

## **Luke 18 v1-8, 2 Timothy 3: 14-14:5.**

**October 20 2019**

It's so important when considering the parables that we look carefully at the characters in the stories because Jesus often used people that surprise us and jolt us into a totally new way of seeing things. I was at a Deanery quiet morning last week (couldn't do the whole day - which says something!) - and was reminded of something by Mark Clavier who was introducing Matthew's gospel (we've had Luke this year - Matthew is next in our Lectionary). It was something Karl Barth, the famous Swiss theologian said. He talked about encountering a "...strange new world within the bible." Every bit of spiritual and mental equipment he brought to the task of studying Scripture was shattered by this "strange new world" and as a result he had to begin looking at both the Bible and his own world in a new way. Today's parable is a great example. Jesus uses a figure of no particular

power or consequence as an example of faith and persistence. And I guess the message is: if this person can do it - don't you think we all can?

The hero of the story is a woman (of no importance at the time), and a widow to boot (so even less so) who simply refuses to take "no" for an answer because she believes her future can be different. She possesses no power or money or influence to hold the arrogant judge to account - or sway his opinion - other than her dogged persistence. Perhaps she's like all those who, like Jacob, have wrestled with God - or who have sought justice down the years by simply refusing to give up - despite violence and imprisonment. The fact that she's a widow and that Luke singles her out as a special focus for God's concern and the particular attention of Jesus is (once again, as we've been seeing) hugely important - and we need to remember that in that society people like her would so often be overlooked or abused.

So are we noticing a theme here? It's a *widow* this time who's being held up as example of a powerful person of faith – and this would have been such a poke in the eye for all the men hearing the story – just like the Samaritan leper who was healed (in last week's gospel reading) & was an example of gratitude that shamed the Jews. And if this woman can be persistent enough to get justice from a corrupt and immoral judge - just think how *much more* God will hear *our* prayers? (By the way that's a great subject for a bible study – the 'much mores' of Scripture – what about these from Luke: when writing about 'giving of good gifts to your children... how MUCH MORE will your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him' (Luke 11:13). Also when Jesus said 'Consider the raven, for they neither sow nor reap...but God feeds them. Of how MUCH MORE value are you than the birds' (Luke 12:24). And if God so clothes the grass... how MUCH MORE will He clothe you, O you of little faith.

Praying isn't about trying to twist God's arm - he's more than ready to answer, to give, to bless. And when we pray for justice and truth we've got to believe it and live it. It needs to capture our hearts and imaginations - just like the amazing God revealed in Scripture needs to captivate our whole being.

Remember the Civil Rights Movement in the US in the 60s - and Martin Luther King's dream? One day... And the lyrics of Sam Cooke's freedom song:

*"It's been a long, a long time coming  
But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it  
will"*

Praying (as we regularly do) for God's Kingdom to come sometimes seems like an impossible task when faced with the onslaught of forces that seem to be so vehemently against God's ideas for his world. Yet we pray every Sunday (and some) for that gentle and just rule to come. Rather than being pressed into the world's mode, this is asking that

the world becomes subject to Christ. We're so deeply influenced by the world we don't even know it. We were consumers long before we became Christians - and that shows itself in our attitudes doesn't it? "I couldn't possibly attend that kind of service, the worship does nothing for me..."(come on we've probably all said it!). What a far cry from the Book of Common Prayer which encouraged us to pray:

"...and here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee;

Of course that's straight from Romans chapter 12. Timothy's letter reminds us that it's through his word that God is able to inspire, direct and correct our lives so that the vision of a world filled with God's life and love can become a reality: a world where all people flourish. If we simply let God's word guide and feed us - because this new state of affairs starts with you and me. If we simply let what *he* says be the voice that shapes us

amongst all those other voices in our society that demand our attention – our time – our money. If we let God's word *read us* as well as we reading *it* – so that our desires, our ambitions, our hopes and dreams are shaped by God. Of course that presupposes that we give it more than just occasional attention, doesn't it? The challenge for the Church – for you and me – is not just to *speak* the message of the Kingdom we proclaim – but to *live* it, *embody* it – no matter what might be going on around us – and to do this gently, generously and with patience – because that's what people will – and do – notice.

Here's Paul continuing his advice to Timothy:

*Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed...all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

Is it just me, or is there something about the bible readings lately which don't seem to be letting

us off the hook? I wonder are we listening closely?

Paul is spelling it out here. What it means is that as we read scripture it will from time to time inform us in no uncertain terms that something we've been doing is simply out of line with God's best for us - his 'will'. Sometimes that's going to be as plain as day in the text ('Don't steal!' - and the rest!). But then other times as we read or remember a passage, we'll begin to hear the voice of God gently, or perhaps not so gently, telling us that this story or verse applies to something in *our* lives. And when that happens - as it may often do for those who read the bible prayerfully - we'd do well to pay attention. Reading the bible as if it is 'God-breathed' will transform us - will improve us - little by little as we listen to his voice and let his Spirit help. And it will *train us in righteousness* - that combination of goodness and justice -

that behaviour that God longs to see in us and in all his children. The aim is not to squash us into an unnatural shape or to make us clones – but to help us become complete richly..*human* beings – reflecting God’s image in all its technicolour, variety and splendour.

As the young apprentice, Timothy has the opportunity to watch Paul close up and to see what he’s gone through and how he’s carried on faithfully through it all. Life will never be easy for those who live and preach the gospel. But with scripture in their hearts and heads they will not only be able to hold onto the faith, but to grow and teach others.

Timothy’s job is to keep going with the task of preaching faithfully from the scriptures whether the moment seems favourable – or not. Sometimes I look at our lectionary readings and think – oh no, not *that* one – because I’m challenged as much as anybody

- and I spend much of the week preparing and mulling all this over before delivering it.

'To be honest' (as they say these days) sometimes that prep is hard going and a struggle. At other times (thank the Lord) it's different - the words flow easily and preparation isn't such an ordeal. There are many different reasons for this - but I know one is the extent to which you guys pray for Barry, Julie and me as we preach and try and lead you - because we need all the help we can get - honest! - so please do! And pray for what the Lord is doing here amongst us. If 'stuff' is going on in church (as it does from time to time) it'd be easy for the preachers to back off: to hold back from leading the congregation into further truth and insight. You know what *that* approach is like, don't you - it's the 'homily' I think they call it - where you get fobbed off with a few scattered, random reflections about the

vicar's holiday - often accompanied by what Tom Wright calls "the shoulder-shrugging comment that nobody likes to listen to sermons these days anyway, so it's not really worth it." Paul of course, would have none of that with Timothy - "keep going" he says, "whether the time feels right or not" - and Timothy, who was young, and perhaps a little shy and anxious - just like me - okay, well maybe not. But whatever, Tim undoubtedly *needed* the advice. We probably all know people who inflict their own personality and opinions on everyone they meet, in a brash and bullying way - and vicars who hector people from pulpits. But the teacher or preacher's task isn't to lay down the law. He or she is to make things clear 'with all patience and explanation' - so please forgive me when I don't do that sufficiently well, I do know how important it is..

But did you catch the end of the reading from the epistle? Paul gives Timothy a warning, which explains why he has to persist with his patient teaching. Quite soon, people within the Christian community won't want the kind of teaching which will help keep them healthy and strong. Like people being instructed by their doctors to follow a particular diet, they'll discover that half of their favourite foods are not on it, and so will look for different doctors who will advise them to eat and drink what they like. "We're all right as we are" they'll say - "we don't need to learn anything more - and we don't need to change our behaviour or do different things - and we certainly don't want to hear all that old stuff about Jesus in the gospels - because there are all sorts of different new angles and takes on spiritual things that would make it a lot easier". (Ah ah!) "Timothy" (Paul says) - "don't be surprised

when you hear such stuff – get on with it – it’s your calling – keep your balance – it may be painful at times – be persistent – but then you didn’t sign on for an easy life. Go on announcing Jesus as Lord and King – keep on introducing people to Jesus and to this *strange new world* that the Risen Christ is bringing into being. It isn’t about what the world would regard as successful, but it is about loyalty and perseverance.” (As I said – hits you right between the eyes, doesn’t it!!). In the scriptures lie the green pastures for the soul – but do we honestly spend enough time reading them ourselves? We deepen our love for God as his Spirit uses these amazing promises and seals them in our hearts.

**Amen**