HOMILY FOR SUNDAY ORDINARY 29 YEAR C

16 OCTOBER 2016 ST BENET’S HALL

Today’s gospel from St Luke, like many we have heard in this year of readings from Luke, illustrates its message with a pointed parable, found particularly and only in the Third Gospel. Today it is of a judge, who has neither fear of God nor respect for man and who Jesus later refers to as ‘unjust’. Jesus’ use of the word ‘unjust’ suggests that his lack of fear of God is in fact a lack of faith and piety and his lack of respect suggests carelessness for the justice and truth of the cases he hears. He is therefore a bad judge. He is faced in the parable by a pestering and nagging widow, who seeks his verdict in her favour against an enemy. Neither character is particularly appealing or attractive. Still the woman eventually through her persistence gets her way, for the judge resolves to find in her favour – it is not really quite clear in the story whether she is in fact truly in the right – since otherwise he fears he is never going to hear the end of it and she is going to worry him to death.

Jesus uses these hardly appealing, but may be very believable, characters to illustrate two important aspects of the life of faith, firstly the need to pray continually and secondly never to lose heart. The disedifying character of the unjust judge is used by the way of a contrast rather than likeness. If an unbelieving judge eventually gives in to the persistent widow, how much more will God, who is good and loving and just respond to the prayers of those who cry to him, day and night, and even if he appears to delay in responding, nonetheless he will see justice done, and unlike the unjust judge, he will see it done ‘speedily’, the apparent delay melting away. We should place all our hope and trust in God and show this by turning readily to him in prayer. Then there is at the end another little twist in Jesus’ rather sad final comment: ‘But when the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on earth?’ Will there in fact be any persisting in prayer and not losing heart? This gives us a signal that trust and faith and prayer may not come so easily to us.

It is certainly easy, as I dare say we all know, to lose heart, to become discouraged. Having an ideal as high as to shape one’s life in a Godward way, to respond truly and fully to the double law of love of God and love of neighbour, the life beat of the Gospel, to love one who is often enough an annoying and pesky neighbour, who seems to worry us half to death, leaves one with a discouraging deficit between ideal and reality, the gap at times seemingly widening not narrowing as we try to make our halting progress. St Benedict’s fourth chapter of his Rule, is ‘The Tools for Good Works’, tools of the spiritual craft, to be used without ceasing day and night, to be returned on Judgement Day for the reward the Lord has promised. They progress from love of God and neighbour by way of the Ten Commandments – as monks need to be reminded not to kill, not to commit adultery, not to steal – to a daunting 74 verse list comprising renunciations, self discipline, compassions. They are written by someone who knows well the challenge of any sort of community living and its failures ‘Never give a hollow greeting of peace or turn away when someone needs your love’ … and it proceeds through the hardest teaching of the Gospel: ‘love your enemies’. It challenges fundamental assumptions: ‘If you notice something good in yourself, give credit to God, but be certain that the evil you commit is always your own and yours to acknowledge.’ It includes the twin points of today’s gospel: ‘devote yourself often to prayer’ and lest we lose all heart in completing so long and daunting a programme, the last of the tools is ‘Finally never lose heart in God’s mercy’. Never lose heart: God in his love will set us aright as we stumble along the way. The enemy we most have to fear is ourself, our own weakness in living this way of love; we are ourselves the Amalekite enemy to be mown down, as in the first reading from the book of Exodus and we are to ourselves the enemy of the widow in the Gospel. And our weapon against the enemy within is a persevering faith and trust, showing itself in our prayer – our continuing prayer day and night, a prayer for help and mercy. A trust not in ourselves but in God.

The early Cistercian monks were particularly drawn to the image from our first reading of Moses holding up his arms to secure the Israelites’ victory over the Amalekites. When his arms grew weary, he sits on a stone and he has two helpers Aaron and Hur who support his arms. The Cistercians saw Aaron and Hur as symbols of monks praying and thus supporting the people of God. We may see them in the context of today’s Gospel as symbols of our own continuing and persevering prayer to God for mercy as we seek to live his life of love.

Of course I dare say we need to guard against a danger of misunderstanding these phrases ‘pray continually’ and ‘cry to him day and night’. We may pray that the dead will come to worship God in the liturgy of heaven, but whatever that phrase means, it surely is not a never ending Church service. Nobody is at Mass all day long. We may seek to pray continually, day and night, but nobody can say prayers all day long, and live a human life of love. Understood in this too literal way, Aaron and Hur, as it were, will themselves grow faint and weary. In order to activate a power of prayer against the enemy which is ourself and within, we need to go deeper or beyond the conscious level and deeper or beyond the needful activity of our lives, to a place deep within, where prayer can indeed be continuous and which is not in competition with all the necessary activities of our lives and which rather precisely supports them. It is God’s work not ours, and it is an intention and openness on our part to him, a prayer for his mercy. I think therefore that a key passage to consider in parallel to our gospel today is this from Paul to the Romans: ‘The Spirit too comes to aid us in our weakness, for when we do not know how to pray properly, then the Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words; and he who can see into all hearts knows what the Spirit means because the prayers that the Spirit makes for God’s holy people are always in accordance with the mind of God’.