

SERMON 16th October 2022

When God says “No!”

Today we are going to focus our attention on a parable spoken by Jesus, and reported by Luke. Before we do that let's quickly look at the Psalm (121). Our God, the Psalmist insists, is a God who guards ("keeps" in the NRSV translation). Listen to the repeated use of "guard"...

Psalm 121 Jerusalem Bible

- 1 I lift my eyes to the mountains : where is help to come from?
- 2 Help comes to me from Yahweh, who made heaven and earth.
- 3 No letting our footsteps slip! This **guard** of yours, he does not doze!
- 4 The **guardian** of Israel does not doze or sleep.
- 5 Yahweh **guards** you, shades you. With Yahweh at your right hand
- 6 sun cannot strike you down by day, nor moon at night.
- 7 Yahweh **guards** you from harm, he **guards** your lives,
- 8 he **guards** you leaving, coming back, now and for always.

Hold that thought!

In the parable of the unjust judge (maybe "corrupt" would be more appropriate) there is a similar faith expressed in the reliability of God, but in a very strange way. Listen again. Insert yourself in the story. Picture Jesus with a small audience that hangs on his words. They are puzzled. Why? There are two main "actors" in the story a judge — perhaps better thought of as an **arbitrator**, and a poor **widow**. Do you identify with either of them? Is there a hero? The evangelist, Luke, has collected this story — he is a story collector. Why does he want to pass this story on? Evangelist means the teller of good news. Is there any good news in this parable?

Listen again:

Luke 18:1-8 Jerusalem Bible.

Then he told them a parable about the need to pray continually and never lose heart. 2"There was a judge in a certain town," he said, "who had neither fear of God nor respect for man. 3In the same town there was a widow who kept on coming to him and saying, 'I want justice from you against my enemy!' 4For a long time he refused, but at last he said to himself, 'Maybe I have neither fear of God nor respect for man, 5but since she keeps pestering me I must give this widow her just rights, or she will persist in coming and worry me to death.' " 6And the Lord said, "You notice what the unjust judge has to say? 7Now will not God see justice done to his chosen who cry to him day and night even when he delays to help them? 8I promise you, he will see justice done to them, and done speedily. But when the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on earth?"

Here the congregation was asked for responses. Do you, as reader, have any responses?

This judge is not like our judges. Our judges interpret the law. Our judges speak impartially of guilt and innocence. But this judge's job is different. His job is to take sides. He is supposed to understand the interplay of good and evil. His field of action is ethics, not law. His job is to call out evil. His job is to stand up for good — and justice. His job is to take the side of those getting a raw deal. Of course, in the story, he fails badly as a judge. He is tired, and irritable. He can't be bothered. Perhaps the rich and powerful have better access to him. Perhaps some bribery and corruption has occurred. Perhaps it is in the interest of the judge to tune his ear to the interests of the strong. We understand people like this judge. We know people like him. In politics. In business. Sometimes in religion.

The woman (the widow) is another thing altogether. In the Bible, widows are symbolic of destitution. They have lost their support and their rights. But this widow does not give up — she has been wronged and she wants (she demands) justice.

Discuss the Yiddish verb “to kvetch” — meaning to complain. It is also a noun. One can be “a kvetch” — a persistent complainer. Also discussed was the Yiddish word “Schmuck”, which refers to a generally unpleasant and unreliable person. The point is that the parable describes the interchange of a kvetch with a schmuck.

We, in our minds, surely urge the widow on. We wish her luck. We want the judge to change. We want the system to change. We want the widow to win.

But Jesus is not giving us a lesson in reforming the system, or reforming human nature. Jesus is all too well aware of corruption. It won't change. The poor we will always have with us. The rich we will always have with us too. In our own time the distribution of wealth — the gap between the richest and poorest — has reached obscene dimensions. There will always be corruption. We too seek an arbitrator — a guard to use the word favoured by the Psalm.

Into these facts of life Jesus intrudes with this proposition: if even a corrupt arbitrator (who is a schmuck) can be nagged, pestered, cajoled, kvetched into dispensing sound judgement, how much more likely will a faithful, gracious, loving God (who is a Mensch) respond to our entreaties. Fair enough! Message received. God listens. God responds.

But there is a problem. We have all had the experience of asking God for something, only to be met with a deafening silence. We have all had the experience of God saying “no”. I'm not talking about finding the car keys or a parking spot. We know that this is nonsense. I am talking about relieving pain, or curing an illness, or stopping a war, or ending a pandemic. We may ask God to intervene in these matters, but we are not surprised if it does not work, or if the answer seems to be “NO!”.

It is possible that we are part of the problem. Perhaps our requests need to be modified. Perhaps what we need is to get a better understanding of how things work, to develop our world-wise-ness. To locate ourselves in this real world that is full of challenges and to seek solutions that involve our participation — like developing inner strength and fortitude.

It could be that the silences following on our desperate requests for help are answers in themselves. Perhaps the message from the Almighty is to get real, work on your inner strength, learn to understand your problems as part of the grander scheme of things. Life wasn't meant to be easy. God may be pestered into action, but His response still needs to be understood and worked on.

Does that make sense — or is it a copout?

And on a final note, let me remind you that Jesus prayed in the garden that his coming bitter end would be otherwise — yet Jesus also committed himself to his Father's will. And remember that Jesus also asked, on the cross, why God had forsaken him. The same Jesus who told us in today's parable that God can be pressured into action on our behalf — that same Jesus experienced also the desperate loneliness of God's "NO".

Does Jesus' example speak louder than his parable in this case. Is the God revealed in the life and example of Jesus a fellow-traveller on the pilgrimage of life and faith, getting his feet dirty on the long and rocky pilgrim path?

Can we put aside our multitudinous desires and demands and go with the flow, substitute the road of faith for the courtroom and remind ourselves again and again that ours is a God that has experienced

injustice, that has suffered, that has known anguish, that understands temptation, that has walked and continues to walk with us...

“Who through this weary pilgrimage has all his people led...”

May it be so...

Karel Reus