

“Will He Find Faith on the Earth?”

In the name of him who has promised to return, gather his elect from the four corners of the earth, and take them to be with him forever in his glorious home, dear friends in Christ: Ah yes, that blessed hope we cling to: that one day in the hopefully not-too-distant future the trumpet will sound, Lord Jesus will descend in such a way that every eye will behold him, and this world of toil, tears, and pain will come to its final end. For the faithful, that's not a bad thing. According to his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwells righteousness. From then on sin, death, and all the afflictions and sorrows we experience in this age will be but a distant memory. What a bright and joyous day it will be!

And yet, who here hasn't thought, "Yes indeed, all that's very nice; but what about *now*?" Even if you're only vaguely conscious of events happening in our country and around the world, it's hard not to notice that things are going from bad to worse. The nightly news rarely fails to bring shocking new tales of evil and vivid images of violence. Just a couple of weeks ago, for example, we heard of ongoing trial in New Jersey in which the accused was found guilty of being one of two scoundrels who held an entire family hostage, robbed them by extortion, raped the mother and youngest daughter (an eleven year old), then tied their victims to their beds, doused them with gasoline, and burnt them alive in their home. What kind of monsters could even think that up, much less carry it out? What is the world coming to? On a wider scale, we've got thousands of crazies throughout the world who think they're doing the will of their "merciful" god by setting off bombs in crowded open-air markets, on subways, airplanes, and in houses of worship. And rather than being repulsed by the insane cruelty of such acts, like you'd suppose, many of their coreligionists are inspired by these atrocities to join the cause and strap on their own suicide belts of explosives. "Sign me up!" And now, apparently for the fashion conscious suicide bomber, exploding shoes and underwear are available too. Nothing like matching accessories. We wonder how it is possible for any human mind to be so twisted by evil.

And if man's increasing capacity to do evil to his fellow man were not enough, on top of it we have all the natural disasters that continue to strike with what seems to be increasing frequency: floods, famines, earthquakes, mudslides, hurricanes, tidal waves, and more, which, due to growing world population and crowding, are causing more death and misery than ever before. And much closer to home, we have our own personal problems to face: aches, pains, illnesses, accidents – both for ourselves and for our loved ones; the deaths of people we are close to; struggles and disappointments with relationships, with money, at work and school, and even here in the church, in which we are constantly beset by persecution from without and the attacks of false teachers from within. And none of it ever seems to get any better. It just keeps getting worse.

In the midst of all this, there are times when it's hard not to think, "How can a good and loving God allow it to go on? What's he doing up there with all his free time, anyway? Why doesn't he intervene? Why doesn't he fix things?" And if in a moment of sheer frustration you are so bold as to give verbal expression to such thoughts, some pious person who means to be helpful is likely to respond, "There, there, now. I know things seem bad for the present. And they are. But the Lord has a plan even in this. You'll see. And isn't it a comfort to know that we can take our cares and concerns to him in prayer?"

I suppose someone saying that might even help sometimes; but, let's face it: usually it doesn't. No, if you're really feeling overwhelmed by the trials you're having to endure, you're more likely to say, "Right. We can *pray* about it. Oh, dandy! And that's been so mighty helpful in the past, hasn't it? Look: I've been praying. We've all been praying. What good has it done? None. Zip. Nada. Things aren't any getting better. They just keep getting worse."

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt so discouraged that you gave up on prayer thinking that God's going to do what he's going to do with or without your input – so what's the point? If so, you're not alone. I daresay that just about every Christian has, in a time of spiritual crisis or depression, experienced such feelings of helplessness and despair. Fortunately for us, the Lord Jesus, knowing very well what trials and tribulations his followers would face, knew also that *we would* feel this way at times. It is precisely for this reason that Jesus tells the parable that is today's Gospel lesson: the one about the unrighteous judge. It is one of the very few parables Jesus told for which the purpose and meaning are specifically stated: to tell us that we ought always to pray and not to lose heart.

The story begins with a worldly minded judge. It's his job is to ensure that justice is done and that the law is upheld. He is especially to see that the rights of the poor and needy are protected against those who would take advantage of them by leveraging political or monetary power. That's what this judge *should* be doing; but he's not. We're told that he doesn't fear the Lord, which means that he doesn't think he'll ever have to stand before God and give an account of his actions. He recognizes no higher authority than his own; no standard of right and wrong by which he will be judged. It leaves him free to bend, twist, and subvert the law any way he wants. Neither, Jesus informs us, does he care about people. He doesn't care if they receive justice in his court. So what if the rich and powerful are oppressing the poor? It's all the same to him. He has no compassion on those who are suffering unjustly. The only thing he cares about is himself. It suggests that he's wide open to being bribed by the highest bidder to make judgments in their favor quite independent of the validity of their cases. He's a despicable crook – unfortunately one with a lot of power over people's lives.

On the other end of the spectrum, we've got a poor widow. She is the victim of some illicit legal dealings – we're not told what exactly; but it's likely that she has been cheated out of her rightful inheritance. In that very patriarchal society in which every woman was supposed to have some male relative who was responsible to look out for her safety and wellbeing, the fact that she herself keeps going to the judge to present her case tells us that she has no one to do that for her. She's all alone – or, if she has children, they are too young to help, which only makes matters worse because they're forced to suffer along with her. The point is that she's helpless. She has no money and no advocate to speak in her behalf. And the judge whose job it is to protect her legal rights could not care less. So she does the only thing she can: she keeps going to him over and over again demanding that he do what's right by her.

For some time the judge refuses to listen. But this woman is tenacious. She hounds him constantly. These days, she'd be the kind of person who camps on the sidewalk in front of the judge's house with a picket sign waiting to shout at him whenever he emerges to go to work, and she follows him all the way there presenting her case. Then, since she's no doubt been thrown out of his court for making a scene several times, she waits there for him to emerge again so that she can follow him home. She's not going to give up.

Finally the judge realizes this. And this is where the translation we heard doesn't quite capture what he actually says to himself. What we heard was, "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will

not beat me down by her continual coming.” It makes it sound like he’s decided to help her only to avoid being nagged to death. And if you follow that through, then it would seem that the teaching point of the parable is that you ought to keep praying because eventually the Lord will get sick of your whining and give you what you want just so you’ll shut up. Somehow that’s not very comforting. No, what’s translated “beat me down” is a word that literally means “to hit below the eye.” In English we’d say “give me a black eye” – not in a literal sense – she’s not going to hit him; no, the idea is that her constant pleading is going to give him a bad reputation. He fears that people will see him coldly ignoring her day after day and conclude that he’s nothing more than a heartless brute. And who’s going to want their cases heard by a judge with a reputation like that? No one. A bad reputation will cost him his job. The bribery – that kind of stuff – is all done under the table. But a judge needs at least to appear publicly to be fair-minded, otherwise he’ll be looking for work. So the idea here is that even though he doesn’t care about the widow or about the law, he does care about himself. He’s going to have to give her justice to protect his good name.

“So wait; Pastor, are you saying that the Lord doesn’t really care about me or upholding any standard of absolute justice, but he does care about his reputation. So I ought to keep praying to him because his not answering makes him look bad and he can’t allow that to happen? Something like that? Is God afraid of losing his job?” No, not at all. This is a parable of Jesus that teaches the lesson by contrast. The point is this: if even a lousy judge who doesn’t care about you or the law would respond to your constant plea for justice simply in order to protect his good name, how much more will the Lord who loves his children dearly, and who is very much concerned with upholding justice, and who, it needs to be said, has a flawless name to protect, rescue his sons and daughters from their afflictions when they cry out to him for help? What kind of mother ignores the cries of her baby? What kind of father stands idly by watching when someone is abusing his son or daughter and they’re calling to him for help? Only terrible parents – the very worst sort. And when we give up on prayer, that’s what we’re accusing the Lord of being. That’s also the witness we give to the world when we stop praying. “Hey, why don’t you become a Christian? It’s wonderful! We have an awful God who plugs his ears to our prayers and enjoys seeing us suffer.”

No! That isn’t who the Lord is. That isn’t how he has revealed himself to us. That isn’t whom we believe him to be. And this is the main point: our attitude toward prayer is directly related to our understanding of God. If you imagine that he’s a villain far worse than the unrighteous judge who eventually gave the widow the justice she kept pleading for, then by all means, give up on prayer. It doesn’t do any good. God isn’t listening. But if you believe, as Jesus taught us, that you have a Father in heaven who loves you, who always wants what’s best for you, and who is so deeply concerned about every detail of your life that he has the very hairs of head numbered, then pray knowing that your Father hears you and will always act in your best interest.

Prayer is above all an act of faith. It’s an expression of your belief that the Lord is faithful to his promises, that he really is in control of all things, and that he cares for you. This is why it’s in this context that Jesus asks the question, “When the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on earth?” He’s asking whether there will be people like you and me who are actually doing what we said in the Psalm we read earlier: looking upward to the Lord in the expectation that he who made heaven and earth is our help in time of need; that he is watching over us, and that he will keep us, protect us, and preserve us from all evil. If you really believe that about the Lord, then you will be praying to him.

Now, someone might protest, “Okay, I see that ... but I don’t always get what I ask for when I pray.” No, you don’t. But you can be sure of this: the Lord always does give you what you need. And he’s a whole lot wiser than you are. So if he doesn’t give you what you want, you can be sure there’s a good reason for it. A bigger issue is: what good things could you have that you’re not asking for? St. James tells us that “You have not because you ask not.” And look, I’m not talking so much about the material goods that the health and wealth preachers tell us we should be asking for: fancy cars, sprawling mansions, piles of cash. No, the Lord is far more interested in giving us the good gifts of his Spirit; things like faith, patience, peace, kindness, discernment, love. The Lord is practically bending over backward in his desire to give us these things. How often do we ask for them? And how often do we ask for the wrong things or with the wrong motives? I mean, if the Lord in his wisdom sends a trial, we immediately want out: “Lord, take this away. Deliver me from this illness or sorrow or pain”—whatever it happens to be. Maybe it would be better to ask for the faith and strength to endure it, and to be a good witness to the Lord in the midst of it – at least until such time that the Lord in his mercy and according to his perfect plan decides to take it away.

Again, the question is: When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? Or more to the point personally, when he comes, will he find faith in you? What do you believe about the Lord? Because if you really believe that he is your loving Father who only has your best interests at heart, then with respect to him you’ll be like one of those little fuzzy headed chicks in the bird’s nest chirping away like mad and with its mouth hanging open just waiting for a parent to come along and put something in it. And you won’t care how it tastes: bitter, sweet, pleasant or not, because you know that whatever it is, it’s good for you. So you keep asking and expecting to be heard and answered. That’s how our lives of prayer should be – if indeed we have faith in our heavenly Father who called us by the Gospel to trust in his Son.

And that fits nicely, because it’s only through his Son that we can have that kind of faith. It’s in the Son that we see full extent of our Father’s love for us. We can be certain our prayers will be answered for his sake – oddly enough, because we know that for our sakes certain of his prayers were not answered. Remember how he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane for the cup of suffering that we deserve to drink forever on account of our sins to pass from him if it were possible to save us any other way? His request was denied. To save us, he had to drink it. And while on the cross suffering in our place, his cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” was answered with stony silence from above. There, on the cross, Jesus received his Father’s cold shoulder and the turning away from his cries for help that by rights should have been ours – and that’s our greatest proof that our Father will never treat us the same way. Jesus endured it for us. Properly understood, you might even say that on that day, God played the role of the unrighteous judge: ignoring the plea of the Righteous One who for our sakes made himself helpless, while we who are wicked prospered infinitely at his expense.

Knowing that, trusting that, believing that precious truth – this is what moves us to pray. For will not he, who held nothing back, but freely offered up his Son for us, not together with him give us all things beneficial for our lives in time and eternity? Of course he will. So then let us pray. Let’s pray confidently, boldly, eagerly, and constantly no matter how dark things get in the days ahead – because we know for certain that the day is coming when all our prayers will be answered. And on that day, we want the returning Son of Man to find faith in us. May our Father in heaven grant that it be so. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!