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Keeping Faith on Earth (Luke 18. 1-8)

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This is an astonishing parable – almost breath-taking in its audacity. How does Luke, how does Jesus, think he'll get away with such a wildly counter-factual vision? The story posits a widow seeking justice from a judge who 'neither feared God nor had respect for people'. In other words, she is petitioning someone who has no motivation whatsoever to respond well to her claim. But in the end she gets her way, because she persists. She's demanding and annoying enough that even this unjust judge gives in. The Greek paints a comical picture: the judge in the story imagines himself being battered into submission – where he speaks, in the English translation, of giving this widow what she wants 'so that she may not wear me out', the Greek implies he's worried about getting a black eye. It's a term usually applied to boxers!¹ And the hyperbole of this story, the extremity of the judge's disinclination to be helpful, makes Jesus' point. If even someone this amoral will yield to persistent petition, how much more will God who is good 'grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night'.

Except, of course, one of the main stumbling blocks to faith is that there are all too many occasions on which God does not appear to grant justice to those who cry to him day and night. Just ask the terrorised inhabitants of Ukraine or Tigray, the asylum seekers locked up for years in hotel rooms or in off-shore detention, or any of us who cry out to God for healing from chronic or terminal illness, for release from traumatic memory or liberation from addiction, mental anguish and abuse. Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. But how can we 'not lose heart' when our dearest hopes are overthrown, when God does not in fact come through with our desired outcome in the end? A child dies; an injustice

¹ Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), p.264.

ruins our prospects; a city is left in ruins. Surely, when such calamities befall, it cannot be because we haven't asked hard enough or persisted long enough in prayer. It cannot be because we have lacked 'faith'. So, what are we to say about this story?

Let me start with some words about its context. This whole section of Luke's gospel is concerned with what it means to have and keep faith in the new reality Jesus has been announcing and enabling, which he calls the 'kingdom of God'. Jesus' disciples are slowly learning that this promised kingdom involves a new form of personal, social and religious life. It's becoming available here and now to those who trust his leading and follow his way. The question being addressed by the gospel is, how do you make ready for and respond appropriately to this new reality? How do you keep faith with this new possibility for being? The question may be especially acute for the first readers and hearers of Luke's gospel; after all, it's been some time since Jesus left the earthly scene and meanwhile the world is not notably transformed.

In this context, says scholar Robert Tannehill, 'The instruction to "pray always and not to lose heart", has a specific focus. It is prayer for justice in an unjust world and for the vindication of believers who criticize the world's values and face the world's ridicule and persecution'. According to Tannehill, 'not losing heart' involves not only persistence, but also courage and boldness. 'The widow presented here as an example', he says, is almost 'brash', 'uppity'. She 'resembles the man who gets his neighbour out of bed because he needs three loaves of bread' (Luke 11. 5-8). The fact that she is a woman and more than that, a widow (so in the ancient world particularly vulnerable) 'makes her behaviour even more striking'.² Here is someone who, as it were, represents the exposure and vulnerability of the first Christian communities being bold to claim the justice she knows is available, persisting loudly and vigorously until she's received it. It's as if Luke is encouraging those early believers to keep on with it, to be courageous in their stand for what they know is

² Tannehill, *Luke*, p.263.

true, for God (he says) will not long delay in fulfilling the promise Jesus is and has made.

So notice how this context shifts our hearing of the story. Many of us have grown up with an image of God as being not unlike the unjust judge – inscrutable, capricious, inclined not to give us what we most want and need. Persistence in prayer then is about ‘wearing God down’ till God will give us anything just to shut us up. I’ve heard people speak of ‘storming heaven’ in prayer, as if we have to wrest our own and the world’s good from God’s stingy hands. But isn’t the whole point of the gospel to communicate that, in Jesus, God is already actively on our side – already among us to free and heal? Through him, we’re getting glimpses of what the world could be, if we only we let go our compulsive habits of self-preservation and self-aggrandisement. The kingdom of God, says Jesus, ‘is among you’; it’s already breaking open the carapace of your old self, and of the old world from the inside.

On this understanding, persistence in prayer is about daring to keep faith with this possibility, even when things look hopeless; daring to keep living out of the promise of justice, even when there’s every reason to doubt that justice reigns. Parker Palmer has written of a friend who gave his life’s energies to the cause of peacemaking, only to see an increase in wars and rumours of wars. Parker asked him how he maintained his commitment. His answer: ‘I have never asked myself if I was being effective, but only if I was being faithful’. American advocate for social and racial justice, Angela Blanchard, puts it this way: ‘we do good work because we do good work’,³ not because we’re assured of success. This is persistent prayer in action – faith at work on earth.

But if this tells us something about our part in keeping faith, what about God’s part? The gospel says God will meet our faithful prayer: ‘I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them’. But isn’t this precisely what doesn’t seem to happen a lot of the time? What is there to say about that? Well ...

³ Cited by Meg Wheatley in *Who Do We Choose To Be?: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity* (Berret-Koehler Publishers, 2017), p.280.

Jesus' parable tells us to be insistent and courageous in naming our need before God. I've said already that I don't believe this is because we have to wear God down. Rather, I think it's because wholeheartedness is of the essence of prayer and the catalyst for transformation. I know I'm often tempted to hold back on really going for it. I can tell myself I'm being humble; but more often it's about self-protection. If I'm not really present to depth of my yearning, then if it doesn't come off, I'm not so disappointed. If I don't take the risk of really asking, I don't feel so exposed. But it's the willingness to risk that matters.

For one thing, it's only as we truly expose our hearts before God, and dare to name our deepest longing, that our desires may be purified and our will more closely joined to God's. This is the pattern of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane. He asks, as any of us would, to be spared the cup of suffering. According to Luke's account, 'in his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground' (Luke 21.44). Dangerous, self-exposing prayer. Yet in the end, despite his fear and anguish and God's apparent silence, he becomes able to say 'not my will but yours be done'. He becomes capable of accepting what will be, even though it's not what he asked for or would have chosen. And this isn't resignation. It's more that his whole-heartedness has connected him to the heart of God and enabled him to see beyond his immediate circumstances, enabled him to keep trusting come what may. 'And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?'

For what seems to happen as we empty ourselves before God is a breakthrough into a different quality of hope. This hope isn't the optimistic belief that we'll attain our desired outcome, but an unshakeable confidence in the goodness of God. In my experience, the paradox is that often it's only in undergoing the anguish of our initial petition seeming to fail, that we break through into this new realm of trust and peace. Like Julian of Norwich realising in a century of war and pestilence that 'all will be well, and all manner of things will be well'. We may come to know, writes Rowan Williams, 'that our present pain is not the whole of reality,

that behind it is a more final fact, God's vulnerable love drawing us forward'.⁴ Here the hope we come to experience is nothing other than the presence of the Spirit of God; it's the knowledge that passes all understanding of God's inextinguishable love and life.

None of this diminishes the magnitude of the world's suffering or invalidates our helpless wish that things might at times be different. But the persistence in prayer that Jesus teaches is not a magic remedy for our ills. It's simply our access to ever-deepening trust in the goodness and mercy of God, such that even in the midst of suffering and need, we're empowered to keep on with a measure of freedom and peace. This is the prayer of faith. And the question is posed to us, as it was to those first disciples: 'when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' (Luke 18.8).

⁴ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.22.