

TCTS Valedictory 2014
(Luke 18:1-8)

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Our Gospel reading this evening is quite clearly a parable about the power of prayer. It's also a story that shows—if we had any doubt about it—that Jesus had a sense of humour.

The parable gives an example of a poor woman gaining justice from an unjust judge: from someone who, despite his position, couldn't care less about justice, unless there's something in it for him. Perhaps it's a lawsuit or money she's owed or a piece of land. The widow clearly can't afford to bribe the judge, so she does the next best thing: she keeps asking, and asking, and asking—turning up at his house day and night, and knocking on his door. This is a very determined & persistent woman, and the judge knows it. And so, because of her personality, in the end the judge gives her what she wants and what, incidentally, she deserves.

The parable combines two of Luke's favourite themes: prayer and justice. The theme of justice begins in the Magnificat, the Song of Mary, where Mary sings of the rich and powerful being thrown down, with the coming of Christ the Saviour, and the poor and humble being exalted, being fed, being given justice. That theme goes through the Gospel of Luke and continues into Acts, where the early Christian community shares their possessions with one another—as a family—and take a particular responsibility in caring for the poor, especially widows.

Likewise the theme of prayer is everywhere across Luke-Acts. In fact, everything important happens in the context of prayer: Jesus' baptism, his transfiguration, the appointing of the twelve apostles, his arrest at Gethsemane; or, in Acts, the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and many of the events of Peter's ministry and Paul's missionary work. Great things happen while people are at prayer—sometimes to their complete astonishment.

Luke's focus, in the parable however, is mainly on prayer and the prayerful cries of God's people, including their cries for justice. That's a good theme for us at this time of the year. It reminds us that prayer is our vocation; it's what we are called to do. We're also called to be people of action and justice, but that action is always to come from prayer.

For Luke, prayer is first and foremost the task and calling of the Christian community; it's the prayer of the Church. But prayer is also the vocation of us as individuals, as Christians. Prayer, in other words, is both communal and deeply personal. Within that broad understanding, Luke identifies several different kinds of prayer. There's intercessory prayer, where we intercede for others or for our own needs. That's the kind of prayer we find here in this parable, exemplified in the widow. And Luke assures us that God hears the prayers of the church, the prayers of God's people. In other words, God chooses to work with us and through us, and through our prayers. And we are encouraged in our vocation to intercede for the life of the world, the life of those in need, the life of those who are persecuted for their faith, those who are subjected to violence and hatred and terror; to pray for a creation suffering from human greed and exploitation.

Then there's the prayer of confession, which is the very next parable, where we know and confess to God when we've messed things up: for ourselves and for others, acknowledging that we are sinners, the very opposite of self-righteous and self-satisfied. Luke's Gospel also speaks of people praising and glorifying God. That too is a form of prayer, perhaps the highest form being the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving in the Eucharist, where we praise God is for who God is and for what God has done on behalf of the whole creation.

But there's another form of prayer that we see in Jesus himself, and that is the prayer of communion; the kind of prayer in which no words are said but we simply be in silence in the presence of God. St Theresa of Avila speaks of this kind of prayer in these terms: 'I gaze on Christ gazing on me, lovingly and humbly.' This is the prayer of the heart, the prayer of communion.

All the great mystics and saints of the church knew this kind of prayer. Today, in particular, we commemorate Albert the Great, the thirteenth century German saint. Albert was the teacher of St Thomas Aquinas. He was a very eminent intellectual in his day, who rediscovered the works of Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, and brought them into dialogue with theology. Albert was passionately interested in theology, in philosophy, in science in all its forms (the stars, animals, botany), and in music, and he taught in the great medieval Universities of Paris and Cologne. But at heart he was a Dominican priest, a powerful preacher and a dedicated person of prayer who, as the bishop of Cologne, lived a very simple life, a life that reflected his total dependence on God.

And that's the key to prayer. It's learning to give ourselves, to surrender ourselves, entirely to God. Not to hold onto our control, our own ego and willfulness, even our own anxieties and insecurities. But to hand everything over to God: our deepest longings and fears for ourselves and for others, our passion for justice, our love of the church and God's people, our desire for the creation to be renewed. Our intercessions arise from that dependence on God, that deep communion with God, as the basis for all our actions for justice, for goodness, for peace.

We don't, of course, do it alone. Christ prays in us and for us, through the Spirit; is always with us when we pray, always present, putting into words what we can't say, making up for the inadequacies and limitations of our prayer.

This evening, at the end of the year—the end of the academic year, and the end of the church's year—the gospel reminds us again of our core vocation, our calling as the baptized people of God. We're called to be people of prayer, people whose whole lives are given over to God, and people, therefore, who can intercede, in company with Christ, for the life and needs of the world.

Thanks be to God.