

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)  
(Exodus 17:8-13 / Luke 18:1-8)  
16.10.2016

When we listen to Jesus' parables, one of our first reactions is to ask ourselves: who is God in the story? Where do we fit in? These questions stem from the fact that we have been taught to try to identify the characters of the parables.

From this point of view, the parable we hear today is a bit problematic: if we are the widow, is God the judge? Is the parable suggesting that we should pester God until he changes his mind and relents?

If we want to respect the text, we need to look at our parable from a different angle: it seems to me that in the story God is the widow and we are the judge. The widow pesters the judge, like God who pleads for our attention, until we are converted and act with justice.

The whole biblical revelation bears witness to God's patience in our regard. However he is not patiently resigned as someone who has given up on us. God's patience has a purpose. God is patient because he cannot impose himself on us. He has no choice but to propose himself in love, and to wait for an answer from us. God knocks gently at the door of our hearts and waits patiently that we may let him in.

Like the woman in the parable, he has no other power than his fidelity to his own purpose, to what he thinks is the right thing to do.

God's goal is not to make us accomplish one good act of justice but to transform us completely into a new creature, to make us new. This is why every day, every hour, every minute, he comes and knocks again at the door of our hearts and minds, pleading for justice and love, for peace and respect. When we open the door, then we are transformed by the grace of God's visit. When we do not open the door, then we hurt ourselves and shrink in humanity and diminish in divinity.

The good news is that God is patient and will remain patient until the very end, up until the very last second. The problem is that the more we refuse to open the door, the more we harden ourselves, the more difficult it is for us to change.

If we persist in being like the judge of our parable, with no fear of God and no respect for our neighbours, we end up tragically alone, cut off from all life-giving relationships, truly our life is hell.

Like God who is patient and perseverant in the way he relates to us, so we are called to be patient and perseverant when we relate to him in prayer.

Yet, here we have to be careful, the word *prayer* means more than times of communal worship or of personal meditation. As we have just said, it is about being in relationship.

In our Gospel reading Jesus is keen to stress that the problem is about justice. And so we cannot just focus our attention on prayer without inserting it into the context of our whole lives and how we relate to one another at every level, how we act with justice, respect, generosity and peace in our daily lives.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel sums up the challenge in very clear terms when he writes: "Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of hatred and opportunism. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision." (quoted in Kaplan, *Abraham...*, p. 340).

When Jesus exhorts us to “pray continuously and never lose heart”, he means that we should never despair of the ability for our world and our Christian communities to be different, more conformed to God’s will and plan for his creation. When Christians pray they are changed and so they can become agents of change in their family, community and society.

So prayer is not about changing God or informing him about things he would not know; prayer is not a method in order for us to feel good; prayer is not about “saying prayers” to a far-off divinity.

For us to pray is to allow God to shape us in his image and likeness. It is to put our lives into his hands over and over again so that he may use us for his purpose.

Here again the widow appears as a perfect model of Christian life. Like God himself, she is poor and humble, strong and perseverant.

If we want to overthrow and ruin the pyramids of injustice and fears, of self-centredness and envy which threaten our relationships and our lives, it is important for us to be prepared to pray and to act with humility and patience.

The paradox here is that prayer empowers us insofar as we first acknowledge our poverty. Our prayer should be rooted in a deep awareness of our dependence on God and upon one another. In Christianity there is no such a thing as private prayers, even when we are physically alone. We never pray on our own but always as members of the one Body which we form together with all our brothers and sisters throughout the world. A weak prayer life endangers our relationship with God and also the way we relate to one another.

With Pope Francis, “we believe in the meek and humble strength of prayer” (Address, Assisi, 20.09.2016), so let us become like the widow of our parable, humble and strong in prayer.