

## **Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity: Anti-Slavery Sunday**

**Sunday 16 October 2022**

Worcester Cathedral

*Luke 18. 1-8*

If you visit Primark's website the first link (after the store locator) is Primark Cares - a page which brings together the companies goals around making their business sustainable, fair, and just. As a mission document it is very impressive with three themes: sustainable clothing, protecting the planet, and improving people's lives. Three of today's major ethical concerns brought together in one place. The Primark Cares page is of course a positive reaction to some damning allegations over the years of a company producing a throw-away product at the cheapest price – and with little to no concern over the ethical issues around throw away clothing, and modern slavery.

I am not on commission from Primark but it is clear that huge steps have been taken in progressing human rights and environmental concerns, and their modern slavery report for 2021 is well worth a read – if only to outline the complexity of issues surrounding modern slavery. Here is a company – on their website at least – taking seriously the evils of modern slavery and our communal complicity in allowing it to happen.

What is true of Primark is no doubt true of most, if not all, high street traders: our consumerist age searches out the cheapest price for a product we may not intend to last for more than a few years at most. We are increasingly aware of the ethical issues surrounding food, clothes, and other products, but we are also as adept as ever at finding our own mental loopholes in justifying what we overlook in order to feed our consumerist desires.

The woman in today's parable was persistent in her desire for justice. It is an image which sits on the border between our compassionate relationship with the widow and her desperation on the one side, and the contemptible and over-used caricature of a nagging woman on the other. The judge who is unjust, relents not because he fears God or fears the people, but because he is tired.

Cynics may argue that businesses today are more aware of their responsibilities because of pestering. The widow in today's gospel story is a perfect example of pester power. It is a power which we should not underestimate however frustrating it is to those of us on the receiving end. For some pester power is their only power. This woman would have little to no access to justice; even though she had rights her voice would not be heard in the courts, she is a widow with no financial means to support her plea, and as the classic symbol of the most vulnerable in the Old Testament, the widow represents the voiceless, powerless, and defenceless. Pester power is her only option.

Drawn as we are to the plight of the widow, it is the unjust judge who illustrates this story as he is compared with God's perfect righteousness. The judge himself declares that he fears neither God nor people – one translation saying that he felt no shame before people.

When judges care nothing for God, in other words do not see their judgements as flowing from the seat of righteousness itself; or fear people, in other words have no sense of shame and see no value in upholding what might be called common decency, then judges can only be swayed by either bribery or persistence. This widow, being poor, cannot resort to bribery but is persistent in her plea.

The resonance of this injustice with our modern world is not lost on us. We are all too aware that justice is often trumped by cold cash, the penniless powerless in the face of big business - the politics of coercion at best, bribery at worst. But even a business such as Primark will not have changed position merely because of pester power – they are acutely aware of people power. In contrast to the unjust judge, businesses do fear the people – even if they do not fear God.

The parable of the unjust judge might feel like a moral story about a poor widow denied justice and a judge who relents – all of which is set in the truth of God's unlimited mercy. If our pestering is heard by a ne'er-do-well human being, how much more will God listen to the cries of the poor. All of this is true but rather misses the point of Luke's teaching about God's kingdom and the importance of steadfast prayer – prayer which will not be wearied while waiting for salvation, prayer which will be persistent and steadfast because it is the foundation of a life which looks to salvation in Christ.

For Christians, hope is always the salvation and restitution of all things at Christ's second coming but such hope does not prevent us from addressing the need for salvation and restitution in our time. Rather, it strengthens our resolve as we watch and wait for the signs of the kingdom. We cannot profess faith in a God of the future only, our faith is in the kingdom now – a kingdom we proclaim now.

We have all been taught about the great abolitionists of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: Olaudah Equiano, Thomas Clarkson, and William Wilberforce. And we may have been misled into thinking that this was the end of slavery. But slavery is on the increase with a global estimate of fifty million people trapped in modern slavery. The number of people trapped in forced labour, including sex trafficking, has risen to 28 million, with a further 22 million trapped in forced marriage according to the latest United Nations report. Most cases of forced labour – 86% – were found in the private sector in industries including manufacturing, construction, agriculture and domestic work. Millions of people, mainly women and girls, are also estimated to be trapped in commercial sexual exploitation. Here in the United Kingdom, slavery is spread across urban, suburban, and rural communities.

The Clewer Initiative is the national work of the Church of England to combat modern slavery and in partnership with Worcester Diocese Mothers' Union and the Learning Team here at the cathedral today we are inviting you to make a paper chain as part of this awareness week. A poignant display of anti-slavery chains are exhibited in the trees in College Yard. The brightly multi-coloured knitted chains serve as a reminder to us all that modern day slavery still exists and is present within our communities. The paper chains made today will be displayed inside the cathedral.

In Britain all types of modern slavery can be found but two examples illustrate the problem and what we might do. The first is labour exploitation among companies having high needs for low skilled, relatively low paid and often temporary labour. For example, agriculture, horticulture, food packing and processing, construction and hospitality. These sectors often have major seasonal peaks in demand for a limited supply of workers. The work can be gruelling with long hours and little job security, resulting in workers and employers being vulnerable to criminal exploiters who are adept at hiding signs of exploitation and slavery. The rural economy in this county is particularly at risk.

The second form is county lines - organised criminal gangs operating in large towns and cities who coerce vulnerable children and young people to act as mules to run drugs out into rural areas. To aid their expansion into rural areas, gangs also use a practice known as 'cuckooing' where they take over houses of vulnerable local people to use as a base for their local activities.

What can we do? The abolition of slavery is an urgent issue which calls us to be like the widow in today's gospel and also to heed the words of Jesus as he ends the parable. Our first action is to remember the action of the widow. In the face of overwhelming evil we can feel powerless but as the widow resorts to persistence – her only weapon – so we must be persistent. Persistent in action against modern slavery. The Clewer Initiative provides many ways to do this – follow the link on the Sunday News for more information, download the car wash app, the farm work welfare app, sign petitions, campaigns – whatever it takes to be persistent in calling out evil, calling for justice, seeing the problem and acting.

This is pester power at its best and it is people power. The widow's cause is our cause because it is what is right. The unjust judge had no respect for people, but such ignorance is contrary to our Christian calling of respect and dignity for all God's children.

Alongside pester power and people power (and forgive me for the rather tacky alliteration) prayer power is what makes this an intrinsic part of what it means to be Kingdom people. Jesus' final words in this morning's gospel set the challenge of the widow and the unjust judge firmly in our court: 'when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

The campaign against modern slavery is a call for justice both human and divine. It offends every understanding of freedom, dignity, and worth – an understanding shared by our common humanity yes, but an understanding at the very heart of what it means to profess faith in God in whose image we are made. If we profess any faith in the Christ who shared our human flesh then we must believe in human dignity without any exception, exemption, or compromise. This is our faith and now it is our duty. 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

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