

Preached by Dr Robert Gilbert, on Sunday 17 October 2010, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.

(Luke 18:1-8)

Someone I know refers to Jesus as ‘the genius from Nazareth’. That seems a good place to start thinking about the parable of his we heard read as the Gospel today. Whatever and whoever else he was or is Jesus is certainly someone of genius – a wholly original phenomenon who argued and enacted his vision of God’s Kingdom from town to town, at lakeside and in the streets, in the open countryside and in the Temple. He simply outwits his opponents – he is cleverer than them, faster thinking and more subtle in his language, able to play the crowd against them. He makes frequent use of jokes and parodies, he is unafraid to challenge his *followers* as much as his opponents. He is uncompromised in his single-minded presentation of his vision for a new world that would already be God’s Kingdom come. He does all this through one of the graces of genius, which is simplicity: Jesus sees what is at the core of a situation, what motivates, what is needed. It’s the simplicity of love, I suppose. And famously, Jesus is as happy parlying with the curious, the sceptical and the opposed, at parties and dinners as he is in the synagogue and Temple. What a scandal! What a revelation!

So, we hear, God is like.... a magistrate who is godless and misanthropic. God is like a magistrate who only does justice because he is pestered by a widow. What the story begins with is the search for justice against those opposed to justice – that’s what the word translated as ‘opponent’ indicates. And there are other games going on in the tale Jesus tells, too. The version that is usual is something like that the magistrate says: “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”

But you can literally render it like this: “I will grant her justice so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face.” And even more evocatively, the recent translation by Nicholas King from Campion Hall in Oxford is: “I’ll give her justice. Otherwise she’ll end up by coming and giving me a black eye!”

So ask repeatedly in prayer to God and, like a godless misanthropic magistrate finally answering a plea the prayer will be answered in the end. Jesus says “Do you think that God won’t bring about justice for his elect who shout to him day and night, even though he is slow at dealing with them? I’m telling you – he’ll quickly bring about justice for them.”

The reference to God as a magistrate in this story is an analogical one, and much of the language we make use of in speaking about things to do with God has to be analogical. Much of the language Jesus used was analogical – and he set it within the parabolic to give narratives within which anyone can locate themselves and work towards an understanding of godly things. The simplicity of genius, again.

We are forced into analogical ways of speaking because we do not know what we are speaking about; we are forced to speak in nonsense, in nonsense verse even, in paradox because everything we say about God is inevitably nonsense – as has often been observed. And the humorous tales Jesus tells, the perplexing scenarios he conjures up, are therefore especially appropriate. Humorous nonsense used to talk about Eternity. And yet since what we do know is the world around us and since our lives are constituted entirely by the relationships we enjoy – or suffer – we need a way of leaping from the mundane to the

divine. So we call God Father by analogy because we believe that there is a relationship between the earthly story and the heavenly story – between what we believe to be good and what is Good. But they do not coincide. We call God Father because that analogical description of how we stand with respect to God has been given to us in the tradition in which Judaism and Christianity stand and as an analogy used by Jesus himself, as a name we can use because we know nothing of God apart from what God has shown us of Himself. The language is subversive and a powerful way to think about analogical language and its religious use is to think of it as a ‘subversion from within’ – not my own phrase, but that of the Catholic theologian James Alison. Here is a subversive thought: while we might think that we use the term ‘Father’ of God and to God by extension from our earthly experience of parenting to a big Sky Daddy, maybe what actually is happening is that our understanding of fatherhood derives from the relationship God makes with us. The loving fathering we receive and that we are called to give is patterned on an understanding of relationships that starts outside ourselves and has been revealed to us.

Again, we say “God is Love” and mean it to be the closest analogy we manage because that is what we believe has been shown us most clearly, most simply. And we mean the analogy from all that we mean by “love”, applied to God: the love we call agape, or self-giving love, the love which is full of joy – that is, erotic love – and the love we experience every day, the love of friends for each other. But these loves are not separated from each other, our relationships are not of exclusively one kind of another: the erotic is in no way confined to the way the word is used most of the time, and friendships are self-giving. The existence of marriages and relationships of a similar kind show us this most obviously but not at all exclusively. But you see, the subversion is, that what we *really* mean by “love” – all the ways we use it to and about each other – is an echo of the love God is and the God love is. The analogy of the unjust magistrate is subverted within its own narrative by Jesus as he tells the story. Jesus is saying: you have justice, and you try to exercise it (but not very well). If you, though, have justice then think how just is God. And if you pray to each other for justice – and even if only by wearing the magistrate down can get it – surely God will be just to you. So pray always.

In Luke’s Gospel alone we have the following analogies for God, out of Jesus’ mouth, besides that God is a Father and God is like an unjust magistrate:

God is like a moneylender who lets you off; God is like a man sowing his field; God is like a man in bed whose friend is knocking at his door wanting bread; God is like a Lord returning from a wedding party; God is like the father of the bride; God is like a burglar who comes unexpectedly; God is like a judge who flings you in prison; God is like the owner of a vineyard; God is like a master who has locked his door; God is like a man throwing a big party; God is like a shepherd; God is like a woman who has lost a coin; God is like an absentee landlord; and God is like a vineyard owner who is absent.

Of none of these should we think, could we possibly think in literal terms. Exactly. But all of these are from the mouth of one genius who held the crowds spellbound by his teaching, causing them to pursue him relentlessly from place to place. And all of these images, these analogies together, in their subversion, are aimed at helping us understand something of what we must do, and who we are called to be.

The subversion from within that these analogies entail was made by Jesus into the substance of his life. In accepting his calling – who he was made to be – Jesus made of

himself, of what he did and said an enactment of the subversion from within of the power relationships and terminologies of our world. Of course, he is present in some of the stories he uses himself – the son of the vineyard owner, for example. In others, while the story might be about the Father, his Father God, it *could also* be about Jesus himself and about a realisation of what his mission is really about. The analogy of God as a Lord returning from a wedding and as a burglar coming unexpectedly are what I think of first here.

In the parable of the Lord returning from a wedding, he finds his servants up and waiting and when they have let him in he puts on his apron and serves them. The Lord waiting on his servants in that parable is a subversion of Lordship from within. And at the Last Supper the same subversion is enacted – Jesus states clearly, in Luke’s version, that he is the Lord of his disciples but among them as one who serves. In John’s Gospel the same point is made in Jesus washing his disciple’s feet. Anyway, Jesus reveals himself at the culmination of his ministry, the night before he died, as himself *the* subversion from within the structures of the world – master-servant, magistrate-petitioner. Forget masters and servants: the masters should serve and the servants be served. Forget magistrates playing at justice – they will give in if you bother them enough: petition God always who gives goodly and justly and not out of fear of a black eye. You see, it’s a joke Jesus is making at the expense of the world to try and say what God is like.

Scandalously subversive, Jesus is turning inside out the way the world always seems to have been and showing how the world is meant to be something else. He makes himself a scandal and finally, in what we call the scandal of the cross, rejection and humiliating death are proclaimed as victory. Our word *scandal* comes from the Greek word for stumbling block. Jesus makes himself a stumbling block to others – he puts himself in the way of the world and trips it up, turns it inside-out. In Luke chapter 20 Jesus chooses to quote Isaiah chapter 5:

“So what’s this scripture?” Jesus says. “The stone which the builders rejected, this is the one that has turned into the cornerstone.” He continues, “Everyone who falls over that stone will be dashed to pieces.”

But luckily even if we are in pieces the transformative vision that Jesus enacts gives hope for forgiveness and resurrection.

Jesus told the parable of the unjust magistrate to explain why we should pray all the time. What does the answer seem to be? Not that God needs telling what we need, or asking many times before he shifts himself. But a subversion from within. The magistrate can’t be bothered to meet the widow’s request for justice until he starts to fear she will attack him. So he gives in to her at the end. Is she in the right? Certainly. Whose side is Jesus on? Whose side are we supposed to think God is on? The widow’s, of course. Whose side is the world on?

Well, we’d like to say the widow, but really it isn’t. The world is on the side of power, mostly, and success. This woman is neither powerful nor successful, she is pitiful and pleading.

So why does Jesus think we should pray all the time? Because if we pray all the time maybe we will start to see how a woman like this one is in the right. If we remember, very hard, the terrible injustice and sadness of our world maybe we will help to make it a better

place. If we pray thoughtfully about our friends and colleagues maybe we will be kinder, more lovely people. And loveliness *is* what we want. It's a subversion from within: the story looks like its about a magistrate, but it isn't, it's about a widow who's in the right. It's about a widow who is lovely, and part of that loveliness is the humorous fact that the godless, misanthropic magistrate fears she will hit him.

So another part of all this subversion is, I'm afraid, an element of absence of the magistrate, of the vineyard owner, or the landlord. As Jesus' mission reaches its climax this becomes clearer – the final two parables he tells in Luke are about an absentee landlord who expects his placeholders to use the money he has given them for profit, and an absentee vineyard owner who sends his messengers, and his tenants kill them. The world is handed over to us, and we must do God's work in it. Jesus says much earlier on:

“When you are going to the magistrate with your opponent, while you are travelling, take the trouble to settle with him, in case he drags you to the judge, and the judge hands you over to the constable, and the constable flings you in prison.”

So, prayer is passionate concern for the world around us, and the prayer we make is to the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, as the traditional Trinitarian formula has it. Praying for the widow, praying with the widow we are in the Spirit, the Spirit which is her innocence, her justification and her defence. We are acting through the Son because we are doing the Son's work, we are acting for Christ; we are praying to the Father because we are doing what is right; and the unjust magistrate has become an absence and an irrelevance for us. In the end he will give in, if we try hard enough – this we believe, this is faith. The faith we have that God's desire will come to fruition for us and in us.

I said earlier one of the distinctive features of genius is simplicity. The simplicity of genius is to say something in a way that anyone can understand which distils all the other things lesser minds, less formed, less focused, less loving could say at great length. Jesus managed in 70 words what I have just spent two-and-a-half thousand words mangling. But I have tried to do it in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.