

Pentecost 21 – God’s law and Persistent Prayer – 17<sup>th</sup> October 2010

Readings: Jeremiah 31: 31-34 ‘I will write my law upon their hearts’

Luke 18: 1-8 ‘The persistent widow and the unjust judge’

### Introduction

This is a sermon in two parts as both the Jeremiah and Lukan passage deserve some reflection.

### The Law written on our hearts from Jeremiah 31

A distinguished Christian ethicist once said that ‘character’ is who you are when nobody else is looking. Character is who you are ‘all the way to your boots’, to use a colloquialism. Or as the prophet Jeremiah might put it, character is what you have ‘written on your heart’. Jeremiah said that for most of our history with God, we had to have God’s way, God’s law written on tablets of stone. We needed to see and read them or have them read to us to remind us of what God expected of his people. This way we might keep some of the commandments! However Jeremiah looks forward to the time when God’s law will be written on our hearts. Good character is not a matter of accurately reading and obeying a set of rules but rather it is a matter of having something on the heart. Good character is when you are able to sing the song without having to read the notes. You know it ‘by heart’.

When I was at theological college we had to do Christian ethics. It was an incredibly boring subject. This was so sad because ethics shouldn’t be boring. When I came to teach ethics at the Australian Defence Force Academy as part of my chaplaincy role there I tried to make sure that it wasn’t the boring subject that I had endured as part of my own university training. In the course we looked at various ethical problems. We analysed each situation and weighed up alternative courses of action. There were debates, discussions along with passionate arguments on things like abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia and of course on war and was there such a thing as just war? Ethical decision making was an incredibly lively subject. At the beginning of the year, when I was at the Academy, a defence attaché from an overseas country came to see me with his six Muslim students worried that this was a compulsory subject being taught by Christian clergy. I think he, along with the students, were worried that we were going to ‘Christianise’ their students. Having explained the outline of the course, also shared the fact that we couldn’t hide our Christian ethics, we then assured them that they would have plenty of opportunity to input from both their personal and faith background.

The course went well and at the end of the year both the attaché and students came to say thanks and to give us gifts as it was the subject the students had enjoyed the most. As chaplains we were both amazed but also appreciative of their gesture.

All we had done was to ask students to apply their reason, their logical rational thinking to a variety of scenarios and have deliberations around the question “What ought I do in this situation and what are my guiding principles in my decision making?” Amazing what came out of that. Certainly guidance and teaching was

given along with background knowledge as lecturers. However, most of the work was done by the students.

For most there was a strong conscience that differentiated right from wrong, they had a strong set of beliefs which needed to be accessed in their ethical decision making processes so that they could rationally work through the problem solving processes.

Certainly it reminded me of Jeremiah's hope that God's Law would be written on our hearts. Deeply, divinely implanted so that no matter how much pressure we may find ourselves under we may respond as God would want us to in any adverse scenario.

A 'pipe dream' – I'd like to think not!!!

### The Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge

Now we come to the parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge. In these eight short verses (Luke 18:1-8) there are a host of theological ideas and issues which at first glance we may not recognise. There is the obvious, prayer and trust. But there is also justice and deliverance, judgement and faith, persistence and resistance, the first and the second coming of Christ along with the life of believers. Furthermore, there are various ways to interpret this parable and what is the main focus. Is the focus on who God is and how God acts, or on the believers and their call to faithful life? Are conservative interpreters right in emphasizing the need of devout piety in one's private prayer life, or is a liberal interpretation more sound with its emphasis on communal resistance against injustice?

I raise these thoughts to make us all think outside the usual 'box'.

However I want us to think on the theme of 'persistence' – not ours but God's. One way to summarize the biblical message, the good news of both the Old and New Testament, would be to speak of God's persistent, unshakable, everlasting love for us and for all of creation.

We deserve God's condemnation but God is so persistently in love with us that we can trust in this God to bring about justice. We can be sure that God hears our prayers, our crying night and day, even though we may not see the results we expect or want immediately. God does not forget about us, as we do so often to others and even to God. However, we do lose heart and we do grow weary in our faith and prayer life.

Craddock, in his commentary on Luke says, "All we know in the life of prayer is asking, seeking, knocking and waiting, trust is sometimes fainting and we may grow angry. But we need to be faithful and persistent."

It is at this point that we need to be reminded of God's perseverance with us as a people. We need to remember God's persistent love in Christ. Praying is and always will be hard work as we wait in the words of the Lord's Prayer 'thy kingdom come'. We live in the time between the first and second coming of Christ and as such we need to keep faithful and hopeful in what sometimes seems a hopeless world.

Praying means trusting in God and not ourselves.

The widow, in the parable, kept coming to the judge, hoping against all odds, persistent, determined and relentless. In a way the widow in Jesus' parable represents not only the need to pray always, as Luke puts it, but also the Holy Spirit's incessant work of encouraging us to pray. The Spirit's nagging persistence and unrelenting perseverance helps our prayer life.

One of the great things of this parish is the Thursday morning Intercessory Prayer Group that prays at 7.30am each Thursday morning of the year. It is not large, 12-18 people, but they pray each week for people in the parish and the community, uplifting those with particular needs to God. They are persistent with their prayers! Luise Schottroff, in her book 'Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity', summarises the parable in these words: "Praying and crying to God against injustices describes the whole life of the believers: their efforts, their protests against injustice. It describes also their trust in God, for they know that God acts very differently than the unjust judge."

We are called to:

- count on God to come down on the side of justice
- count on God to hear the ones who have no power, no influence, no voice
- count on God to hear those who have nowhere else to turn
- count on God not always to grant your requests, but to hear with loving, parental patience, the persistent prayers of your heart.

### Prayer

Almighty God, we thank you for all the ways you stay close to us. We praise you for your revelation in Scripture, preaching and the witnesses of fellow Christians, all of which draws us back to you. Continue to guide us and infuse us with your life.

Amen