

Homily for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

October 16, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Exodus 17:8-13 (God's help depends on Moses' constant prayer.)

Responsory: Psalm 121 (Our help is from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.)

Second Reading: 2 Timothy 3:14-4:2 (Remain faithful to what you have learned and believed.)

Gospel: Luke 18:1-8 (Parable of the dishonest judge.)

This certainly is not the first time that we've heard Jesus urge his disciples to pray persistently. We all remember his famous teaching: "Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and the door will be opened to you." But, we also acknowledge that we often *fail* to receive what we ask for because of our inability to *discern what is best* before making our requests.

Today, discernment of what is best doesn't seem to be an issue, because Jesus is speaking more specifically about asking for *justice*. He contrasts our just and loving God with the dishonest judge in the parable, who "neither feared God nor respected any human being." As a judge, he's supposed to render a just decision in every matter that is brought before him. And, he's supposed to do so *promptly*, so as to limit the harm suffered by innocent victims. But, this judge doesn't care about protecting the innocent or ruling according to God's commandments. So, the poor widow, who is alone and vulnerable, has to pester him relentlessly to force him to do his job. She's not asking for any *favours*. She's simply demanding a *just decision* against her adversary.

Jesus assures us that, *unlike* the dishonest judge in the parable, God is a *just and loving judge*, who cares deeply about the welfare of his people. So, he will not only "secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night," but he will also, "see to it that justice is done for them *speedily*." That sounds very reassuring, and it fits with our understanding of God and his care for his people. However, as we reflect on that promise and that image of a just and benevolent God, we run into the very same problem as before, with his promise, "Ask and you shall receive." The fact of the matter is that many people who seek justice *never receive it*, and many people who do injustice are *never held accountable* for their crimes. Our lived experience seems to be at odds with Jesus' teaching and with our own beliefs about God's goodness and faithfulness. In fact, there seems to be a blatant contradiction *within Jesus' teaching*. If the Lord responds "speedily" to the pleas of his people, how can it be that they are "calling out to him day and night"? The fact that they have to call out to him so persistently, like the widow in the parable, suggests that God is *not responding* speedily to their cries. He's acting like the dishonest judge, ignoring the suffering of his people and frustrating their desire for justice. So, what are we to make of this apparent contradiction?

It might help us to consider the example of persistent prayer that we find in today's first reading. Moses needs help from a couple of attendants to keep his arms lifted up in *constant* prayer throughout the battle against the Amalekites. He cannot rest while the Israelites are having the better of the fight, for as soon as he lowers his arms, the battle turns in the enemies'

favor once again. That scene is a fitting metaphor for our life of faith. We can think of ourselves as being in a lifelong battle, which requires constant prayer on our part. At times, the support of other people of faith is also needed, to give us strength when we are weak, and to remind us of our *constant* need for God's help and protection, even when the "battle" seems to be going in our favor.

We cry out for *help* whenever the battle seems to be turning against us personally, when our wellbeing is in jeopardy. But, we cry out for *justice* when it seems that God's enemies are prevailing over his righteous ones. That's when we really get frustrated and ask, "Lord, why aren't you doing something to fix this?" We reflected on that just two weeks ago, when the Prophet Habakkuk was crying out, "How long, O Lord? I cry for help but you do not listen!" Then, the answer came from Jesus, as he assured his disciples that their faith was much more powerful than they realized. This week, Jesus turns the tables on his disciples, asking, "When the Son of Man comes, *will he find faith on the earth?*" Will he find people praying persistently, aware of their constant need for God's help and God's mercy, in good times and in bad? Will he find people who understand that our covenant with God demands fidelity *on our part*, even as we demand that God be faithful to *his* promises? Perhaps the apparent delay in God's response reflects a deficiency in *us*, not in God.

Another possibility is that we are simply confused about the true nature of divine justice. A recent trial in Florida provides a tragic, but enlightening example. The young man who killed 17 people and wounded 17 others in the shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida pleaded guilty to his crimes and was facing sentencing. The only question for the jury to decide was whether to impose the death penalty or life in prison without the possibility of parole. They opted for the latter, and many of the victims' families were devastated that "justice" was not done. One traumatized parent inadvertently asked the key question, which gets at the heart of the matter: "What is the death penalty for?"

He tried to claim that this was not about vengeance. Imposing the death penalty in this case, he argued, would deter other school shootings. Does anyone really believe that? Most of the really heinous and senseless mass shootings seem to end with the shooter taking his own life as the police close in on him. The death penalty is not about *deterrence* or protecting the public; it's about *vengeance*, pure and simple. And, while we should never judge grieving and traumatized parents for seeking payback against their children's killer, we who look upon these events from a distance *should* be able to maintain greater objectivity. We should be able to discern the difference between human vengeance and divine justice.

Perhaps the faith that Jesus hopes to find upon his return in glory is faith that God knows what he is doing. It would be quite sad for the Lord to show up and find all of us grumbling about the awful state of the world and accusing God of not listening to our pleas for justice. He might respond, "If you asked for *true* justice, our Heavenly Father would be happy to give it to you. *Trust* in his judgment, *discern* his will, and you might discover that God *is* doing justice for his chosen ones, and doing so *speedily*."