

Reflection for GPP Sunday 20 October 2019

Readings: 2 Timothy 3: 14 – 4: 5 and Luke 18: 1 – 8

Congregational Story Time: *Inspiration!*

The story of *Luke's Way of Looking* – finding inspiration where others see differently.

Set alight with enthusiasm - Spirit of God at work. God breathing into us – and bringing us peace and inspiration - yet maybe not like a dove but like the wild goose of the Spirit.

Reflection: INSPIRATION FOR LIVING

- *what is inspiration from God, in scripture – or elsewhere?*
- *a confusing parable : an inspirational story from Jesus*
- *taking a risk to live prayerfully, persistently and with responsibility*
- *God loves you, can inspire you, transform you. Are you ready?*

The letter known to us as second Timothy has the usual kind of introduction to letters that says it is written by Paul to Timothy. It was a letter that encouraged and advised, mentoring the younger Christian so that he would keep going as a faithful servant of God. However, this letter may be in the Pauline tradition but not actually written by Paul, but by his followers later, in the style that he wrote, as an encouragement to all growing in their faith.

The letter reminds Timothy that he had known the sacred writings, the holy scriptures, since he was a child. But what holy scriptures and sacred writings were meant here? The reference is to the Hebrew Scriptures, included in what we call the Old Testament, because at this time, the New Testament as we know it, did not exist. The Hebrew Scriptures, the books of the law, the prophets and the psalms, were also the scriptures that Jesus knew. By the time of the letter we heard read this morning, some of the letters in our New Testament and indeed some of the gospels, were circulating separately, individually around the Christian communities. They were not, however, collected into the New Testament as we know it now, until the fourth century.

Why is it important to understand this? Well think of the verses that followed – v.16 and 17 of 2 Timothy chapter 3 *All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living, so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified and equipped to do every kind of good deed.* The 'all scripture' referred to here is the books of the law, prophets and psalms. They were the recognised holy writings at the time. Yes we recognize that the Scriptures, old and new, teach us truth, rebuke error, correct faults and give instruction for right living. We recognise that God's message comes to us through the Bible but it also comes to us in other ways – and we can assert that God still speaks today, maybe sometimes in new and surprising ways.

Yet this verse has become pivotal in Christian understanding, and misunderstanding, of the Bible. *All scripture is inspired by God* has been the focus of many arguments and dissensions, been the cause of groups breaking away and forming new denominations or individual churches, and been the subject of many scholarly articles and books. I'm not going to give you a scholarly argument, or a historical treatise, this morning but I do want to encourage you to consider what you understand by the words 'inspired by God'.

The inspiration of God means different things to different people. In terms of inspiration for the writing of the Bible, there is a spectrum of understanding of what that means – from God dictated all the words so they are literally 'the words of God' to many authors created the writings but were 'inspired' to write by God's Spirit – sometimes called thematic inspiration – and many points between those two. Inspiration can be understood as the presence and activity of God's Spirit within individuals and within the Hebrew and Christian communities, and can take account of

cultural settings that affect the way in which events are recorded. Many of you love the poetic language of the King James Authorised Version of the Bible from 1611. Did you know that was translated into English mostly from the Vulgate Latin translation and not from the original Hebrew and Greek in which it had been written? There had already been an interpretation from the first translators from Greek and Hebrew into Latin and then another one as the seventeenth century translators chose what words to use in English to translate the Latin. If you believe that the actual words come from God, are they the Hebrew and Greek words, or the Latin ones or the English?

If we look for dictionary definitions about inspiration, we find that 'to inspire' means to breathe in, or to infuse thought or feeling into someone, to animate, to put life into. The Spirit of God inspires us in that way – breathing life into us, animating us, infusing us with the life of God. I have had a new experience of infusion over the last 18 months as I have regular infusions of something called pamidronate. It flows into my veins so that it will reach all my bones and strengthen them. When the sharp needle goes into the vein in the back of my hand and the liquid begins to circulate around my body that is a time that encourages me to be very aware and very grateful for the strengthening I receive from the infusion and inspiration of God.

The inspiration of God is available to all of us – not just to the ancient writers of Biblical texts, but to you and me now today. Every time there is an inner prompting for you to do something you might not have thought of, or a sudden resolution that comes to you of something you have been concerned about, or an aha moment when you see something with new clarity, do you regard that as the inspiration of God? I hope so. I certainly do. Inspiration may come to us in unexpected ways, especially when we choose to live in an attitude of prayer – acknowledging that God is with us all the time and making our whole lives open to the scrutiny and inspiration of God.

Jesus was inspired by God and Jesus inspired others, including with the stories he told. The story of Jesus we heard today has been described by Biblical commentators as one of the hardest parables to unravel in all of the gospels. But let's try to do a bit of unravelling anyway.

In Jewish tradition, widows and orphans were the symbol of vulnerability. Being widowed left you without property, impoverished, and vulnerable to the whims of your closest male relative – we see a clear example of that in the story of Ruth and Naomi. Luke mentions a number of widows in the ministry of Jesus. For Jesus, a widow was both vulnerable and a woman with potential to make a difference. The widow in this story was also a person with a strong entitlement to justice.

When we hear the parables of Jesus we need to remember that Jesus used humour, shock, and hyperbole, to impact his hearers, and his stories were subversive – his parables turned the normal expectations of life and behaviour upside down.

In the story Jesus told that we heard read today, the second character was the judge. What do we know about him? The story tells us twice that he was a rogue – he did not respect God or people. The judge is called unjust, meaning perhaps that he takes bribes and is only willing to listen to those who will pay for justice. He was corrupt.

For a woman, any woman, let alone a widow, to approach a judge to plead her case would have made Jesus' listeners gasp. No woman in the ancient world would have been likely to intercede on her own behalf in the way that Jesus portrays this widow. His listeners would have been either shocked by her brazen action or laughing at her audacity as she breaks every social convention. Women had no right to approach the judge in public or private and women had no access to legal recognition in a court before a judge.

The rules of Jewish society in Jesus' time were harsh and discriminatory against women. Unmarried women were not supposed to leave the home of their father unaccompanied. Married woman could not leave the home of their husband unaccompanied. When they did go out, all women were supposed to wear a double veil. Women could not testify in court. Their word was

considered unreliable. Remember how the women who went to the tomb in the Easter story were disbelieved as 'recounting an idle tale'. Women were discouraged from talking to strangers, which is why the story of Jesus talking to the woman at the well in Samaria so scandalized the disciples. This story Jesus told of the widow and the judge breaks so many of the moral and traditional rules of the time that for those who heard Jesus tell it, this was a shocking story.

A traditional interpretation has seen God as the judge and Christians in the role of the persistent widow. That makes the message of the story that we should wear God down with our constant asking and eventually what we ask for will be granted – and if it is not, then we just haven't prayed hard enough - but that is nonsense. God is not like the unjust judge at all. Far from being corrupt and self-serving, God is love. The judge and God have nothing in common. That is not what the parable is about.

This parable exemplifies a classic story telling technique of the time – that reasoned that if something small and mundane is true, how much more would something on a higher level be true? If an irritating widow could cajole justice out of a crooked and uncaring judge, how much more will a compassionate God hear our concerns? The moral or message of the story then is keep going, keep living a life close to God, do not lose heart. This is not a story about nagging God to make our prayers effective. It is a story about not giving up, even when we feel discouraged, and trusting that God knows and understands our situation and is ready to inspire us and give us strength. Take a risk to live prayerfully, persistently and with responsibility.

Another message we can glean from this story is to liken the judge to the forces in this broken world that run counter to God's way of being – the powerful who abuse their power, exploit the marginalised, and ignore the injustices and suffering around them. We, then, are urged to be persistent in opposing these forces and working for justice for all. God is active in the world through us, ready to listen and to act with compassion - through us. We need to listen to those around us and respond to the suffering and injustice we become aware of. Welcome the inspiration of God to help you and transform you through the power of love.

The Spirit of God is in you. May the wild goose of the Spirit challenge and inspire you. The Kingdom of God is within you. Let it grow. God loves you. God will inspire you if you open your heart and mind to that infusion of the Spirit. God bless you. Amen.

As part of our response to God, we sing *The Kingdom is within you*.