

Luke 18: 1-14

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I've been telling stories almost as long as I've been preaching, more than 20 years. Some of the stories come from my life experience, things I've seen or done, or stories of my niece or nephew when they were small. Other stories are fiction, tales I've invented to highlight some aspect of our faith.

A story is a bit like a painting. Different people see different things when they look at a painting. Think of our banner, on the wall near the organ. What strikes you when you look at it? The cross on the mountain? The native birds? The rocks by the beach? Or do you absorb it as a whole, and think, that's Coolum?

Or think of a movie. Have you ever gone to a movie with a friend and, discussing it afterwards, discovered that they saw something you were quite unaware of? or even that they saw the whole movie differently to the way you did? Maybe you saw a love story and your friend saw a political one. It was the same movie, but you saw it quite differently.

A story is like that. Each of us hears it slightly differently and, if we hear it again at another time, we are likely to pick up something new.

No doubt Jesus knew this when he told stories about God, about faith, about living as God's people. Jesus told stories, parables, to help us understand how to walk with God. These stories are familiar to us, but often, when we reread them, we discover something we hadn't seen before.

That's what happened when I was reflecting on the first parable in today's gospel reading. It's known as the parable of the unjust judge. That's how Jesus refers to the judge in his story, a man who 'neither feared God nor had respect for people.' This judge was the antithesis of what a judge should be. A judge's job is to mete out justice. If a judge is unjust, where can a person obtain justice? By appealing to God, or to the community? But this judge had no faith and did not care about public opinion. So justice was unobtainable.

Yet, the widow in the story continued to demand justice, despite repeated refusals from the judge. She wouldn't take no for an answer; she just kept coming to court, asking again and again for justice. Finally, the judge gives in, not because he

thinks it's the right thing to do, not because he cares what others say of him, but because he is fed up with being pestered by this woman.

According to the author of Luke's gospel, this parable is about the need to pray continually and not to give up if our prayer seems unanswered. Jesus himself says that, like the unjust judge, God will grant justice to those who cry for it. So, the Church has always read this parable as a story of faithful people praying persistently to God. In other words, the traditional interpretation identifies the unjust judge with God.

But as I was reflecting on this parable, I thought, Hold on a minute. God is *not* unjust! God is the epitome of justice. And far from not caring about people, God loves all people, for God has created us all out of love. So why do we identify God with this unjust, unfaithful, uncaring judge? It doesn't make sense.

What if, I wondered, what if we turn the parable on its head? What if we identify God with the widow and ourselves with the unjust judge? After all, we all fail at times to be faithful and God-fearing; we all at times are less than caring for others; we all at times ignore the plight of those who plead for justice. We are far more like the judge in the parable than God is.

God, in fact, is more like the widow. God is more persistent than anyone I have ever known. God won't go away, no matter what I do, say, or want. God is utterly, totally, determined that each of us will become faithful, loving and just, no matter how long we persist in being faithless, uncaring and unjust. We can continue to say 'no' to God but, just like the widow in the parable, God keeps coming back to us, saying, 'Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.' Eventually, we are worn out with resisting; eventually, we will say 'yes' to God.

This is the experience that St Paul knew, when he heard the risen Christ speak to him on the Damascus Road: 'It hurts you to kick against the goads.' It is the experience that Francis Thompson wrote of in his poem, *The Hound of Heaven*, which begins with these words:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
 I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
 I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
 I hid from Him ...

Hardly anyone remembers who Thompson was, but his phrase, the 'Hound of Heaven', has become part of the Church's language. It has inspired paintings, novels and song lyrics. John Stott, the great evangelical preacher of the twentieth century, used it to describe his own conversion. Stott wrote that he was a Christian not because of the influence of his parents or teachers, not due to his own decision, but because he was relentlessly pursued by the 'Hound of heaven', Jesus Christ.

Jesus has gone through death and hell for every human being that ever lived. It is not surprising, then, that he will not allow that sacrifice to be in vain, for anyone. Jesus, the Hound of heaven, pursues each one for whom he died.

This is the Gospel. God in Christ is the hound of heaven who pursues us and knows us, the good shepherd who leaves the flock to come and find us, the persistent widow who never gives up.

Our response is to continue to pray, to commit ourselves to God and to each other, and not to lose heart. Our heavenly Father is persistent; he won't ever let us go, and, like the persistent widow, he will not take no for an answer.

Amen.