

The Voice of the Widow

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (OS 29C)

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(Based on thoughts of Charles Hoffacker)*

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Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn spent many years in the prison camps of Siberia. Along with other prisoners, he worked in the fields day after day, in rain and sun, during summer and winter. His life appeared to be nothing more than backbreaking labour and slow starvation. The intense suffering reduced him to a state of despair.

On one particular day, the hopelessness of his situation became too much for him. He saw no reason to continue his struggle, no reason to keep on living. His life made no difference in the world. So, he gave up.

Leaving his shovel on the ground, he slowly walked to a crude bench and sat down. He knew that at any moment a guard would order him to stand up, and when he failed to respond, the guard would beat him to death, probably with his own shovel. He had seen it happen to other prisoners.

As he waited, head down, he felt a presence. Slowly he looked up and saw a skinny old prisoner squat down beside him. The man said nothing. Instead, he used a stick to trace in the dirt the sign of the Cross. The man then got back up and returned to his work.

As Solzhenitsyn stared at the Cross drawn in the dirt his entire perspective changed. He knew he was only one man against the all-powerful Soviet empire. Yet he knew there was something greater than the evil he saw in the prison camp, something greater than the Soviet Union. He knew that hope for all people was represented by that simple Cross. Through the power of the Cross, anything was possible.

Solzhenitsyn slowly rose to his feet, picked up his shovel, and went back to work. Outwardly, nothing had changed. Inside, he had received hope. *[From Luke Veronis, "The Sign of the Cross" Communion, issue 8, Pascha 1997.]*

What that skinny old prisoner did for Solzhenitsyn, Jesus does for us today in telling us about the insistent widow and the unscrupulous judge. As Solzhenitsyn desperately needed a renewal of hope, so we need encouragement from time to time if we are to continue in prayer and not lose heart. The skinny old prisoner made lines in the dirt. Jesus does something different: he tells us a story.

There is this judge, Jesus says, who has neither decency nor conscience, a corrupt official interested only in his own advantage. A widow appears in his courtroom. She is poor and powerless, somebody not noticed by the movers and shakers in her town. She has no money to bribe this crooked judge; she cannot afford a lawyer to speak up for her. So you know what she does? She speaks up for herself! **GRANT ME JUSTICE AGAINST MY OPPONENT!** she shouts. When this does not bring her immediate results, she remains undaunted. She keeps returning to that courtroom, and refuses to be silent. **GRANT ME JUSTICE AGAINST MY OPPONENT!**

It is no surprise that the judge soon grows weary of this. In the original Greek of the New Testament, he compares her in-his-face attitude to getting a black eye. To spare himself further annoyance, the judge decided not simply to hear her case, but to grant her justice to spare himself annoyance. Is this a portrait of God? That doesn't seem to be what Jesus has in mind, though certainly that is how some people look at the practice of prayer. They paint a picture of God as an unscrupulous judge or a petty bureaucrat or an abusive parent. With such a picture before them, it's startling that they ever pray at all.

God is not like that. Instead, the Lord is the author of all justice and compassion. It may be that we are to imitate, in our prayer, the persistence shown by the widow, but if so, it is not because God is hard-hearted and uncaring.

Let's take another look at that judge. What do we know about him? We know that he is unscrupulous, without decency or conscience. He doesn't respect people; there is no fear of God in him. He is a closed universe. This judge always has it figured out; he leaves no room for the possibility that God may have a more creative answer to questions his life presses upon him.

Do we know anyone who matches this description? Sure, we do! Each of us fits that description sometimes, and some of us may make a career of doing so. There are those times, all too often, when each of us lives entirely unto ourselves. We refuse to allow that God may have a creative solution to problems that beset us, that God may offer us better things than we can ask for or imagine. Our decisions about life then leave no room for God, and no room for other people who have needs and wishes different from our own. The universe, as we understand it, becomes very small; we are its sole inhabitants.

If then the judge represents us, who does the loud-mouthed woman represent? Could it be that this poor and powerless woman, who demonstrates unlimited chutzpah, is there as a reminder of God?

Certainly, this fits. God is ever attempting to break into our closed universe, to draw us into relationship, makes us recognize what our relationships with God and neighbour demand of us.

God is not the unjust judge, but the widow who wears him down. Where, then, is the unjust judge to be found? Listen carefully: that judge is inside each of us, and the purpose of our prayer is to wear him down, to wear him out, to force him to do justice. Prayer is the widow's voice, strident yet sane, insisting that things be different.

Many people have trouble with prayer, or even give up the practice, because they think that praying is an exercise in telling God what God already knows, or persuading God to do what God wouldn't do otherwise, or somehow changing God in one way or another. Prayer, any prayer worthy of the name, is quite the opposite. The primary effect of prayer is not on God, but on us. God's love is already unconditional, God's justice perfect, God's compassion without limit.

God recognizes our needs even before we do. It's not God who needs to change, it is up to us to get in line with God's program, and prayer is a large part of how that comes about.

Prayer is our declaration that we don't want to be a closed universe, dependent only on ourselves and our own solutions. Prayer is our desire to be open to God. In our prayer, the Holy Spirit speaks in the voice of the poor widow who demands justice from the unscrupulous judge. The miracle of prayer is that the judge's resistance breaks down and for once he does what is right and may even do so again in the future.

That loud-mouthed widow would not have succeeded had she not been persistent, confident, and unconcerned with what others thought of her. She had what is known in Yiddish as chutzpah. Our prayer needs to have chutzpah, not because God is deaf but because opening our hearts to God is no easy matter.

There are many things in each of us that can keep God out. Sin is not the only obstacle. Attitudes of mind may keep the door shut and bolted. We may doubt that God hears us; we may consider ourselves unworthy; we may think God has better things to do than intervene in our lives. These attitudes can be driven out by persistent prayer, the voice of the widow who refuses to take no for an answer.

The story is told of a girl who watched a holy man praying at the riverbank. Once the man had finished his prayer, the girl approached him and asked, "Will you teach me to pray?" The holy man studied the girl's face, and agreed to her request. He took her into the river. The holy man instructed her to lean over, so her face was close to the water. The girl did as she was told.

Then the holy man pushed her whole head under the water. Soon the girl struggled to free herself in order to breathe. Once she got her breath back, she gasped, "What did you do that for?" The holy man said, "I gave you your first lesson." "What do you mean?" asked the astonished girl. He answered, "When you long to pray as much as you long to breathe, then I will be able to teach you how to pray."

May each of us long to pray, and learn to pray, and to persist in our prayer - not so that we can change God, but so that God can change us, and help us enjoy that fullness of life God intends for us.

AMEN.