

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 16 October 2022

Scriptures: Exodus 17:8-13; 2 Timothy 3:14—4:2; Luke 18:1-8

Homily: Fr. Ken

In the first reading from the Book of Exodus, we hear of the scene when Moses prays for the newly liberated Hebrews. But when he can no longer hold out his arms in supplication, Aaron and Hur support him.

In the second reading from St. Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, Paul reminds Timothy to be true to his teachers, to what he has been taught, to the Scriptures, and to take every opportunity to proclaim the Word of God.

In the Gospel story, the widow seeks justice from a judge who is unconcerned and gives no answer. Her persistence finally wins out. By contrast, God will always see justice done for those who cry out.

In university courses on political science, and in political conversations and others, you may occasionally hear one person refer to another person as "Machiavellian". That term has a variety of non-complimentary meanings including: "scheming", "amoral", "sly", and "immoral".

The term derives from a person, Niccolo Machiavelli who lived from 1469 to 1527. He was noted political philosopher, statesman, dramatist, and author. He was born in Florence during the turbulent times of 15th century Italy. The Medici, Borgia, and other influential families vied for political dominance, and Naples, Milan, Venice, Florence, and the Papal States competed to expand their territories.

Machiavelli came into prominence after France invaded Italy in 1494. For the next fourteen years, Machiavelli was Florence's top

diplomat, traveling extensively on missions to powerful rulers. But when Florence was made dependent on Rome, Machiavelli's diplomatic career came to an abrupt end. He was suspected of conspiring against the new government, imprisoned, tortured, but then found innocent and was released.

He became embittered, and started writing what was to become his major work, titled The Prince. In that book he examined the history of how states and individuals obtained and kept political power. From his research and experience in matters of state, he concluded that often a leader could only win and hold on to political power if that leader was prepared to act against Christian ethics or any acceptable moral code.

Machiavelli deplored this state of affairs saying "power was hardly worth having if you had to sell your soul to get it". For that he was criticized, of course. However, he accepted human cruelty, injustice, and barbarity as inevitable, and he observed that "if there is one circumstance that a person cannot change, it is one's own character and one's way of reacting to events". Though he himself did not reject Christian principles, he nevertheless did not see them as always compatible with effective political leadership.

In today's Gospel story, the judge described by Jesus as having "neither fear of God nor respect for persons" is unconcerned about the widow's plea for help. Yet as an "elder" and local judge, he would have known that the religious law directed him to lay aside the rule of impartiality in favor of the widow, orphan, and stranger.

It is only the widow's persistence in demanding justice that makes him give in. He does so not for justice's sake but to save himself from being pestered.

The judge in the Gospel seems to fit neatly into Machiavelli's observation that a person cannot change one's own character or way of reacting to events. Or, can a person change?

"More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of", wrote the English poet, Alfred Tennyson.

The Gospel parable is about the power of prayer and "the need to pray continually and never lose heart".

The poor widow is an example for anyone whose life has entered into darkness: she persevered and refused to give up. The unjust judge, whatever his motive, finally acceded to her pleadings, and to that degree, at least, he changed.

Jesus compares the judge's reaction to God who sees justice done to those "who cry to him...even when he delays to help them".

The unjust judge delayed through indifference. Why God sometimes delays in answering our prayers is unknown to us in this life, but it may be that by our going through such time of waiting, God helps us to change into a closer union with the crucified and risen Christ.

Machiavelli lived when corruption in high office was rife, and when nothing appeared "beyond the reach of wealth and astute negotiation".

Machiavelli reflected on what he observed. Yet he never seems to have considered the power of prayer to change hearts.

Whatever our lives may bring, may each of us today always persevere in prayer.

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