

Gospel text

Luke 18: 1-8

1 Jesus told them a story from life to say that they had to pray at all times and not be discouraged. 2 "There was someone who was a judge in a city. He was not afraid of God and had no regard for any human being. 3 And there was also a widow in that city who came to see him, saying, 'Do me justice against my adversary'. But he did not want to do anything for a while. After which he said to himself: 'Although I do not fear God nor have regard for a human being, 5 but because this widow keeps disturbing me, I will do her justice, so that in the end she does not always come to bother me.'" 6 Then the Lord said, "Hear what this unjust judge has just said. 7 And God would not defend his elect who cry to him day and night, while he shows his patience with them? 8 I assure you, he will take their defense promptly. However, when He comes, will the New Adam find faith on earth?"

Gospel commentary - Homily

Getting everything you want, or realigning your desires?

In the Yucatan, Mexico, there are still Maya descendants who practice the ancient tradition of prayer addressed to *Chaak*, the god responsible for the rain, source of life. On the altar of offerings which represents the world, food is arranged in very strict order as well as cups of *balché*, a fermented drink made of tree bark and sacred water gathered from a cave. The food consists of 13 loaves of bread, thick tortillas made of 13 layers of *masa*, a paste of corn, to represent the otherworld beyond oneself. The bread is wrapped in the *bakaalché*, a local grape leaf, and is cooked in a hole called *pib*, broad as a grave and dug near the altar. To preside over the ceremony, there is the shaman, *hmem*, accompanied by 4 little boys squatting at the 4 corners of the altar saying: *hmaa, hmaa, hmaa*, and a fifth boy in the center, saying: *lek, lek, lek*, to imitate the singing of frogs on rainy nights. All of these things are important for *Chaak* to bless the community and give it the beneficial rain for the crops, and to allow another year of life for the community.¹

We can look with some sympathy at this Mayan tradition, but deep within us, we feel very far from such a practice, and above all we do not believe it brings anything. If it's raining, it has nothing to do with the religious rite, is it? However, in the recent past, the "rogation days" (of the Latin: to ask), these days of prayers for the harvests, were part of the Catholic liturgical calendar of the spring. They were not really abolished, but the liturgical reform entrusted them in 1969 to the discretion of the Episcopal Conferences. Regardless, the prayer addressed to *Chaak* or to God aims the same thing, to bend it so that it gives us something that we need. Would not there be something wrong with all this?

Today's Gospel provides the perfect setting for addressing this issue. A quick reading gives us this: Jesus exhorts us to pray unceasingly to the image of this widow who got what she wanted from a very hard judge, because she was persevering; it's up to us to do the same thing with faith. Have I summed up well what one retains from the Gospel after a first reading? This reading is a problem. You may ask: why be persevering? If we return to our way of reading the Gospel, we say to ourselves: by persevering in prayer, God will eventually give way. The rain? We will have it. Really? Is God like an old man a little hard of hearing to whom we must repeat things? This contradicts other passages in the Gospels where Jesus invites his audience not to imitate those who imagine that by speaking much they will be better listened to, because God knows what we need, even before we ask him (see Matthew 6: 8). But then, what perseverance are we talking about here, of what faith is it? Let's read the Gospel properly.

It is impossible to understand this passage of Luke without going back to the time when he wrote his Gospel, around the year 80 or 85. The effervescence that followed the death-resurrection of Jesus, especially the waiting of his imminent return, was fading: while Paul, whose companion Luke was, seems to await the return of Christ during his lifetime (see his letter 1 Corinthians 15: 51-53, written around the year 55) Christians now seem to experience a certain lassitude which will later lead some people to no longer believe in this Parousia or this new world (see the 2nd letter of Peter 3: 9, written around year 125). What does this return of Christ or this new world consist of? For Paul, this is the last step in the war against evil and the final victory over him (see 1 Corinthians 15: 24-25). With what we know today, it is obvious that tomorrow is not the day before.

Knowing this, we are doing a different reading of the beginning of the Gospel: *Jesus was telling them a story inspired by life to say that they had to pray at all times and not be discouraged*. The context is that of an incessant and courageous struggle against evil, in the hope of this new world. One could say to oneself: corruption has always existed and will always exist, and we give up. But it is here that Jesus intervenes with his story of the judge and the widow to assert that if a heartless judge could finally give the widow what she wanted, how much more will a God, who is good and a father, will support his children, called his chosen ones, in this struggle for a new world, provided of course that they continue to believe in it. That's the problem here. Things take time, improvements are sometimes imperceptible, failures are many, the turn of events is not what we anticipated, and faith is put to the test. And just as God is infinite, just as our universe is infinite, is it not possible that our journey towards this new world has the same dimensions?

Jesus' insistence on faith has always surprised me. But more and more, faith seems to me fundamental because it allows us to stay alive. Our eyes are so limited that a whole dimension of life escapes us. Did you know that there are 225 million years ago the Atlantic Ocean did not exist, and that since its shores are moving away from about 2.5 centimeters a year? This distance can not be observed by our eyes. It is like the image of faith: we know things but can not really see. Recently, I was enjoying a tennis match in which star Rafael Nadal was trailing 1-4 in the second set, and was facing a tiebreaker that would then have allowed his opponent to serve for the match. In normal times, I would have said: he is toasted, he will lose, and I would have

stopped watching. But since it was a replay and I knew he had won, I could admire his fight to the end. It's like the human adventure. God knows the end result, not us. Faith is what allows us to fight to the end, without seeing the outcome, but knowing that the outcome, whatever it is, will be good.

We have one last point to clarify. What does Jesus mean when he speaks of the patience of God in the sentence: "*And God would not defend his elect who cry to him day and night, while he shows his patience towards them?*" Luke inserted our passage in this long walk of Jesus to Jerusalem where he gives his teaching on the way of living during his absence, a walk that speaks of the human journey necessary to follow him wherever he wants to go. Any journey takes time. It often involves course corrections, and even a new direction of one's life. What we ask in prayer reflects us. If we change, our prayer will change. The patience of God is the time given to us to evolve, to change direction to our life, to let ourselves be transformed by the perspective to which Jesus opened us, so that one day there will be no more difference between the prayer of Jesus and ours. In my prayer, I name many people, my family, my relatives, people of work, but I name them so that I can bring them what they really need, not that they win the lottery; true prayer always involves us.

Did Jesus pray for the rain? Coming from Galilee, where wheat was grown, he certainly wanted the rain to fall like all farmers in the region. But his true prayer is reflected in Gethsemane when he asked God for the strength to live well the events that were coming and asked his disciples to do the same. Adjusting one's life, and therefore one's prayer, to this new world is the work of a lifetime, and therefore requires a great deal of perseverance. But it's never too late to start. So, what are we waiting for?

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, October 2013

¹ *Secrets of the Maya Otherworld*, Alma Guillermoprieto: National Geographic Magazine, August 2013.