The Poor Widow

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Pentecost + 19: Lk 18 1-8; Jer 31 27-34, Ps 119 97-104

I usually focus on the scriptures when I preach. I hope that today's sermon will make it a bit clearer why I think it's so important to do so.

Luke tells us that Jesus told his parable of a downtrodden yet very persistent widow so we'd know to keep praying and not to lose heart. There was a lot in this widow's life to make her lose heart. She'd lost her husband, she'd been abused in some way, and to add insult to injury, her access to justice was blocked by a judge who didn't fear God, and who couldn't care less about his public image. The widow would've had no money to bribe him with and no male advocate to plead her cause for her, so it didn't look as though that shameful judge would ever listen to her.

Yet she persisted. Repeatedly she confronted the judge's shamelessness. She knew that the shame of her predicament was a powerful bargaining chip. She knew she was entitled to justice, and so she'd go on complaining until that judge went blue in the face, not her.

Where could she have got her inner conviction of justice from? As a Jewish woman, she participated in the corporate prayer life of her community. She'd have learnt of God's commitment to justice in the Scriptures (Micah 6.8); learnt of God's particular care for her as a widow. (Exod 22.22-24, Deut 10.17-18) She acted on her trust in God whom she'd heard speak directly to her in readings from scripture. She acted on her certainty in the God she came to know in those readings. It's as if, when she had the unjust judge in front of her, she talked to God over the judge's shoulder so she could keep on demanding her justice.

It was time this judge learnt God's ways.

Jeremiah described where her conviction lay in today's passage from chapter 31.[33] … *this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.* [34] *No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.*

So in his parable, Jesus gave us a widow who had God's law written on her heart; that was the source of her conviction. She was a citizen of the Kingdom of God. It was irrelevant that she was *the least* in the social pecking order of antiquity. With the law written on her heart, she was on the same level as anyone else. So she had the conviction, and she found the strength to persist in her demands for justice. This morning's parable reminds us that it's also *written on our hearts* that we belong to God. So can we also have the courage to persist in prayer? And more amazingly, Can we discover God at work in that prayer – God persisting in claiming us?

Prayer is a marvellous, liberating gift from God. It's a place in our lives where God meets us, embraces us, talks with us, and takes us seriously no matter what our circumstances. God is astonishingly broad-minded, and that's the lovely thing we discover in the conversation of prayer. … When I say that prayer is a gift, I mean by that a spiritual gift which comes to us because of the Holy Spirit living in us. At baptism, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. In the conversation of prayer, we find that we have become permanently invited eavesdroppers; eavesdroppers listening in on a conversation between our Mother, the Spirit, and our lovely Heavenly Father.

That intimate conversation is one which goes on whether or not

we're conscious of it. But from our baptism on, we grow in our understanding that this conversation includes us; that this conversation connects us with the true source of our being. St Paul describes that conversation in a part of his letter to the church in Rome.

"the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we don't know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. Romans 8:26-27

So the Holy Spirit speaks to God from deep within us. God searches our hearts, and there, finds the Spirit praying aloud the words written on our hearts. Through the Scriptures, through the Church, through friends, through creation, God speaks to us. Can we hear the Holy Spirit replying; crying out from deep within us?

It's a life-skill, learning to hear God's voice. But by giving us the gift of the Holy Spirit at our baptism, God ensures that we are equipped to learn to hear that voice. Like any little child, we're born with the faculty to learn our parents' language.

God the Holy Spirit dwells within us. She's the mother and teacher of our hearts. Because of her dwelling within us, our hearts gradually learn the life-giving nature of divine conversation. There's something within us, written on our hearts, says Jeremiah – something within us that feels empty and alone until we're engaged in this conversation. We don't feel fully ourselves until we can express what is the very deepest part of who we are – until we can participate deeply in the most wonderful and profound relationship there is; discover God's love. St Augustine prayed it this way; *Everlasting God, in whom we live and move and have our being: you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*

Jesus walks before us alive in the gospel, and beckons us by his love for us, and by his own example, to join in that conversation – more easily as he's one of us too. Choosing to join in this conversation just once can change us utterly. Once invited, God persists. When I'm talking about persistence in prayer today, there's the real persistence; God. God never gives up on us.

What comes of eavesdropping on our divine parents? This morning's gospel sheds an interesting light on this aspect of prayer. It shapes the way we live, and it shapes the way you see ourselves. Remember that widow? Most onlookers would probably have viewed her as deluded, stubborn and hopeless; and we might be tempted to see her that way too.

But frankly, I see her example as inspiring. She subverted everyone else's illusion of her powerlessness through her belief in her own dignity and worth in the sight of God. That belief was a free gift which God blessed her with; a faith nourished by her regular encounters with God through scripture and prayer. If you ever wonder why I focus my preaching so much on scripture, this persistent widow is someone I'd recommend you consider. Amen