

**Sermon by Ray Cleary**  
**Pentecost 19, 20 October 2019**  
Luke 18; 1-14, Jeremiah 31;27-34  
St Silas Albert Park.

“Who do you think you are”, is one of my favourite television series on SBS. The stories behind the individuals who take part discover many unknown aspects of their family history, some that shock them and others that enlighten and help explain certain aspects of their personality.

I think I am a pretty ordinary bloke, an Australian, with as my wife has discovered in her search of my family roots Irish, Croatian, German and Italian forbears. Ah ha, I knew there was something about this guy some of you may be saying. I am today however a result of many influences, my nurture, the people I have met throughout my life, my working-class background, my education, reading and being a parent and grandparent. Life has not always been easy and as many know I have a strong commitment to justice. I empathise strongly with those who struggle with life and speak on and with them when needed. Perhaps the strongest influence on my life has been what I have learnt from young people abandoned by their families, homeless people, abused women and children young people on drugs who speak about only feeling good about themselves and able to deal with the challenges of life when taking drugs including alcohol. Standing alongside and as voice for the Other has been a consistent pattern for me and I am sure at times my naming of “Elephants” in the room has not endeared me too many of my colleagues. One of my “pet” sayings, not original I confess is, “that evil flourishes when good people remain silent”. My favourite biblical text, Yes I do read the bible, is from the prophet Micah, “and what does the Lord require but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.”

One thing about me that you do probably do not know is that I have never doubted the existence of God. God has always been a given. This is not the same as saying that my understanding and passion for God has not changed over my life time. It certainly has. I recall teaching RE in State schools and asking the class to draw me a picture of God, one girls’ response was to draw nothing on her page because she said God was beyond her picture. On my regular outback travels as, I sit and ponder under the stars with a good port I cannot accept that life and all its beauty and challenges is an accident of history and that humanity has the capacity to be God in its own image. I know many of my non-church friends who in their earlier lives were active in church life think I am a bit odd in believing in God today and like them probably many of those sitting in the coffee shops in Middle Park right now would have similar views.

Religion and faith is probably at its lowest ebb in Australia today a result of many things including the Churches failures to address abuse, a lack of solid biblical and theological teaching of and by the faithful people of God, too much effort to protect its own privilege and at times an unwillingness to recognise the cries and voices of those who are described as the “other”, namely the widow, the homeless, the refugee and the different.

Then of course, without mentioning any names we see an increasing brand of Christianity that I describe as “prosperity religion”, an understanding that suggests that to believe is to be rewarded, individualism at the cost of community and welfare is only a last resort and should not be too attractive. This leads me to suggest that we Christians are facing if not already experiencing an identity crisis, even within Anglicanism there are increasing signs of disunity and even the possibility of schism. Today we cannot take for granted that Christian faith or any faith for that matter other than secularism, as the source that will underpin and shape who we are as a community, nation and as a world. Christians are increasingly in exile in many places a remnant of our former identity and we have to struggle to have a voice and to be noticed. We see this in “all the who-ha” about religious freedom with some sections of the Church “crying wolf”, demanding privilege and the ability to discriminate.”

Today’s Gospel leads us into another of Luke’s Jesus’ parables on the justice of God. The widow in our first story is not short of confidence as she challenges the judge who understands himself as accountable to no one, full of his own importance and above reproach. He has no concern for his fellow human beings and so ignores the pleas of the widow. Without husband and family, the widows of the day were dependent on the proper administration of justice. The widow is a woman of prayer and is confident in her faith despite the attitude of the judge. She knows who she is and her place in the community. I have no doubt that the widow is very confident and assured while the judge is fickle and arrogant. In his commentary on this passage Brendan Byrne writes, “this parable addresses the temptation to give up and to lose heart in the midst of the evils of the time”. It is losing heart that seems to be increasing not only among people of faith but of all people of good will who seek to live a Christian life. Only when the judge fears the verbal challenges of the widow may give way to actual physical violence, a black eye as is the literal meaning of the text that he responds. The widow’s actions remind us of other occasions when the woman fights back like the Syrophenician woman and like the earlier parable in Luke 16 of the rogue manager, the judge acts when he realises he will lose.

Central to this parable is faith. It is faith in God, not limited to prayer but engagement and action. The parable offers a sharp challenge to the world of today where faith is often ridiculed and sidelined, where injustices continue to destroy lives and where the Other, the poor, the widow and those whose lives is a struggle remain without hope.

I suspect like you I struggle to remain hopeful at times. I get angry, even want to throw things at our leaders who do not answer with integrity, who seem to not get it, or who remain silent in the face of injustice. I even have occasions when I am angry with God. I am sure however he is big enough to receive the brunt of my anger.

The second parable in today's Gospel takes us one step further. The temptation to be smug and self-righteous is present in every religion and this parable is a reminder to us that our mission should not be on ourselves but others. In this parable one prays in self-righteous tones while the other asked for mercy. This suggests to me that we need to let go of the past, often in our minds a romantic past, and wake up to the present and future. It is unlikely that for the foreseeable future that Christendom shall not return. This does not mean we remain silent but rather embrace the tenacity of the widow against the odds but rather accept we are one among many in the market place of ideas and in many places a minority voice and demand a voice and to be heard.

In last Sunday's reading from the prophet Jeremiah the Israelites were instructed to pray for the welfare of the Babylonians, even though they received nothing in return. Likewise, the welfare of the Church will not be safeguarded in today's post faith community but we are assured as the Israelites were in today's reading from Jeremiah that a new covenant will be restored, "one that will be written on their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be my people."

Throughout this year we have been reading from Luke's Gospel on Sundays. His words, the words of Luke's Jesus open up for us many challenges to not give up, to remain focused on the Kingdom of God, to be patient, to care and to embrace the widow, to speak out against injustice and to live our lives without pomp but with humility.

If you are like me this is not always easy, nor do we often see the implications of how we act when challenged, maligned or marginalised. Too often we seem to join the throng, embrace the crowd and fail to hear the cries and hurts of the wider community instead remaining silent. In all this I am reassured by God's continuing love for me and in the words of Francis Moloney, we are all the broken and forgiven people of God. Without such assurance our lives would be diminished as together we remain faithful to proclaim God's enduring love and grace for all.

Both the widow and the tax collector clearly understood who they were and their understanding of the call to faith. Likewise for us to reflect upon and begin to plan for the day's ahead.

Amen.