

Grant me justice!
Psalm 13, Luke 18:1-8

23 October 2016

My friend, Agnes was a great complainer. Sadly, she is no longer with us now but I am sure she wouldn't mind me telling her story, because she was actually, quite proud of her achievements as a complainer. If we went out for a meal together we could be sure, that Agnes was going to find fault with something on the menu. She would then demand to see the Manager or the chef, show them the undercooked, or overcook dish and tell them off in the nicest possible way. More often than not, she would end up with not only a perfectly cooked replacement dish, but also with a substantial deduction from her bill. The rest of us could not quite decide whether to feel embarrassed or impressed by her. Well, some people can away with anything! But did you know that there are several websites on the Internet that teach you how to complain effectively?

The widow in our Gospel story is instinctively following the steps suggested by one particular website:

-Firstly, it is important to address your complaint to the right person, the one, who is responsible for the problem. The woman knows who the dispenser of justice is in her case; so she turns to the judge. It is a risky business though, because at the time women were not supposed to appear in court on their own behalf, there had to be a male relative, or advocate to stand up for them.

- Next, your complaint has to be short and to the point. There is always a long story behind any complaint, but the shorter the complaint is, the better the chance that it would be heard. And again, our widow comes up trumps here; you cannot be shorter than her complaint: she demands 'justice against her opponent'.

-Then it is helpful to offer a clear solution. Some might want their faulty goods replaced, others want their money back. My friend Agnes got them both! For the woman in the parable the solution is the same as the demand, she wants justice against her opponent.

-And finally, the crucial part, you have to give a time frame for restitution and indicate your next step for approaching a higher authority if you don't get satisfaction on this level. Unfortunately, there is nowhere else for this widow to go. She reached the end of the rope. She must have tried all the other avenues open to her; she is stuck with this unsavoury judge, so she keeps pestering him until she receives the justice due to her.

This parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow is unique to Luke's Gospel; there are no parallel stories to be found in the other gospels and although it is quite short, more like a vignette of a parable, its interpretation has

been complicated by the immediate framework in which Luke placed it and, which, it is generally agreed, does not go back to Jesus. As it is, before we begin to hear the parable itself, there is already Luke's introductory sentence in verse 1: "He told them a parable to show that they should keep on praying and never lose heart". After this the most obvious and most often used way to understand the parable is that it is about prayer. In this scenario the powerless woman stands for us, who are urged to pray without ceasing and the corrupt judge stands for God, who, of course, is not corrupt or unjust, rather a loving, listening God who gives justice to all who cry out in their need. We can see straight away some problems here. The judge clearly cannot be identified with God, for he has no fear of God or respect for people and is probably in the pocket of the widow's adversaries anyway. Furthermore, according to the experience of praying people down the ages, ourselves included, is that not all prayers are answered, however long and hard they are being uttered. So where does that leave us?

There are those interpreters, William Barclay among them, who suggest that this parable is not so much about prayer, rather it is about God. They propose a radically different way of getting the meaning of it: *we stand for the unjust judge and the widow represents God*, who is constantly pursuing people and it is the people who are constantly refusing to hear and respond to God. (Anna Wierzbicka: What did Jesus Mean?) This may be a controversial way of reading the parable, yet it expresses an important feature of God as portrayed by both the OT and NT. The God, who keeps calling and wants to be recognised as a caring, justice-seeking partner, who can be trusted and whose constancy is never in question.

If we look at the parable in its larger context in Luke's Gospel, we find that directly before this passage Jesus is being asked about the 'last Days': "When will the Kingdom of God come?" (Luke 17:20). At the time of Jesus the whole nation of Israel were in a ferment of anticipation. Suffering under Roman rule, which followed a succession of other foreign rules, the people of God were desperately longing for their liberation. Their feelings echoed those expressed in the Psalms of Lament, for example in Psalm 13, which we heard earlier:

*"How long, Lord, will you leave me forgotten,
how long hide your face from me?
How long will my enemy lord it over me?
Look now Lord, my God and answer me...
lest my enemy say, 'I have overthrown him,'
and my adversaries rejoice at my downfall.*

By the time Luke wrote his Gospel, around 85-95 CE, the young Christian Church was in a similar situation. It expected the early return of Jesus and as time went by,

it became increasingly difficult to maintain that hope, even though they kept praying for it. In this context Jesus' parable takes on the significance of a lament, in which *the widow represents Israel* relentlessly seeking justice in its oppressed state and is being on the verge of losing heart. Curious as this identification may sound, it is very biblical. The prophets of the OT often pictured Israel and its capital city Jerusalem, as the deserted widow. The opening verses of the book of Lamentations say:

*“How deserted lies the city, once thronging with people!
Once great among the nations, now become a widow...
She weeps bitterly in the night, tears run down her cheeks..
Her friends have all betrayed her; they have become her enemies.*

Applying it to ourselves, this parable acknowledges the difficulty of our constant longing for a better, more equitable, more peaceful, more just world. And we too are encouraged not to give up, because if an unjust judge is able to give justice, how much more can we trust God to hear us and act decisively for change.

Looking at the parable without Luke's framework, that is verses 2-5, the emphasis falls on the widow's powerful and brave action rather than on 'what the unjust judge say' and does not let us put the widow into the role of a tame, docile woman of prayer, who is of no threat to anyone. This widow, as we said, has tried everything, even prayer, presumably, but finally she is taking things into her own hands, and decides to act. Widows have a special place in the Bible. 'Along with orphans, resident aliens and the poor', widows formed the so-called "quartet of the vulnerable", who were at the bottom of biblical society. (F Scott Spencer quoting Nicholas Wolterstorff) They needed extra care and support from the rest of the community, as clearly directed by the Torah, yet they were also the ones who were most often exploited by magistrates and other power-brokers, the very ones, who should have protected them. Widows, we may note, had to bear the additional burden of their gender in a thoroughly patriarchal society, where their case often ended up in court because their male relatives did not do their duty by them.

This widow, we may also notice, is not nagging for charity, or for something she fancies she needs, she is seeking justice, she is standing up against the judge, but also against a corrupt, unjust system, which keeps her and all others, like her from having what's rightfully theirs. She is an active agent for social transformation, which is in line with God's just rule often referred to in the Bible. So, you see, if we take the parable being merely about persistent prayer, we lose this social edge of the story, which is so often characterises Jesus' other parables too. In the interpretation however, they have often got narrowed down to questions of personal salvation.

But there is more. By her courage and perseverance, the widow wins the fight with the judge 'on points' as one commentator says, except that maybe there is no winner or loser in this parable. They both gain something. The widow's action doesn't merely achieve some measure of social transformation in the abstract; it achieves the actual transformation of a man of injustice into someone, who decides to act justly and grants the widow's request. Everybody knows this little dictator for who he is, even he knows himself for who he is; only the widow believes that her opponent has the capacity for meting out justice. Whatever his declared, face-saving reasons may be, the unjust judge finds himself free to act in the right way, in God's way, if you like. It brings to mind a story told about Desmond Tutu (we heard about him last Sunday – he is clearly a favourite character of modern parables!). In the darkest days of apartheid in South Africa he said to the soldiers, who threatened him: "It is not too late! You can still join the winning side!" The widow, like Desmond Tutu, conducts her fight in such a way, which doesn't demonise her enemy, but treats him with faith, that leaves the door open for reconciliation and enables the judge to act in a just way.

So, yes, the widow can stand for God in the sense of relentlessly calling to humanity and hoping for a positive response, but she can also stand for the God, who cares for social justice and is willing to come down on the side of those fighting for it. This understanding of the parable tells us about God's justice as enabling, or 'restorative' justice, which gives second chances and raises up new life. And all because of that everlasting love that under-girds all creation. Thanks be to God.

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