition to the Prime Minister?

So what is Jesus saying through this parable? What he *isn't* saying is that God is like the judge – too idle or self-centred to do anything for the poor and oppressed, or to answer our cries for help. Quite the opposite. The message is simple – if even a lazy, self-centred judge who has no interest in the rights of the poor can get off his backside to protect a poor widow, then surely our God, who is not only the Judge of all the earth but our loving Father, will act to bring justice and end suffering. But we have to play our part too – at the very least we need to keep on praying and not lose heart.

All very well, you may say, but that's not what we are seeing all around us. The world is *full* of injustice. Millions have fled from their homes to escape war in Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, Somalia and other places. Many of them are exploited by people-smugglers and drown when rubber dinghies capsize in the Mediterranean. Children are locked in clothing factories in Asia to make cheap clothes for high street shops, working long hours for a pittance. More and more women and children are trafficked for domestic slavery, prostitution and pornography in this country and around the world. What does Jesus' parable have to say to all that?

What we often fail to do when reading a bible passage is to check its context. This means not only the historical context that it comes from, but the literary context, i.e. what comes before and after the passage in question. I had a look at the previous few chapters in Luke's gospel. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where he will be crucified and raised to life. But many of his followers are expecting his arrival in Jerusalem to herald the inauguration of the Kingdom of God under their Messiah, Jesus. The reign of the Messiah will see the righteous rewarded, the wicked punished and all injustice brought to an end.

But Jesus is teaching about a final judgement that is still some way off. God's plan, as Jesus explains later in chapter 24, is this: *Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*²

The final judgement, when all injustice will be ended, comes later in the plan. We are still waiting for it. And so were Luke's readers. There is evidence in Luke's Gospel that Luke was wanting to help his readers come to terms with the fact that 40 or so years after Jesus' death and resurrection the Second Coming still hadn't come.

The parable of the widow and the judge faces this issue. The crux of the story is that there is a gap between injustice being committed and that injustice being righted. The widow doesn't get her answer straight away. Jesus doesn't say how long she has to wait, only that it is “for a while”. The Christian faith never claims to provide instant solutions to the problems of the world. “Just believe in Jesus and all your problems will melt away” is a false gospel. Jesus suffered. Paul suffered. Peter suffered. Stephen was stoned, James was beheaded. For the best part of 3 centuries Christians were persecuted on and off, many being killed in Roman arenas by wild animals for public entertainment. Today the fight for justice and freedom may take time to bear fruit. But the Berlin Wall fell, apartheid was dismantled. Historic sexual abuse is finally coming to light and perpetrators are being punished.

There is much yet to do to bring justice to our world and relieve suffering. And in our own lives we may have to wait to see the answers to our prayers. Suffering is part of life, and we can't escape it.

Jesus urges us, not to be patient, but to be *persistent*. He tells the parable to show us that we *ought always to pray and not lose heart.*³ God is on the case. He cares passionately about suffering and injustice. But each instance of suffering and injustice is part of a bigger picture of cause and effect, most of which is

² Lk 24:46–47 (ESV)

³ Lk 18:1 (ESV)

hidden from our eyes. So we need to carry on praying and not lose heart, trusting God to bring about his perfect will in his good time.

In the meanwhile we need to go on *knock, knock, knocking on heaven's door*. And maybe, while we're waiting, we could see what we could do to bring an answer to our own prayers.

Note to readers

You may like to spend a few minutes praying over these things, bringing to God those areas of injustice and suffering in the world that are particularly on your heart, or particular people who need your prayers. If you would like to, listen to the Dunblane version of *Knockin' on Heaven's Door* as you bring your concern and anger about injustice to the Judge of all the earth:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KQzQVREMBU>

The additional verse is shown below:

*Lord these guns have caused too much pain
This town will never be the same
So, for the bairns of Dunblane,
We ask, please, never again.*