

The Twenty-ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Exodus 17:8-13
<i>Response</i>	My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 121:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Timothy 3:14-4:2
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 18:1-8

The 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C is commonly referred to as the Parable of the Persistent Widow, although there are in fact two characters in the parable. There's the unrighteous judge and the persistent widow. So whatever you call this parable, it's in Luke chapter 18:1-8. It's another example of one of these distinctively Lukan parables. In other words, it's only found in this Gospel. If we didn't have the Gospel of Luke, we wouldn't have the parable of the Good Samaritan or the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and we also wouldn't have this very interesting and memorable Parable of the Persistent Widow. So let's just read through the Gospel together and then we'll try to see if we can explain this text. In Luke 18:1, it says this:

And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor regarded man; and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Vindicate me against my adversary.' For a while he refused; but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to

him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?”¹

There is a lot going on in this parable to talk about. Okay, let’s just walk through it together. First thing, notice Luke will often do this in his Gospel; he’ll give you the context of a parable. So we saw in an earlier video how the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Mulberry Tree was stimulated by the apostles asking Jesus, “Increase our faith.” And in this case, Luke tells us that Jesus told this particular parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not to lose heart. So he gives you a frame; he gives you a context for understanding the meaning and the message of the parable. The reason he gives it is to teach them about persistent prayer, that’s constant and doesn’t grow weary.

And in this case, it’s interesting. I was curious, what is the Greek verb when it says “lose heart.” Is that the literal expression? In this case, it’s not literally what the Greek is. The Greek is *engkakeō*, and it means to not lose heart or not be disappointed or not grow weary. That’s the connotation, but it comes from the Greek word *en* and *kakos*, which means... *en* just means “in” and *kakos* means evil. So it’s what happens when we are in a bad situation; we’re immersed in evil or suffering. When we’re in that kind of situation we can lose heart or get disappointed or, you know, grow weary—all those things. So it’s a very rich word. So he says to pray and not to *engkakeō*, not to give up in the midst of evil, basically, in the midst of suffering or persecution or whatever it is that’s going on in this particular story.

So he gives us the story, and it has two characters: the unrighteous judge and the persistent widow. So the judge here, it says that he “neither fears God nor regards man.” Now what that means is, he doesn’t keep the commandments—that’s what fearing God meant in the Old Testament. So he’s not a person who keeps the law and he doesn’t have any regard for men. So he’s inconsiderate toward his neighbor. So he doesn’t have love of God or love of neighbor; he’s an unrighteous judge.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

And this should make you think back to the Parable of the Unjust Steward, right? It's one of these parables where, as we're going to see, the judge actually represents God. Allegorically speaking, he is a symbol for God. But he's a bizarre one, because God himself is obviously perfectly just. And yet Jesus is using a parable here that uses a wicked judge as an image for God. We'll come at the end and explain how that's the case, but that's the basic point.

So he's an unrighteous judge, and what's happening here is this widow keeps coming to him and saying, "Vindicate me against my adversary." Now the Greek word there—the technical terminology—it's juridical or judicial terminology. When she says, "Vindicate me." What she means is "give a righteous verdict for me against my accuser." So the adversary there isn't just like, you know, some rival person in the community. Someone has apparently accused this woman or is persecuting this woman, and she's calling upon the judge to do justice and vindicate her against her accuser, or her persecutor.

Now for awhile what does the judge do? He just puts her off, because he doesn't care about some widow being persecuted or being falsely accused. Now that right there shows you that there's a problem, because if you go back to the Old Testament—if you know the Jewish Scriptures—you'll recall that in the Old Testament, one group of people to whom God is particularly attentive are widows, orphans, and strangers. Those are the—well, not one group—three groups that that He's particularly attentive to. And in Exodus chapter 22, there's actually a law about this. In Exodus 22:21-24 it says this:

"You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry; and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

Alright, so tell me how you really feel, God. I mean, this is pretty powerful stuff. And this is a constant theme in the Old Testament, that God defends the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant—or the sojourner or stranger. In other words, people who have no way of protecting themselves. So the widow doesn't have a husband,

the orphan doesn't have parents, and then the sojourner or the stranger (the immigrant) doesn't have a family network—or in some cases, laws to protect them. So these are the most vulnerable people in ancient society. So if you hear a parable of a widow asking the judge to vindicate her—in other words, to protect her from her accuser or her adversary—it's an echo of that Old Testament passage that says if the widow is being oppressed and she cries out to me, I'm going to hear it.

So the fact that this judge is neglecting the widow's plea just shows you how unrighteous he really is—that he's not following one of the most basic laws of social justice in the Old Testament, the social doctrine of the Old Testament. The very idea of social justice and social doctrine, the social doctrine of the Church, goes back to the Pentateuch. It's rooted in the laws of the Pentateuch regarding both the economy, what to do with wealth, the right practices with money and property, but also with regard to persecution and oppression of the most vulnerable members of society—like widows, orphans, and sojourners.

So Jesus here is kind of drawing on that Jewish social teaching from the Old Testament, and He's bringing it into this parable. Now what's fascinating to me about this parable—I didn't know this before I studied it carefully—is the translation of the words here. So we call this the persistent widow, that's kind of a common translation. But if you actually look at the Greek, the Revised Standard Version does not quite translate this correctly, because what the judge actually says here is:

“Though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming.” (Luke 18:4b-5)

Now the RSV says “wear me out”, but the Greek actually says, “lest she come” and the word here is *hypopiazō*, and the New American Bible gets this right. The New American Bible says “lest she come and strike me.” But the literal Greek actually “lest she come and give me a black eye.” That's what *hypopiazō* means. It's a boxing term. So Paul actually uses this elsewhere when he talks about boxing the air or shadowboxing, this imagery of punching. So she's not the persistent widow, she's the violent widow, and perhaps you've known some old ladies like

this, who you don't...you don't want to mess with them. That's the kind of woman that's being described here. Basically, this judge is afraid that if he doesn't give this woman a verdict, she's going to come and do physical violence against him. She's going to give him a black eye. So there's a bit of a humorous element here to the parable as well.

So that's where the story stops, and then Jesus gives the *nimshal*. He gives the explanation to the disciples when it says:

And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily. (Luke 18:6-8a)

So, sometimes people are a little perturbed by this or they're a little confused by this application of the parable or this explanation of the parable. What they'll say is, how can that be the right explanation, because the parable is describing an unrighteous judge, but Jesus is saying that this refers to God. And the answer is, you need to understand—wait for it—first century Judaism, because one of the common methods of argumentation in first century Jewish literature, and in later Rabbinic literature, was something called the *qal-va-homer*. It's a Hebrew expression; it means "from the lesser to the greater." In Latin, we talk about the *a fortiori* argument. In other words, it's saying, if this is true for this lesser thing, then how much more true is it for the greater? That's how the argument works. And this was a standard Rabbinic form of argumentation. It's probably still used in court rooms to this day. And the idea is, if an unrighteous judge will vindicate this widow because of her persistence, how much more will the righteous judge of the universe—namely, God—vindicate His elect who pray to Him with persistence and constancy. You see? Does that make sense? I hope that kind of gives you the logic of the parable.

So although the parable does have a kind of twist there, it's something unexpected, in the sense that it's comparing God to an unrighteous judge—you know, comparing the righteous judge to an unrighteous judge—it does make sense. The logic of the parable holds together in an ancient Jewish setting, which of course is the setting in which Jesus would have uttered such a parable. So it's a very

profound parable in which Jesus is telling the disciples, “Be like the persistent widow.” Don’t lose heart. Don’t think that you’ve been abandoned by God. Don’t think that you’ve been forgotten by God. I promise you, if the unrighteous judge would vindicate the widow who was persistent with him, then the righteous judge of the universe, God, will vindicate His chosen ones, His elect, and He’ll do it quickly. He’ll do it speedily. It’s going to come soon.

Now the final passage there, the final line of the parable is one of the most sobering lines in the New Testament. We’ve seen Jesus give a number of difficult sayings in the Gospel of Luke—a number of hard sayings in the Gospel of Luke. And I think this is one of those hard sayings, because it’s very sobering when Jesus says:

Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth? (Luke 18:8b)

I don't know about you, but the impression that question gives me is that the implied answer is no...No. So why would Jesus say such a thing? Two points. First, this last line gives you a clue to the fact that Jesus is talking about the final judgment, when He’s talking about the vindication that’s going to speedily come. He does not mean that every earthly injustice that’s perpetrated in this world is going to be speedily vindicated by some kind of earthly court.

If you’re waiting for all of the injustices of government officials and kings and potentates and dictators and local judges and local politicians and state politicians...if you’re waiting for all of those injustices to be vindicated, and you’re waiting for every single person—especially vulnerable people, like immigrants and widows and orphans—to be vindicated in earthly courts of law, quickly and speedily and fairly, you’re going to be waiting a long time. You’re going to be extremely frustrated, because one of the realities of this fallen world is that often justice is not served. It’s just a fact, especially in nations and governments where corruption is just part of the judicial system. However, as Jesus says, “The coming of the Son of man”, the final judgement, although it might seem like a long way off to us, from God’s perspective, He is coming soon. It’s going to take place very

quickly, and that's especially true if you think about each of our individual particular judgments. They're going to be here sooner rather than later.

So, Jesus begins to talk about the coming of the Son of man, because the vindication that He's speaking of is not an earthly vindication in an earthly court; it's the eschatological vindication. It's the final vindication that will take place at the final judgment in the coming of the Son of man. So that's what He's referring to, that's the first key point.

Now when He says, "Will he find faith on earth?"—the reason that the implied answer to that question is no, is because of something that Jesus says elsewhere. If you look, for example, at the Gospel of Matthew 24, when Jesus...this is Jesus' famous Olivet discourse, where He actually describes what's going to happen before the final judgment, before the Son of man comes on the clouds of Heaven and renders the final judgment. And in Matthew 24:12, Jesus says that before the Son of man comes, there's going to be a time of great tribulation, a time of great wickedness in the world, and it says that not only will evil and suffering and persecution and false prophecy and false messiahs, not only will all of those things increase, but Jesus says, "In that day, the love of most men's hearts will grow cold." In other words, there's going to be a mass apostasy, a mass turning away from God by the greater portion of humanity.

And in fact, St. Paul talks about this in the Second Letter to the Thessalonians 2, that before the Son of man comes, there first must come the great *apostasía*, the great apostasy, or the great falling away from the faith, when there'll be much deception and a rise and spread of wickedness.

So Jesus here is presupposing—and that's, by the way, that's a very ancient Jewish idea, that the age of salvation is preceded by a time of tribulation and darkness and sin and a lack of faith. I did my dissertation on this if you want to read about it. I thought it'd be a kind of, you know, positive topic—something very uplifting to get me through the difficult times of doctoral studies and graduate school. In any case...but it was very informative. It was very illuminating, because it's kind of contrary to common modern presuppositions. We tend to think that things will just get better and better and better and better, and then the end will come, and that's

not how it worked in the ancient Jewish eschatology. In ancient Jewish eschatology and in the teaching of Jesus, a time of great apostasy precedes the final judgment.

So He says here, “When the Son of man comes, will he even find faith on earth?” And so Jesus uses that sober exhortation to remind his disciples, well, what do you need to do? If everyone else is falling away, if it seems like—and it can seem that way sometimes—that even, you know, not just members of the Church, but church leaders, there have been great scandals, times of great darkness, not just in the west but in the east, not just in the north but in the south. If you see lots of darkness and sin and falling away from the faith, what do we do? Do we lose heart? Do we give up? Jesus says no. Your response to apostasy should be to pray constantly and not to lose heart, not to give up...to persevere in prayer. That’s the message in this parable. So, something we can all use these days is the virtue of hope and encouragement in the face of a very, very wicked, wicked world.

Alright, Exodus 17. What about the Old Testament reading for today? If you go back, the reading here is a strange story, a little odd—maybe not as famous as some of the other Old Testament stories. This is the story of the Israelites battling the Amalekites. Now if you look in the book of Exodus 17, the Amalekites were the people of Amalek, and they were the sworn enemies of Israel. And they have a very—shall we say—prominent place in the story of the exodus, but it’s a negative one. Because when the Israelites got out of Egypt, they were going to go straight to the Promised Land, but the Amalekites rose up against them and fought them in battle and made the Israelites shrink back from going directly to the Promised Land. And as a result, they end up spending 40 years in the wilderness, wandering around. And trust me, just look at a map and you’ll see that it doesn’t take 40 years to walk from Egypt to Israel. It’s not that far away.

So the Amalekites were seen as kind of an accursed people, because they had prevented—so to speak—God’s plan from being fulfilled with the Israelites going straight to the Promised Land. And so, when the Israelites are doing battle with the Amalekites, a very famous scene takes place in verse 8 and following. And it says this:

Then came Am'alek and fought with Israel at Reph'idim. And Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out, fight with Am'alek; tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand." So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Am'alek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Am'alek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat upon it, and Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua mowed down Am'alek and his people with the edge of the sword.

Okay, now you might be thinking, what in the world does that have to do with the parable of the persistent widow in the Gospel text for today? And the answer is, absolutely nothing...unless you read the Old Testament in light of the New, and the New in light of the Old. In other words, the Church is presupposing here a tradition of reading this passage typologically, as a kind of prefiguration of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. You might be thinking, wait, what are you talking about? Watch for a second. This is a great example here, a source I'll often use in my Mass reading videos is the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. If you're wondering, where does Dr. Pitre get all of these quotations from the Church Fathers from? Well, sometimes I get it just from reading the Fathers, but other times I'll just use this source. It's a collection of different Church Fathers; it's a commentary on the passages of Scripture. And I forget how many volumes it's got—a good 12 volumes from the New Testament and another 13 for the Old Testament. So it's a large series, but it's really valuable.

In any case, in the commentary on Exodus—I just pulled it off the shelf here—listen to how the ancient Church Fathers interpreted the action of Moses here. St. John Chrysostom, one of my favorites, says this:

See how the type was given through Moses, but the truth came through Jesus Christ. Again, on Mount Sinai, when the Amalekites were waging war on the Hebrews, the hands of Moses were propped up, held by Aaron and by Hur standing on either side. But Christ, when He came, Himself held His hands

extended on the cross by His own power. Do you see how the type was given and the truth came?²

That's from his homilies on the Gospel of John. So Chrysostom is saying that Moses holding up his hands on the hill was a type of Christ crucified. And again, St. Justin Martyr says:

In truth, it was not because Moses prayed that his people were victorious, but because while the name of Jesus was at the battlefield, Moses formed the sign of the cross.³

Now what's Justin saying there? Well, he's reading the Greek Old Testament, and in the Greek Old Testament, Joshua's name is Jesus. See, Jesus is just a Greek version of Joshua. So Moses is holding his hands up in the sign of the cross, but the person who's actually doing battle and winning is Jesus, AKA Joshua. So Justin sees in Moses, again, a type of Christ. And I think that's just a fascinating point, because what's going on in the Old Testament—I shouldn't say that there's no connection with the widow because what Moses is doing here—is a physical form of prayer. So when he holds his hands up and extended on the hill, it's a kind of physical gesture of prayer on behalf of the Israelites. So as long as he's praying, they're going to win. But once his hands start to get tired and he lets them droop, then the Amalekites start to win. So it's fascinating, notice the parallels between Moses and Jesus. Just as Moses holds up his hands, his arms outstretched, so that the Israelites win the earthly battle, so Christ holds his arms extended on the cross to give victory in spiritual warfare with the devil.

Second, notice this also, just as Moses has two men at either side—Aaron and Hur—so too Jesus has two men on his right and his left, the good thief and the bad thief. Third—now this is cool—just as Moses is on a hill with his arms outstretched, so too Christ is crucified on Golgotha, on Calvary. He's crucified on a hill with his arms outstretched. And then fourth and finally—and this is cool—just

² Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament Volume III: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

³ Ibid.

as Moses is doing this in the evening, at the setting of the sun, so too Jesus is being crucified at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, which in Jewish chronology, that was the time of the evening sacrifice. It was in the afternoon. And if you recall too, what happens? The sun goes down and everything goes black—so there's an eclipse. So the idea that Jesus is crucified in the evening is tied to as well—it's a parallel with Moses doing this in the afternoon at the going down of the sun.

So all of this was seen by the Church Fathers as a powerful typology of the crucifixion of Jesus on Calvary, but also of the power of intercessory prayer. Because effectively, what is Moses doing? He's interceding for the Israelites in the same way as Christ on the cross is interceding for all of humanity. "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." So, beautiful, powerful typology there between the Old and the New Testament in the ancient Christian tradition.

The Responsorial Psalm for today, Psalm 121, the refrain is:

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:2)

The basic theme of this psalm is that the Lord is your guardian, the Lord is your keeper. The guy who made, you know, Heaven and earth and the universe, is actually the one who is your protector. And that's a really important truth that's easy to forget if you're losing heart. In other words, if the trials and the tribulations and the sufferings and persecutions and battles of this world are getting you down, it's likely that you've forgotten that your help comes from the Lord who made Heaven and earth. That's a Jewish image of God's omnipotence.

So if you really believe that the Lord is God, if you really believe that He is all powerful, if you really believe that He has so much power that He made Heaven and earth, then whatever earthly trial you're going through—whether it's the Israelites being persecuted by the Amalekites or the widow being persecuted by her adversary, or you being persecuted by whoever it might be, or whatever troubles you might be facing—none of them are too big for God. He is the all powerful One. And if the psalm is right, that He is your keeper, He is your guardian, He is your shade, as it says, then really, what do you have to be afraid of? The irony of this—or not the irony, but the...well, I guess it is kind of ironic. The irony is that so

often even Christians—we as Christians—become afraid when we have the least reason to be afraid of anyone in the whole world, because not only is God our protector, as the Israelites in the Old Testament, but the same God has come in the flesh, in the person of the new Joshua—Jesus Christ—to do battle with the enemies of this world, who are not flesh and blood, but are the principalities, the powers, and the forces of this present darkness, as Paul says—or as the letter to the Ephesians says—we really don't have any reason to be afraid, because He's already conquered them in the battle of Calvary, where He stretched out his arms between Heaven and earth and did not grow weary, but gave Himself, made intercession for us, the Church, and for the whole world.

So then how should we pray? If all that's true, if we really believe Christ is the savior, if we really believe that the Lord, who is maker of Heaven and earth is our guardian, how should we pray? I'll end with a quotation from St. Cyril of Alexandria, a fifth century Church Father—one of the Doctors of the Church—who wrote one of the earliest commentaries on Luke that we possess. This is what he had to say about the parable of the persistent widow. Quote:

It is, I affirm, the duty of those who set apart their lives for his service, not to be sluggish in their prayers, nor again to consider it as a hard and laborious duty: but rather to rejoice, because of the freedom of access granted them by God; for he would have us converse with him as sons with a father.... But that God will bend his ear to those who offer him their prayers, not carelessly nor negligently but with earnestness and constancy, the present parable assures us. The constant coming of the oppressed widow conquered the unjust judge that did not fear God or have any shame. Even against his will, he granted her request. How shall not he who loves mercy and hates iniquity, and who ever gives his helping hand to those that love him, accept those who draw near to him day and night and avenge them as being his elect?" ...Excellent therefore it is to make request by constant prayer...⁴

⁴ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Luke 119; trans. R. Payne Smith

So what should Christian prayer look like? It should look like constant prayer. And look, if your arms aren't getting tired yet in praying, you're probably not praying enough...or you'll get there soon. So remember that, just as Moses needed a little help from his friends, it's easy to grow weary in prayer. Don't forget to pray with others as well. If you're starting to lose heart, find prayer partners. Find brothers and sisters in Christ to lift up your arms and to help you in the battle of prayer, because it really is a battle. But the good thing is we already know who is the victor.