

*for those losing heart*  
a sermon preached on the  
*twenty-second sunday after pentecost*

16 October 2016

at

*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:10-4:5; Luke 18:1-14

In a conversation during the week it was suggested that Jesus' treatment of the religious leaders is extreme, that perhaps it merely reflects not Jesus himself, but the early church's hot dispute with the synagogue, and therefore these criticisms ought not to be taken too seriously. It's an interesting suggestion. I must say that I have some sympathy with this way of getting out of the discomfort, of today's second parable in particular. After all, I am a latter day Pharisee! If I could readily dismiss Jesus' attacks on the 'religious leaders' as mere exaggerated hyperbole, then my own situation would be more tolerable. This is tempting indeed!

Well let us turn then to the parables given to us today.

We see from the first of today's parables that Jesus' followers are losing heart.<sup>1</sup> (Are any of us 'losing heart'?) So Jesus gives them the symbols of 'widow' and 'unrighteous judge'. In first century Ancient Near Eastern culture a widow knows that she is as good as dead; while a judge is powerfully confident in his own life. In this context, a widow is a perfect symbol for those who are losing heart, and their need to 'pray always'. How timely, that we are given this parable when we are in the midst of our Spring Series: 'Prayer in Daily Life'.

The 'unrighteous judge' only consents to the widow's prayer in the end because he is in fact afraid, afraid that her persistence may give him a black eye – yes, that's what the Greek literally says!<sup>2</sup> Yet, says Jesus, if even the unrighteous judge – who acts out of the wrong motive – can manage to grant justice, then how much more the Creator of all will do so.

But, will God find such faith? Will God find the persistent prayer of those who know they are as good as dead?<sup>3</sup>

While the first of today's parables is given to those who are struggling with their decision *for* Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, the second parable is given to those who are firmly *deciding against* Jesus' self-emptying way.<sup>4</sup> This, we note, is Luke's narrative pattern – first a teaching to those who are accepting his way; then a teaching to rejecters. Those who reject the way of Jesus are symbolised by the Pharisee's dependence on 'goodness', on commitment to law.

At a commissioning of a parish priest recently I was struck again by our church's depressing emphasis on law. No celebratory breaking of the Bread – the one thing we are invited by Jesus to do together when we meet.<sup>5</sup> Instead, hectares of words – words, and yet more dull words. Taking central place – overwhelming the liturgy of the symbols of ministry – was law, the lengthy recitation of what is known as the 'oaths and declarations'. I mention this because the symbols we adopt usually give our game away. And the loudest symbol in our Diocese's rite of commissioning is rather like the Pharisees' speech to God in the temple.<sup>6</sup> 'Look at all our good works; look at all we're going to do!'

*We* are the Pharisee praying in the temple, extolling our virtues and good deeds and spiritual exercises, depending on our adherence to law to justify ourselves. For in spite of Jesus' life, teaching and death proclaiming the profligacy of grace – and the church's 'belief' in salvation by grace alone, through faith – we remain utterly committed to law, to justification by works. As has been observed, "Our love of justification by works is so profound that at the first

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1 Luke 18:1

2 Luke 18:5 **υποπιαζει** *hypōpiázē*

3 Luke 18:7-8

4 Luke 18:9

5 Luke 22:19

6 Luke 18:12

opportunity we run from the strange light of grace straight back to the familiar darkness of law”.<sup>7</sup>

Try this thought experiment based on the parable. Imagine the tax collector returning a week later. We want him to have ‘reformed’ his ways, don’t we? But the self-emptying God of justification by grace through faith – who has simply got right out of the game of justification by works – just sends the tax collector home justified anyway. Do we like that? No, we certainly do not!

Or, if you like, imagine him returning a week later, having managed a few modest reforms. What do we want God to be doing with him? Examining him of course: to test the extent to which he has amended his ways! But – and here’s the crunch of *evangelion*, gospel – if God is not interested in the Pharisees’ impressive list of righteous deeds, then why would the tax collector’s modest reform impress?

And in this way the parable exposes what our prayer book calls “the thoughts of our hearts”. “Why are [we] so bent on destroying the story by sending the [tax collector] back for his second visit with the Pharisees’ speech in his pocket?”<sup>8</sup>

And the honest answer is that while we agree with the parable’s teaching as a religious idea, as a correct Christian belief, *in our heads*, our hearts continue to be in the grip of its opposite. Our ‘secret prayer’, revealing the ‘thoughts of our hearts’, is for approval in others’ eyes, for ‘successful’ demonstrations of our righteousness.<sup>9</sup>

So no matter how uncomfortable this parable might make me feel, I do not think that Jesus’ teaching in these parables is mere exaggerated hyperbolae. We *are* alarmed by the strange light of grace; we *do* find that there *is* something familiar and curiously comforting in the darkness of law’s calculations.

The medicine of Jesus’ gospel is emphatic and decisive: the judge’s and the Pharisee’s ability to win the game of justification is no better than the widow’s and the tax collector’s. Indeed, it’s worse! For the judge who thinks he’s living leaves his courtroom dead; the widow who knows she’s dead goes home with life. The Pharisee who thinks he has life goes home dead; while the tax collector who knows he’s dead goes home living.<sup>10</sup>

The point of both parables is that they are *all* dead – to law and justification by works – and their only hope is the strange light of grace, the way to life which goes by death!

‘Prayer’, in this light, is ultimately giving ourselves over to this astonishing way of the self-emptying God; who reverses all our carefully calculated equations and hierarchies,<sup>11</sup> who has got right out of the justification by works business, and who simply desires to put on a great feast to which all are invited.<sup>12</sup>

‘Persistence’ in prayer, is the desire with all our hearts – indeed the finding of our hearts – to align ourselves with God’s infinite Love: in whom we are justified regardless; in whom neither our good works nor our ‘chicken sacrifices’ makes the blindest bit of difference; in whom our own death is all that’s required, death in the way of calculating righteousness, but alive through the way of dying.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 2002, p342.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, p343.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 18:9

<sup>10</sup> Luke 18:14

<sup>11</sup> Luke 18:14

<sup>12</sup> Luke 15:22-24; 15:21-23