

HOMILY SUNDAY 29 - C

“The Unscrupulous Judge and the Importunate Widow”

(Exodus 17:8-13; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:2; Lk 18:1-8)

Have you ever seen the bumper sticker: “If you want peace, work for justice?”

The gospel today could inspire another saying: “If you want justice, pray unceasingly and work steadily for peace.”

Betty Williams, the 1977 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate from Northern Ireland, is an example of someone who is prayerful in the way Moses was when his arms were supported by Aaron and Hur during the battle against Amalek. She witnessed the bombing death of children one afternoon on the street where she lived. A little girl died in her arms. The force of the bomb had severed the girl’s legs and blown them across the street from where she held the bleeding child. Williams went home in shock and despair. Later that night, when the shock had worn off, the full impact of what she had seen struck her. She stepped outside her door and screamed into the night. Shouting at both God and the world, she moved from house to house, pounding on doors that could easily have opened with weapons pointing at her face. “What kind of people have we become that children are blown to bits on our streets?” she howled to all who would listen. Within hours the town was awake and stirred to take action. In a short time 16,000 signatures were on petitions for peace that helped to end the bloodshed in Northern Ireland.

Betty Williams was Moses with her hands raised between heaven and earth in prayer and protest: the staff of God was lifted up once again. Once again the widow was making her case in a world that seems to have neither fear of God nor respect for humanity.

The parable especially challenges us not to focus only on our prayer life (the easier part), but also to express our faith by caring for the powerless and homeless in our midst. It is time for us to give renewed attention how we put our faith into practice. Another way of putting it is the folk saying, “Pray as if everything depended on God, and work as if everything depended on yourself.”

The characters in the story show that the just God does not protect the property interests of the privileged but is compassionate and looks out for those who have no power to leverage privileges from the powerful. The way of the kingdom, therefore, calls for priorities based on compassion.

Once God’s compassionate nature has been clearly stated, then the call to pray and not lose heart takes on a different tone. The God to whom we pray is compassionate, ready to respond to the needs of the powerless and oppressed. How does such a God hear our prayers if they are self-centered, concerned only with petty issues, or irrelevant to God’s redemptive purposes? To those who have it in their power to relieve the distress of the widow, the orphan and the stranger but do not, the call to pray night and day is a command to let the priorities of God’s compassion reorder the priorities of their lives.

For John O'Shea, the point of this gospel is not just to persevere in prayer, but that personal spirituality and social justice are two sides of the same coin. Praying to God is for the purpose of effecting social justice. God answers the cry for justice by giving it to the hearts of the ones who cry. In this way the ones who pray will endure because they will be grounded in God. The energy of wearing down injustice is mediated through the widow, but it does not originate with her. It is the result of her communion with God made possible by her continual praying.

To pray always and not to lose heart means more than merely persevering in the face of difficulties. It is more than not giving up. It is coming forward with love and being faithful to the ways of peace. We can resist the temptation to resort to actions more unjust than the oppressive structures when we integrate our hearts into the heart of Jesus. He is the one who prayed always in the garden of Gethsemane, who stayed awake, and who was able to resist the temptation to resort to violence or run away, as did the disciples who fell asleep. He is the relentless widow who prays always until his heart becomes the heart of God.

Jesus asks us to listen to what the unjust judge says to himself. In so doing we learn one important thing: he can be had. His self-understanding is that he is vulnerable to being exposed for who he is. This is what he most fears and what eventually will drive him to give justice. The relentless widow unmasks injustice until justice is given, even if it is given only reluctantly. The heart of the widow is sustained by prayer. God suffuses the hearts of those who pray with justice, and then with empowered hearts they bring this justice into the affairs of earth. God does not intervene as a separate agent of activity and bring a justice to the human world that humans themselves cannot bring. And since injustice is an individual habit and an ingrained social structure, perseverance to transform it is difficult to maintain. It is difficult to wear something down that is so pervasive, so the effort is endless. Only those grounded in the heart of God will persevere.

Archbishop Romero in Latin America is an example of someone who embodies all these elements of faith - trust; surrender; gratitude; perseverance and love of Scripture. His perseverance in the face of death threats cost him his life, but he continues to inspire countless poor today to both persevere in prayer and to work for justice.

The Eucharist we are about to celebrate is all about faith. We believe that through the prayer of this community and the celebrant, the Body and Blood of Jesus is made present on the altar. We believe that as we receive in communion who we are, the Body of Christ, we are transformed into that Body of Christ. We believe that empowered in this way, we are commissioned to go out, sustained by prayer, to work for both peace and justice.

So, have faith, and express that faith through sustained prayer and undaunted work for justice and fairness in our world.