

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year C

29th Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Exodus 17.8-13)

Perseverance in Prayer

This battle scene seems to us nowadays a bit of an odd passage to choose to reinforce the gospel lesson of perseverance in prayer. Can we still pray for the slaughter of our enemies?

An important value of these bloodthirsty passages of the Old Testament is to remind us that revelation is gradual: we cannot take in everything at once. Look how long it took us to realize that the logical consequence of Paul's little letter to Philemon is the total abolition of slavery! Paul didn't realize it, and neither did most Christians for 1700 years.

Future generations may think our morality primitive, too, as we or our successors come to understand Christianity ever more fully. However, prayer can be exciting and uplifting, but it can also be boring and exhausting, with just that sinking feeling of exhaustion: 'I can't hold my hands up any longer.' That is when we need really get on and hang on in there, expressing that God is not just one Mr Fixit among many possibles, but is our only hope and dependence. Cupboard love alone will not do, neither will a last-minute turn to someone about whose existence we had practically forgotten.

Question:

When is it important to turn to prayer?

Second reading:

(2 Timothy 3.14-4.2)

The Uses of Scripture

The inspired writer seems to be devoting much of his space to the use of scripture in preaching and controversy, but most of all the scriptures 'instruct you for salvation'. We have to receive the message and take it to our own hearts before we can pass it on to others. This is by seeing the variety of ways in which God cares for us, his ever-present forgiveness in all our idiotic mistrust and shying away, our stubborn preference for our own search for happiness.

Only by immersing ourselves regularly in the scriptures and growing to love these varied glimpses of God can we come to draw out their richness and sweetness. And there are plenty of difficulties to be overcome: the strangeness of language and ancient ways of thought, the barbaric primitiveness of the Chosen People of God, the boring instructions on sacrifice and purity. Don't rush it or gobble it up. Go at your own pace, and remember that it began as God's Word to Abraham, Moses, David or whoever, or Jesus helping his contemporaries to understand about the Kingdom, or Paul responding to the queries of his half-instructed converts. But now it is God's Word to you.

Question:

What is your favourite passage of scripture?

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Gospel:

(Luke 18.1-8)

The Answer to Prayer

We often think of prayer as mere asking, and this parable encourages us to pester God as the wronged widow pestered the Unjust Judge. But that is only one aspect of Luke's teaching on prayer. He also shows us what our attitude in prayer should be, by the parable immediately following in the gospel, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector: the tax collector wins approval because he just stands there, admitting his sins.

Most instructive, however, is Luke's teaching on Jesus at prayer: he reminds us that Jesus is always quietly at prayer to his Father. He needs to slip away to spend the night in prayer. Especially he prays at the most important moments of his life, at his baptism, when he chooses his team, before he teaches them to pray, at the approach of his Passion, finally forgiving and comforting others at his death.

Paul tells us we should pray continually. The prayer of asking must be built on a relationship of love and dependence, just as the request of child to parents is built on that loving relationship. It does not matter if the child is naughty, as long as the relationship is one of love; so we do not need to be perfect to make our requests to our Father.

Question:

When and how do you find it best to pray?
