

## Pray Always and Do Not Lose Heart

*A sermon at Holy Eucharist on Proper 29C, 2025*

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*Jesus uses a parable of a persistent widow seeking justice to exhort his followers to pray always and to never lose heart. This commandment may be more demanding than it first appears. How are we to make every hour one of prayer with hearts turned always to God?*

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Just prior to today's gospel portion from Luke, Jesus had his followers quite concerned. He'd given some dramatic and dire predictions about what the eschaton, that is the end of time, will be like. He compares this period to the destruction seen in Noah's time and the ruin of Sodom. Jesus promises that people will be separated from one another and, while he is insistent that the kingdom of God is coming in this way, he declines to give specifics on exactly when or where.

The text does not say so, but I think we can safely assume that the people listening are made uneasy by this conversation. The listeners are a crowd that includes, at least, disciples of Jesus, some Pharisees, and the usual curious, hesitant group of onlookers. There are surely a variety of reactions among the folks present, but nobody is much comforted by what Jesus has to say about when, where, and how the kingdom of God will come.

In today's passage, which follows this without any break or change of scene, Jesus seems to be trying to offer some comfort to the listening crowd. After a frightening prophecy about the end of time, Jesus offers to them hope and reassurance in a life of constant prayer. To illustrate

this, we hear the parable about the widow and the judge.

In this culture and at this time in their history, judges are public figures. In a culture like that of Judea, there were expectations about how a judge would conduct himself. They were expected to be concerned with the welfare of the Judean people and to be seen as good citizens. Being a good Judean citizen included participation in the religion of that region. This judge does not fear God, nor does he respect any other person. We are not told about his sense of ethics or justice or whether he is a good, effective judge. He is a difficult judge to appear before, if one cannot appeal to divine principles or mutual respect to make one's case.

In the parable, the difficult judge is put in a contest against an indomitable widow. We should recall that widows are a special category of person who, in the value system of first-century Judea, are accorded special care. Care for widows, orphans, poor, and strangers is nearly a shorthand for God's justice in Hebrew scripture.<sup>1</sup> These are some of the most vulnerable people in their society and the Law and Prophets demand that they be shown particular care.

In this case, the widow is asking the judge to grant her justice against an opponent. She believes that someone has done her wrong and she is asking the judge to make it right. What may not be immediately clear in our English translation is the intensity with which the widow is both framing her plea and the energy behind her demand for justice.

In the Greek text, what the widow asks for is ἐχδίκησόν. Our bibles translate this as "justice" but, in Greek, the word most often means justice

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<sup>1</sup>Exodus 22:22-24; Deuteronomy 10:17-18; Proverbs 31:8-9; Isaiah 1:16-17; Zechariah 7:9-10

in the sense of vengeance. The widow does not only want to be made whole by her opponent, but she also wishes to see her opponent punished. She must believe that the offence against her is great indeed to ask for a sentence that both restores her and punishes her opponent. This is not a routine request. The widow's case before the judge is serious indeed.

Not only is she asking for an extraordinarily heavy judgement, but she is relentless in asking. The judge clearly has trouble making up his mind about how to settle this claim, because the passage says that the widow "kept coming to him."<sup>2</sup> He refuses to grant her request at first, but she persists. Finally, not because he fears God nor because he has any respect for her, but rather because he fears that she will "wear me out" by her persistent, the judge relents and grants the widow's request.

And here again, our English translation lacks an important association present in the Greek. It may seem amusing, even like a bit of comic relief after all the talk of doom at the end of time, to think of a persistent widow wearing down a haughty judge. But the Greek verb that the judge uses which we have in English as "wear me down" is ὑπωπιάζω. This word comes from the world of boxing and means to give someone a black eye, to strike or bruise them. I don't think it's meant to imply the widow is threatening any kind of real physical violence, especially not against a judge, but rather to impress on us the intensity of her demand for justice.

The widow's persistence is so energetic and so intense that the judge feels as though she is beating him up. Rather than try to endure what seems to be an utterly relentless barrage of demands from the widow, the judge relents

and gives her the justice, or vengeance, that she seeks.

If this were just a story about a persistent, feisty widow seeking justice, it would make for interesting reflection and ideas about interpretation. As is the case with so many other parables. But Luke has framed this one for us as an example of the need to be constantly praying and never to lose heart or become weary in constancy of prayer.

This is good news for us. God hears prayer and values it. God hears prayer and responds to it. Prayer is an activity in which every one of us can engage. We can all pray. Even if we can't move or speak, we can pray. God hears us, knows our needs even before we ask, remembers those we have forgotten, and moves in mysterious ways, wonders to perform. With this in mind, Jesus calls his followers, including you and me, to pray with the same energy and dedication as the widow pursuing justice for herself.

It is all well and good to suggest that we pray with all our might, every hour of every day. But there seems to be an obvious question left hanging: What does that kind of prayer look like? In practice, when one takes it up and tries to really do what Jesus is describing, how does it happen?

Different Christian traditions have different answers to this question. How, then, do Anglican Christians understand this call to pray without ceasing? We have long relied on a structure with three main points. In this structure, the three points are sacramental worship, like Holy Eucharist; the Divine or Daily Office which calls us to the Bible and prayer throughout the day; and personal devotions, which may be many things such as centring prayer, the rosary, lectio divina, and so on. Triangles make for sturdy

<sup>2</sup>Luke 18:3

structures, and this three-pointed method is a balanced, practical, strong foundation for the life of prayer that Jesus is describing.

When we consider the end of time, prayer is a comfort and a help. When we consider that, in the Gospel according to Luke, this teaching is the beginning of the final teachings of Jesus before he begins to move toward Jerusalem and the Passion, prayer is an assurance and a support. When we consider the chances and changes of this life, prayer is a mercy and means of grace.

For Jesus, who teaches us how to pray even today, thanks be to God.