



Ord Sunday 29

THE NEW SHOFAR

God is not God on our terms!

We do not pray to a distant God but to God within us

When Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed

This reading from Exodus is one of the great narratives in the Bible with its focus being on the faithful, powerful intervention by God on behalf of the Chosen People of Israel. It is presented to us as a miracle. When there is no other remedy for their situation, the people are reminded of what it is God wants to do for them in every situation. The whole of the Exodus story is one of transformation. The people move from slavery to freedom; from being hungry and thirsty to being satisfied; from being blind to what is happening to being given sight and guidance; from the real chance of death to discovering life. For the authors of Exodus, all of this transformation is brought about by God and God alone. But they need to persevere in a trusting faith.

This is beautifully conveyed by the actions of Moses. With his hands in the air in prayer, he is placing the impossible situation of the Hebrew people into the hands of God. They have no chance of defeating this powerful enemy, the feared raiders of Amalek. They need assistance and that help comes in the form of a miracle. When it *seems as though* they are on top of the battle, Moses returns his arms to their position of pointing to the ground. He thinks Israel is able to manage on their own, using their own military resources. However, this is the precise moment at which they begin to be overwhelmed by Amalek. This whole story was introduced with the key question from verse 7...*is God among us or not?* The people had been complaining about the conditions in which they were living – they were thirsty and asked God to *give us water to drink*. In the end God answered their concerns by having Moses strike a rock and bring forth water. Now that is a miracle! God can produce a life transformation from a place where there could not possibly provide a solution. A rock. Why then would they doubt the faithfulness of the God who has called them?

There are many solutions proposed but only one is guaranteed to work

We live today in an age where God is removed from most things in life, the divine presence being replaced by some “thing” – product, movement, belief or person. Take up, adopt and use this “thing” and life will be changed for the better. However, experience has shown these *things* do not last. Today’s latest fad, popular movement, life guru and gadget can only sustain happiness for a short time and does not lead to lasting joy, peace and life. This is the message of today’s miracle.

The editors of Exodus are offering a critique of the way people see, understand and judge God. Religion is wonderful as long as God gives them “water” when they cry out in thirst. When God does not act promptly, they want to reject religious living and turn back to their former lives. *Why did you bring us out of Egypt* they cried when they saw no way to resolve the problem of thirst? They were prepared to give up the promise of life in a *land of milk and honey* because they could not sustain belief in a God who was not at their beck and call. There could not possibly be a God if they are suffering in this life! This kind of utilitarian religion is rejected by the Bible.

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When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

It is important to note the way today's Gospel follows on immediately after a teaching by Jesus on the end-time. For Luke, we are now living in this final stage of human history. It began with the coming of Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah and Saviour of the world. However, the Lord goes on to teach his disciples that there is still a period of human history when the disciple will *long to see the days of the Son of Man and will not see it* (17:22). As it was with the Hebrew people during the Exodus, escaping from Egypt was just the first step of a long journey (40 years as it turned out) through the wilderness. This is where the followers of Jesus now find themselves. The question being answered by Luke here is "What are Christians to be doing in the meantime?"

In the parable the answer to this is clear and simple: *it is necessary to pray constantly without giving up*. Praying is supposed to be a way of life for Christ's disciples and here Jesus is not talking just about saying prayers. To pray is to place oneself in the presence of God, to be with God in the circumstances of life unfolding all around us. It is not about reaching out to a distant deity but a seeking for the gift of discernment to discover the God already at work in our midst. The solution or answer to prayer is not "out there" but "in here".

so that she may not keep coming and give me a black eye!

Jesus' shows his sense of humour here by giving us the wonderful picture of a little old lady coming along to the powerful, pompous magistrate, hitting him over the head and giving him a black eye (this is the literal meaning of the Greek here). In the humour though there is a serious message.

The magistrate is declared to be unjust by Jesus (the Lord). He is more about himself, his power, his image and his comfort than he is about a blatant injustice being done to this powerless widow. He has forgotten one of the basic tenets of Jewish life – to care for the widow and orphan for they are without power in the world. These poor little ones are, however, precious to God. In turning his back on this person in dire straits, he is, in effect, turning his back on God.

This tough lady is not one to give up and so she continues to harass the brute of a man. She *kept coming to him...seeking one thing only – justice*. This he refused to give and it seemed as though all was lost. Just as it must have seemed to the Hebrew people during the wilderness that they could not hope to find water out there in the desert or have the strength to overcome the all-powerful army of Amalek. The difficulty they faced had no way of being resolved.

God's patience is greater than that of the magistrate

For some, God's answer in the parable is not all that comforting. The patience of God is greater than that of the magistrate. In other words, God is not going to be swayed merely by the persistence of the person bombarding heaven with his or her demands. True, we are also reassured that God's answer to prayer is far quicker than the speed of justice coming at the hands of the magistrate. But there is a twist in the tail. As with the case of our reading from Exodus, Jesus is challenging the whole notion of utilitarian religion: God does what we want, when we want it.

Note the way the parable ends. God's mercy, love, patience and faithfulness are never in question. We know this from His mighty works down through human history. However, are there "widows" in our faith community who are prepared to cry out to him day and night? When the Son of Man does return, will he find faith on earth? The alternative would be for him to find people who have given up on God, on miracles, on answers to prayer because God is not dancing to their tune.

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