

### *2 Timothy 3.14-4.5*

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

### *Luke 18.1-8*

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "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." ' And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

## Secret Sermons and fighting injustice

I once formed a secret society to crack crime and be a super detective. Me and my partner (my best friend Elizabeth) we were the terrific two – like the secret seven or the famous five – yes we took all of our inspiration from Enid Blyton’s crack squads of crime busting – to be totally honest our focus like theirs was mostly on what to eat and drink – so we spent most of our terrific two sessions making fridge cakes and packing lashings of ginger beer before heading to the beach to look for evil – in the form of footprints mostly – I’m not sure what we thought an evil footprint would look like – but nevertheless we searched up and down the beach for them in the hope that they might lead us to very naughty people who we would capture. Thankfully we didn’t find any evil footprints or naughty people despite our enthusiasm – especially as we really hadn’t thought through the capture thing.

The idea of being a detective to bring justice to the world caught my imagination as a child – as it does now.

Elizabeth and I have always been the best of friends – our teenage version of cracking injustice generally revolved around complaining about our parents not letting us wear outlandish clothes – in Elizabeth’s case she wasn’t allowed denim – which as a teenager of the 80s did seem fairly unjust – for me my main complaint was having to get up so early – I had to get up at such an hour that I needed two breakfasts before school – but our joint favourite complaint of injustice about our parents was – them not letting us give up our piano lessons with our very strict teacher Mr Turner – who also coincidentally didn’t allow denim in his music lessons!

Of course now I realise how ridiculously lucky we were – we had piano lessons... and parents who cared enough to encourage us to play music - and despite my early starts which were quite a challenge were followed with plenty of food to fill me up before school.

As I have experienced life – I have experienced huge blessings and much joy – and I know I am hugely fortunate in so many ways.

I have also sadly known what painful injustice actually feels like – most of us at some point in life experience deep unfairness which hurts us.

There will be many experiences represented here – I am hugely privileged to hear your stories as your priest – and I know that life for many of you - is at times hard and not fair.

In our gospel reading Jesus tells us a story about unfairness to encourage us to pray always and to give us hope.

The characters in our story are – a widow – her opponent - and a judge.

By the very nature of being called a widow we know the main character has a hard life - there is a story of loss for any widow.

The opponent – we know nothing about. Neither do we know what the beef with the widow is about – but if we open our own storybooks of life we can find an example to layer into the story... so maybe for now – think of an injustice – a real unfairness from your life – or if it is easier from our community or our world - and think about now. (*Prejudice or power imbalances, poverty, violence or hatred?*)

Our next character is a judge who neither feared God or respected people.

So Jesus tells us that the widow who is wronged by her opponent – with whatever that wrong is – goes to the judge everyday to persistently ask for justice.

This woman is quite a force – we know this by translating the word we have as ‘wears down’ – the Greek is literally translated as ‘make him black and blue’.

The widow is a wronged woman who stands her ground and boldly persists with requests for justice to this indifferent judge.

The story tells us that the judge is the opposite of God - if even an unjust judge does justice, how much more will God.

In this story we are seeking justice – not a shopping list... Jesus tells us to persist in prayer and hope for justice.

Recently my prayers have consisted of a persistent cry for my best friend Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was recently diagnosed with secondary breast cancer which has now spread to her bones and other places. My best friend – who is faithful and good – is very ill. My best friend has two children not much older than we were when we were hunting for evil footprints.

In my prayer life I feel like I am beating God black and blue with my complaints. My friend is in pain - she is suffering and her family too.

I get that we are to cry out to God for justice for feeding the hungry and for anti-racism and for challenging sexism and homophobia and violence and all unfair things – yes – but this is my best friend. What is fair about my best friend being so ill when she has a heart full of love for her family, her friends and for God? Where is the justice here?

So – as I wrote this sermon at this point I ran out of steam and felt angry and irritated at the injustice and the too easy response we are given to just pray and God will make it all ok after all in God’s way in God’s time - as it doesn’t feel ok after all.

I did what all other preachers would do in my situation – I thought – I’ll look at another reading – and so we have the Timothy reading instead.

Off we go – sermon number two - the second letter to Timothy – context - was written to encourage Timothy and those he ministered with. The main point of the letter is to keep following Jesus despite the sacrifice and risk. Got it...

The particular encouragement in this letter we read today comes in the form of remembering that all scripture is inspired by God - and a reminder to keep carrying out our ministry fully despite the various attacks we might feel.

I felt fully found out when I read that – all scripture and carry out your ministry felt like a spotlight on my running away and a demand to - despite a heavy and somewhat frustrated heart – force myself back to Jesus’ story for us today. I can’t lie I did this after trying my best to avoid it through some distracting phone calls, random searches on wrestling images in the Bible and then straying into random wrestling information... I confess... and a cup of tea.

...Back to the story - the first thing I read again and took on board more fully this time was that we have a *need* to pray – we *must* pray without ceasing. Prayer is for us as well as for God and for those we pray for.

Working out how to pray when life feels hard and unfair is not easy. Persisting in prayer I confess is a challenge for me sometimes – as I expect it is for you at times. But Jesus says we need it and seems to understand that we might feel like losing heart... the two ideas – we need prayer and not losing heart are connected.

Nadia Bolz Weber suggests looking at how Jesus prays ... She says – ‘If we think about the kind of praying Jesus does it is praying that we might know love and become completely one’.

Nadia Bolz Weber describes her move away from the kind of vending machine praying – the get what you want praying where God is a bit like Santa - and instead talks about connection in prayer. She says – ‘It hurts sometimes. But the more you see suffering and injustice around you, the more you pray, and the more you pray the more connected you are to that suffering, and the more connected you are to that suffering the more connected you are to the crucified and risen Christ. For these silken threads of prayer which connect us to God and to one another and even to our enemies are how God is stitching our broken humanity back together. So pray without ceasing and do not lose heart. For God has some stuff to do.’

Whatever is unfair for you or for your loved ones - let us pray always and let us not lose heart.

And let us pray that Elizabeth - and all those who need our prayers - know your love.

Amen