



St James's
Church
Piccadilly

PRAYER IS PROTEST AND PROMISE.

Trinity 18, Luke 18.1-8.

16 October 2022

Revd Ivan Khovacs

These are three related reflections I am calling PRAYER IS PROTEST AND PROMISE.

I was prompted by this verse from T.S. Eliot: *"take no thought of the harvest, But only of proper sowing."*

This helps me to think of prayer as sowing without having to know what the result will be but sowing faithfully.

I am putting this idea about prayer in conversation with the passage from Luke's gospel, Jesus's parable of the unjust judge, which I find confusing if not disturbing. Is Jesus saying that God is like the unjust judge?

PRAYER

I was thinking about prayers of intercessions that a number of you from the congregation bring to the service each week. I know I find leading intercessions a difficult thing, because I think that, if prayer is being vulnerable before God, if it is intimacy of the Spirit, then standing before the congregation is never going to be easy. I really do admire those of you who volunteer to lead our prayers each week. You are not only praying in words that are authentic to you and how you pray, but you also somehow try to imagine how people in the congregation would pray if they all they had was your words to pray with.

But that's the reason, as a person who sits up here listening to the prayers of the person leading intercession in the service, I find it grounding when other people speak in prayer words, feelings, and concerns in their own voice. And only as I hear that voice, do I realise how badly I need those words of prayer, those sentiments, those expressions of care and concern.

I was working with a new curate in Canterbury, someone recently ordained, and in a conversation about prayer, she said:

"I've never had so little time to pray. I say morning prayer with one or two people in my congregation. But apart from that, I am simply too busy to make time for prayer." Then she surprised me with this: "I am simply too busy to make time for prayer. And it's been the best thing for my prayer life. I am finding that the set times of prayer can't be the only time I pray. I can pray in the shower, I can pray down the vegetable aisle at supermarket—and when I cycle down to visit someone in hospital or at home, I think of that time, as that person's gift to me in the time of prayer."

Do you have some version of that? Do you find yourself forming a prayer, silently, or in quiet, murmurs, in the ordinary course of the day? Is that your quiet protest against a noisy day? Or while putting kettle on—stitching that little moment into a prayer tapestry taking shape throughout the day?

The woman in our Gospel reading has a different kind of prayer: a prayer of desperation against an unjust judge.

You could be excused for thinking that Luke has lost the plot when he includes among the parables of Jesus one that likens God to an unjust judge. Luke says that Jesus gave this parable as a prompt to pray without losing heart. But in the parable, God is depicted as an unethical judge who only hands out a judgement because he can no longer take the woman's pleas of desperation.

There is another way to look at it. Because in a way, I think Luke intuits that his readers, and today that happens to be you and me, are probably no different from the people that Jesus is talking to. They were tempted by the thought, as you and I are sometimes tempted, by the thought that maybe God is at best inscrutable, at worst, unfair, or unable to hear when we pray.

I think the parable is calling us out on the fact that our image of God is so impoverished and small, that we are willing to go along with the premise in the parable: we imagine that we can twist God's arm in prayer, that God is a judge who has to be badgered into hearing us when we pray.

But maybe it takes recognising that we are prone to this damaged view of God, as the Gospel says, in order "not lose heart" knowing that when we pray to God, we aren't just praying the God who hates injustice, we are coming before the God who loves justice. And so God who loves our prayers for justice.

Imagine, on the other hand, people living under a different regime, for whom the courts of law are a perversion of the word justice; systems in which law as such exists to preserve the interests of some and ensure the oppression of others. In Black History Month, it is impossible not to think back to African-American people in the struggle for civil rights, fighting a system telling them to keep to one side of town, stay at the back of the bus, abide by the laws designed to work for others.

But what does the parable in Luke's Gospel make of this—I think it's saying something like this:

If even an unjust human judge is in the end able to grant justice, if only after relentless begging, how much more will God hear and vindicate those who have lost so much that all they have is prayer, those whose only hope is the God whose very Word is the promise of justice?

PROTEST

I have been deeply moved by the women in Iran, particular young women, and many of them only school-age girls, protesting for change after the death death in police custody of Mahsa Amini. The 22-year-old Amini died in a hospital after being arrested by the "morality police" in Tehran for wearing an what was deemed an "improper" head covering. This has sparked protests in several cities and across the universities in Iran.

Sometimes I want to say to my Theology students: these young women are fighting freedom. And if you are not doing the reading for my Theology seminar, or you are only getting by with the bare minimum you need, it's because you don't know what it means to be hungry for the freedom to pick up a book without a 'Supreme Leader' or the thought police looking over your shoulder and judging your every opinion.

It must take more than just bravery for these young women to cut off their hair in protest, in the streets, or on social media, in the face of authoritarian rule. It must take more than youthful idealism. It must take a sense of INVOCATION, to know that the moment you are facing is asking you take call on something bigger than yourself. It must take the courage to know who you are, to know that who you are is some-one born into God's free and unfolding future.

These women may not see themselves as freedom fighters, but they must know that they are wounded healers to an even younger generation, for whom they want to make a more just future.

Amen to that: amen to those women. For us, therein may lie the answer in this moment: we may not know yet what to say, or how to respond, but for now can join in, we can let our prayer be our protest, let it be our amen for all the people of Iran.

PROMISE

The promise of prayer must be embedded in the realities we are living, it must somehow contain a promise, yes for a healed future, but also for a transformed present: the promise of prayer is that it makes a future with God visible, accessible, and transformative in the here and now.

Martin Luther King didn't know he was living his final hours in April 1968, when he spoke to a congregation of civil rights activist, in what came to be known as his 'I've been to the mountain top' speech.

"I've been to the mountaintop. ... Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. ... But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. I've been to the mountaintop. ... And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know TONIGHT, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"

That vision of a future promise of liberation had to be a promise with the power to bind people together in strength, determination, and hope that very moment; the PROMISE had to have the power in the present—because it spoke of a liberation worth the struggle, a hope worth the wait.

Martin Luther King's final words were not about change somehow-someday, but a promise that was power in the hands of people in the present.

PRAYER IS PROTEST AND PROMISE

So what is the message for our church, for St James's Piccadilly, for this congregation, here in this place?

Prayer, is protest and promise

when it brings to us

a change of heart,
a change of mind, and
a change of what your hands and mine choose to do
from that moment on
because we know that to pray to God
is to know the God who loves justice, who loves mercy,
who loves, who absolutely loves and delights in us
when we know that we are loved, that we are forgiven,
and that for the sake of others, that we can bring hope to others,
we are resurrected, and set free:
what are we going to do with that?
Amen.