

October 17th Trinity 20

Genesis 32.22 – 31: Jacob wrestling at the brook Jabbok

2 Timothy 3.14 – 4.5: All scripture is inspired by God

Luke 18.1 – 8: the parable of the unjust judge

When it comes to answering questions, does it ever strike you how women can often get away with things that men can't begin to? I dare say it can happen the other way round as well, but for example - you may not be an avid watcher of Newsnight, especially if you have a sensible bed time but you must have heard of that infamous interview with Michel Howard just before the election before this one just gone, where Jeremy Paxman asked him the same question twelve times without getting a straight answer. Arguably that interview contributed to the stalling of Mr Howard's career, and it certainly still makes good and amusing theatre if you happen to have a link to youtube available.

Well earlier this month you may or may not have heard, our Jeremy was at it again – trying to find out when exactly the new Home Secretary, Theresa May first learnt about the changes to child benefit which have caused just a touch of controversy recently. Theresa May started waffling, of course so Mr Paxman repeated the question. When did you learn about the changes?

By the time it got to the tenth repetition, it was beginning to look like another Michael Howard moment when Jeremy changed his question just slightly from "when did you learn about it" to "you haven't tried to give me a date so far" At which the home secretary saw her chance and replied "Oh, you're asking me for a date Jeremy" – at which even the fearsome Paxman had to laugh and back down gracefully. Eye fluttering was never an option for Michael Howard.

In the same way, the widow in the story we've just heard about used a different tactic albeit another allegedly stereotypically female one to get her way – she just went on and on and on until the judge gave in. Notice I did say allegedly female – it was Jesus told the story, not me. It really makes me wonder quite how seriously Jesus intended his listeners to take this little parable. Perhaps it is all about serious things like perseverance in prayer and what have you, but I think he was enjoying having a poke at the law and its workings at the same time?

Those of you who, like me, arise and chant the psalm set for the day before embarking on any secular activity will have noticed that today it was a section from psalm 119 (Don't believe everything you hear in sermons, by the way) Here's a taste of it:

Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes.

With my lips I declare all the ordinances of your mouth.

I delight in the way of your decrees as much as in all riches.

I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways.

I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.

My goodness! Who is this bloke? He takes as much delight from the law as from anything else in the world! Hasn't he heard of sex, or a nice cup of tea? Is he real? And what a contrast it is to Jesus' picture of the law as administered by some weary old judge who'd do anything for a quiet life. **And** all this on the same day as the lectionary organisers choose to feature 2 Timothy verse 16 – that old favourite of the lazy evangelical who doesn't fancy an argument:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness

It is one of my favourites, too, really it is for reasons I'll try to explain as we go along. Because it raises the question of how we use our scripture – for example I think we should beware of ignoring the old testament, or the psalms – they're part of our heritage and underpin much Christian theological understanding. But I don't take every word literally or at face value – it's where it leads us that matters.

One of my favourite activities when I'm not singing psalms is watching films – either at the cinema or though a film club. And I got the DVD recently of The White Ribbon – Das Weisse Band. You may have seen it was awarded best world cinema film of the year recently by the BBC. And it is a cracking film. Set in Protestant north Germany in 1913/14 it portrays an almost puritanical world, ruled by the pastor and the Baron with rods of iron. And on first viewing I thought it was just about the rise of the Hitler generation as nasty sneaky things began to happen in response to this overly well ordered Germanic society. But on reflection, and a

second watching it became much more general – showing how repression generates its consequences, which may be far from what was intended. Perhaps – it's far too subtle a film to sum up in one line. It certainly spoke of excessive order and the origins of chaos.

So why do I mention that? Because when we think about God's word, God's law, it is all too easy fondly to imagine that all would be well if only we could all live quietly according to firm Christian principles. If only. And I suspect Jesus was well aware of that when he spoke of the widow and the judge and the way the law worked for them. Even in a well ordered world, we all look to our own advantage. Try too hard to stick to rigid rules and principles and things are likely to unravel eventually. So how are we to live? It wouldn't be much fun if we all took our lead from the widow in the parable, but maybe it becomes a bit clearer if we think of another story which hinges on Jesus' attitude to the law. The one where he's speaking to a rich young ruler who clearly feels there's something missing in his world as he asks "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Keep the law, says Jesus – tongue in cheek, maybe as the ruler promptly replies that he always has done. Nearly there then aren't you, says Jesus; just one more thing – sell up and come with me.

What he's offering there is that scary thing, a relationship. It's a bit more oblique in the parable of the widow and the judge but it's there – the injunction not to lose heart as we wait on God. And to my mind that's where the scriptures come in, they're there for us to react to at least as much as they are there to live our lives by. They're there to complement and inform our relationship with God.

Which will be our relationship ... and it will only be a relationship if we respond genuinely to what we read. It's what I was trying to do with the psalm – I didn't at all mean it isn't worth reading or that we have to discount it so allow me a little aside here and a reflection on how 5 verses out of 176 don't really do justice to what is a monumental reflection on the Hebrew idea of Torah teaching & law. Eight words are used over and over again, one in each verse: 'promise', 'word', 'statutes', 'commandments', 'decrees', 'precepts', and 'law' 'way of faithfulness.' There's apparently also some poetic use of the same letter starting each stanza- so it's 22 stanzas of 8 verses each you see. But the repetitiveness of those 8 words is quite compelling and I gradually came to understand that the writer sees them all as facets of what God gives. In this way of faithfulness, he doesn't separate the law from God's word or his promises and I found that quite helpful as I'd been beginning to wonder whether I was confusing the idea of

law with what we get from scripture. But no, I think Jesus would go on to wrap all these ideas together in the concept of God's love: they're all still there but no one facet should dominate our understanding to the exclusion of the others. Adherence to the rules shouldn't preclude the need to show love and understanding, for example. And on the other hand perhaps we need to keep a healthy respect for God's laws to temper a "love is all you need" kind of approach. So, though I still can't pretend to love every word of the law like the psalmist, but I did learn something from engaging with the text.

When I was teaching, which I still do occasionally, one of my pet phrases was "I'm glad you made that mistake." And provided I'm confident that the student can take it, I may write it up for all to see. So you could find some real nonsense on some of my boards and if some student were to take a surreptitious photo with her phone, I might have some explaining to do. $100 - 44 = 66$. Call yourself a maths teacher Richardson? But I'm certain that analysing mistakes thoroughly does more to improve understanding than just showing the right answer all the time.

It's a more subtle process with text of course, but reacting honestly and reflecting can be just as beneficial. We started with a couple of more or less successful ways of not answering a question – I'm not of the school that suggests opening the bible and expecting to find the answer to your questions leap out at you but that verse in 2 Timothy has always had a certain resonance for me: All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for various purposes. I put it like that, because I think there may be more than a grain of truth in it if we give it a chance.