

Twenty Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

When we listen to some of the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures, we could get either angry or amused at the way that God is understood. Today's reading from the Book of Exodus has God fighting for the people of Israel against their enemies. The battle goes well as long as Moses is praying with his arms outstretched. But poor Moses gets tired, and he needs to sit down and have others hold his hands up for him. It is his perseverance in prayer that we are focussing in on today. We let go of the other things in this story because we know that the revelation of who God is and how God acts on our behalf is a very gradual thing. It only comes to its perfection in Jesus. And we are still learning who Jesus is for each of us.

The inspired author of the letter to Timothy tells us today that "All scripture is inspired by God and can profitably be used for teaching, for refuting error, for guiding people's lives and teaching them to be holy." I found a commentary about this quite helpful for me. "Only by immersing ourselves regularly in the Scriptures and growing to love these varied glimpses of God can we come to draw out their richness and sweetness. And there are plenty of difficulties to overcome: the strangeness of language and ancient ways of thought, the barbaric primitiveness of the chosen people of God, the boring instructions on sacrifice and purity. Don't rush it

or gobble it up. Go your own pace and remember that it began as God's word to Abraham, Moses, David or whoever, or Jesus helping his contemporaries to understand about the Kingdom, or Paul responding to the queries of his half-instructed converts. But now it is God's word to you."

And so when we listen to today's gospel we try to hear what God might be saying to us about prayer, and particularly about persevering in prayer. Jesus makes the point by using a rather lighthearted story. We could hear Jesus saying, "Remember that widow who was trying to get justice from the judge who kept putting her off. She had no one to stand up for her. No husband to speak for her. No sons to lend their weight to the case. She kept going back time and time again to the judge, but nothing happened until the judge realized that the woman would worry him to death. It was only then that that the rouge of a judge finally heard her case and gave her the justice that was owed to her.

The point that Jesus then makes is that we have a God who is so much better than that unjust judge. "Now will not God see justice done to his chosen who cry to him day and night even when he delays to help them? Some scholars translate this sentence as "Now will not God do justice for his elect ones who are crying out to him day and night, and show patience towards them?" and then

go on, “I promise you, he will see justice done to them and done speedily.”

The persistence that moves us to keep praying to God comes not from thinking that God will get tired of our constant prayers and finally give in. No. We keep praying because we have learned to put our faith and trust in our God. We keep praying because we have come to know who God is. We know God to be like a loving parent who cannot resist giving us the things we need. But like a good parent, God does not give us everything we want. God even makes us wait for some of the good things we need. One commentator suggests that we need time to be hammered into the vessel that is shaped to hold the good things that God offers us.

We keep praying to God because we have learned to put our trust in God. Some would say that we have not learnt how to pray until we have learnt how to patiently wait for our prayers to be answered. One holy man said that we only know how to pray when we have been knocking on God’s door until our knuckles are bleeding.

Jesus ends today’s gospel with a question. “But when the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on earth?” He is asking if there are people of faith who like the widow in the parable cry out to God day and night. That is the question that we have to ask ourselves. Is crying out to

God day and night for what we need part of who we are? Or are we people who have faith for a time but in a season of testing fall away? I think our gospel is helping us to see that praying to God is not an optional exercise in piety that we do every now and again. Prayer is the expression of our relationship with God. The way that we pray reveals who God is for us.

People of faith are often able to see their prayers answered when others cannot see that. Their vision is wide enough to be able to see God at work, even when it seems to be in the wrong place. People with little faith find it much harder to see how God is answering their prayers. If God’s response is a little off center, then they miss it all together.

Maybe part of our prayer this week would be that we have the patience to wait until our prayers are heard and answered. But also, that we would have the kind of faith that looks out of the corner of our eyes to see the movement of God when we are looking for something else.