

Proper 24

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 16 October 2022

Readings: 2 Timothy 3.14-4.5 and Luke 18.1-8

Any of us might have had an experience like the persistent widow in the Gospel reading from Luke. If you have ever had to deal with a bank's call centre, you might know how it feels to wonder if anyone is listening or responding to your needs.

One of the joys of living in Guernsey is the relative ease of talking to human beings on the phone when a problem crops up.

We all experience the micro-aggressions of bureaucracy, but sometimes our needs are serious and the experience of feeling unheard in the middle of an emotional or desperate situation can be devastating. More often than not, it is our persistence, our unwillingness to let things slide by, our unwillingness to lose hope, that eventually leads to success.

It isn't always comfortable to keep advocating for what we need. Of course, it would be much easier if everyone with the authority to do so would help, but at the end of the day, our constant reminders, our relentlessness, make a big difference in getting the job done. Like the persistent widow in the Gospel, if we keep making our case, we may eventually get a response - even if only because the people in charge are so annoyed that they just want to get us off their backs.

History is full of people whose success can be directly attributed to their persistence. Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela sought justice and social change through careful, thoughtful, bold persistence. If either of these people had become tired and had given up, the world would be a very different place. The pursuit of justice requires perseverance; the ability of individuals and communities to persist in seeking justice can change the world.

In the parable, the widow eventually gets what she wants even from the judge who, in his own words, had 'no fear of God and no respect for anyone'. To be a widow in the ancient Near East was to be among the most vulnerable of society. As a widow, this woman would have had no advocate, no social standing upon which to plead her case. But at the same time, this was no passive and depressed woman bereaved of her husband but someone who can advocate strongly for herself.

She had a will to persist; to not give up; to demand that someone listen to her. Sometimes, when we are most vulnerable, when we have the least to lose, we are also most likely to be bold. Despite the widow's marginalised status in society, she exhibited great strength.

The unrighteous judge eventually does what is right, but only because this persistent and driven woman has made him feel trapped. He does not respond out of a changed heart. Achieving justice is sometimes easier than changing the heart of a society. There is hope in getting justice, but there's always more work to do. We don't know what kind of justice the widow in this parable sought, but we can imagine that whatever social circumstances led her to be treated unfairly did not immediately disappear at the judge's ruling.

The Gospel assures us that God is not like the unrighteous judge. God does not respond to our needs only when we have pestered so much that it would be easier just to give in. The Gospel says that God will vindicate us, or bring us justice, 'quickly'. So, how does God bring justice? How does God respond to our prayers?

God did not settle a court case for this woman. That's our work. It's our job to persist, to advocate for ourselves when we feel helpless; to advocate for others when they are the most vulnerable. God's justice is much more comprehensive than what can be achieved through legislation or courts. The Gospel promises us that God will respond to our prayers much faster than the unjust systems of society. If even an unrighteous judge can be merciful in the face of a persistent woman, then how much more merciful is God who loves us and created us and knows every inch of our being?

When justice comes so slowly and is often so limited, how can we believe that God is at work, providing us with unbounded love, mercy, and speedy vindication? We believe in a God who came to be with us and suffered alongside humanity. Jesus himself experienced injustice at the hands of a government that neither feared God nor showed concern for people. We believe in a God who is always at work, changing hearts and minds, transforming lives, bringing dead things to life, turning the normal systems and power structures on their head, making the weak strong and the vulnerable powerful, and giving resounding voice to those who have been ignored for too long.

God is in the cries of the helpless. Imagine the widow in the parable going to the judge again and again to plead her case. The judge ignored her, but God was with her the whole time. To those seeking justice, God says: 'I see you. I believe you. Your pain is my pain. Keep going back. Persist.'

Injustice will eventually end, but our hope in God is that God is with us through it all; that God hears us when we first cry out; that God's love for us will give us the strength to persist; and that God's justice will transform our lives and the hearts and minds of everyone in the whole world.