

'Be right and persist'

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God, the giver of life,
whose Holy Spirit wells up in your Church:
by the Spirit's gifts equip us to live the gospel of Christ
and make us eager to do your will,
that we may share with the whole creation
the joys of eternal life.

My text may be found in today's gospel from Luke: 'Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.' (18 v1)

Father Richard and I have a lot in common. We both attended East London grammar schools. We were both in the same academic year at school. We both taught at Davenant Foundation Grammar School; and we both studied for the ministry in a theological college in Southgate. Of course, these four true statements do not tell the whole truth: Father Richard went to Raine's Foundation School in Arbour Square, Stepney, an old school founded in 1719; I went to East Ham Grammar School, a local authority school which was established at the start of the 20th century. Father Richard was born in 1950; I was born in 1949. We both taught at Davenant but I was there for five years while Father Richard spent all his teaching career in one place. I studied at Oak Hill College on the Ministerial Training Scheme whereas by the time Father Richard arrived, it was called the North Thames Ministerial Training Course. But whatever it was called, we both sat

in the same dining room at different times and saw on its wall the same unicorn crest of the College underneath which was written this motto – ‘Be right and persist’.

‘Be right and persist’ – very evangelical but very true if you want a possible summary of today’s parable. A widow is seeking justice from a judge. We don’t know what the problem is but we know she is convinced she has been wronged and she is seeking redress under law. We don’t know her name nor the name of the judge but we do know this about him: that he neither ‘fears God nor respects people’. Pretty damning: he is a respecter neither of God nor of people. What a sad, selfish man who sees nothing beyond his sad self. Not a nice man; not a good man; not a man likely to mete out justice to the poor. Yet he does. Why? Simply because the widow, convinced of the rightness of her cause, does not give up but persists. Be right and persist – very Oak Hill!

That’s the story and like most of Jesus’ parables, it is a memorable story containing a deep truth. And the truth is simply this, that we ‘need to pray and not to lose heart’. Two things are necessary according to today’s teaching: prayer and persistence.

Prayer is necessary because it is communication with God. Prayer is two-way communication with God. Prayer is not simply a monologue in which we bring him a shopping list of what we want, our cares and our concerns. It is a balanced activity of praise and thanks, of saying sorry and of asking for things for others and for ourselves. And it is a chance of being quiet, being still in the presence of

God and of listening to him, trying to discern his will for us at this present time. Good prayer is about keeping in touch.

Persistence is about not giving up. The phrase in the gospel is 'not to lose heart'. It is a great image. The heart is the centre. The heart is the seat of our feelings and our emotions. If we lose heart, we lose the will to go on; in the worst case scenario to lose heart is to lose the will to live. I know it sounds soppy, the stuff of a Mills and Boon romance, but people can and do die of a broken heart.

And the key is prayer. If we are in communication with God, we will be comforted, encouraged and energised. We will be comforted, made strong, because we will feel God is with us and we will know that we do his will. We will be encouraged, our hearts made stronger, because we know we have a right relationship with God based on proper respect for a God who loves us and who gives us life. We will be energised, the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through us, because what we are trying to achieve is just. We won't lose heart because our power lines are up and running and we switched on through our prayer.

So let me leave you with the parable of the judge and the widow as a story which embodies the command - 'Be right and persist'. If we did, then the world would be a better place for what we seek to do.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the parish Eucharist

St Barnabas's Church, Colchester

17th October, 2010

H: Sermon 22: Persist

