

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

Exodus 17: 8-13

Psalms 121: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8

2 Timothy 3: 14 – 4: 2

Luke 18: 1-8

Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.

The Garaventa Center

The University of Portland

Our Gospel reading today has a modern ring to it. We find it easy to relate to the story of the woman and the unjust judge. Our newspapers and the Internet are full of accounts of people demanding their rights, and of officials grudgingly granting them. For example, you hear a lot of rights language used in relation to the Columbia River, here in Oregon, in disputes among electricity customers, environmental activists, sports fishermen, commercial fishermen, and others. I'm sure any of these frustrated, angry, pleading people could empathize with the woman in the Gospel. All they want are their rights -- just as we very much want ours.

The language of 'rights' is common currency in modern culture, to the extent that we find it difficult to frame questions of politics, morality or even religion in any other terms. For example, I once had a student who thought that the old name for the Sacrament of the Sick -- the Last Rites -- was spelled r-i-g-h-t-s. According to him, it was the last sacrament to which a Catholic had a right.

The idea of rights has made an essential contribution to human freedom, welfare and dignity, but from the perspective of faith, it has some pitfalls of which we should be aware. Not long ago, I picked up a copy of a book called *Bluff Your Way in Philosophy*. It contained an

interesting definition of rights. The author summed the whole question up by remarking, “You have a *Right* insofar as there is either something you deserve, or something you should be allowed to get away with.” This rings true, but it seems too self-centered to satisfy a Christian’s conscience.

I attended high school at a time when students were eager to assert their rights. I was a member of a student committee delegated to meet with the Principal to demand ours. The Principal explained to us that rights were inextricably bound up with duties, so that we couldn’t have one without the other. We had to admit that this sounded plausible. In the end, as I recall, we acquired several new duties . . . and no noticeable rights at all. Nevertheless, I still think the principal had a point. Surely, if other people are required to respect my rights, I have a *duty* to uphold theirs.

It’s striking, isn’t it, that the idea of rights becomes ever more prevalent, while the idea of duty seems to continually fall in popular esteem. People who demand their rights are regarded as heroes. But people who emphasize duty are seen as stodgy. They are regarded as oppressors, or at least as repressed. (That’s certainly how we felt about the Principal.)

But for us Christians, duty needn’t be a somber and joyless thing. Jesus is called “the man for others.” It’s our Christian *duty* to imitate him. Just as in Gospel times, people today cry out to God day and night for justice. If God’s response to them has been delayed, perhaps it is because *we* have delayed. Aaron and Hur supported Moses’ hands in the battle against Amalek. Christ asks more of us. We are to *be* God’s hands in the world, in the battle against injustice.

We ought to feel the same agitation, and respond with the same energy, when the rights of others are violated, that we do when our own rights are threatened. Then, if we keep at it, whether convenient or inconvenient, we can experience the joy of being embarked upon an honorable quest, motivated by love, inspired by Christ, and culminating in the Kingdom of God. Our hands will be God's hands.