



**St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, Florida**  
**21 Pentecost - Proper 24 - Year C - October 20/21, 2007**  
**Genesis 32:3-8,22-30; Ps. 121; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8a**

Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, *Rector*

**Banging On Justice's Door!**

Who of us could not be captivated and saddened by the events in Burma last month? The pictures of Buddhist monks marching en masse and being joined by students and others and standing up to an oppressive government was frightening and inspiring.....

On Tuesday, October 9, First Lady Laura Bush wrote an op-ed piece in *The Wall Street Journal* speaking out against the military junta in Burma. She warned that the military dictatorship there had days to act before her husband imposed additional sanctions against them.<sup>1</sup> This Friday, President Bush, did act and imposed additional sanctions on the leaders of the military junta in Burma.

According to CBS News and the Associated Press, "Mr. Bush ordered the Treasury Department Friday to freeze the financial assets of additional members of the repressive military junta. He also acted to tighten controls on U.S. exports to Burma, and called on the governments of China and India to do more to pressure the government of the Southeast Asian nation."<sup>2</sup>

"Monks have been beaten and killed. Thousands of pro-democracy protesters have been arrested," Mr. Bush said in the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House. "Burma's rulers continue to defy the world's just demands to stop their vicious persecution."<sup>3</sup>

I support the President in this and hope you do too. I especially appreciate the First Lady's determination to speak out in this issue...Her concern for Burma is not something new....She hosted a roundtable on Burma at the United Nations last year....Clearly the outrages in Burma last month made a deep impression on her. It is also clear that she has a high regard for and concern about the safety of Aung San Suu Kyi.

This past June, Mrs. Bush wrote an op-ed piece reminding the world of the plight of Aung San Suu Kyi on the observance of Suu Kyi's 67<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>4</sup> For those that don't remember, Aung San Suu Kyi is the democratically elected leader of Burma. Upon her election in 1988, the military junta refused to hand over power to her and placed her under house arrest. She has been under house arrest for most of the past 17 years.

Suu Kyi has been strongly influenced by India's Mahatma Gandhi and, like him, is committed to non-violence. She is also committed to the freedom of the Burmese people. For her strength of character and her commitment to non-violent resistance and the cause of democracy for her people, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. She is an incredible woman who we should all keep in the forefront of our consciousness....Keeping her in the forefront of our consciousness and prayers is a concrete sign that the military junta has not won.....

I can't help drawing a connection between Aung San Suu Kyi and the persistent woman in today's Gospel reading from Luke...It's a little bit odd, this reading...The narrator indicates that Jesus was speaking to his disciples, that he told them a parable about their need to pray always (Luke 18:1) This seems straightforward enough: a message about persistence in prayer.....

But there is more to it...The parable is not just about persistence in prayer...The parable links prayer, justice and action....Jesus decides to tell his disciples about their need to pray always...."In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent'" (Luke 18:2). Two characters in the parable: a judge and a widow.....The judge: a symbol, a man with power....The widow: a symbol of vulnerability, an unmarried, older woman, in a male dominated patriarchal culture...

Jesus doesn't make clear the circumstances of the woman's suit, but he does make it clear that she is in the right....She wants to be granted justice and she has made a formal application to the institution of justice and to a person who represents that institution and who holds power, real power and therefore has the ability to grant her justice or to deny it....

Sadly, as too often happens in courts of law, this judge does not represent the ideals of his office....He seems like a certain Immigration Judge I have seen at work in Miami.....He is callous and rude and arrogant and apparently does not fear God and certainly has no respect for people....He is a disgrace to his office, this judge (I mean, of course, the judge in the parable of Luke!) And this poor widow is at his mercy, the way so many are at the mercy of indifferent, uncaring, despicable judges and courts today....

But God bless this woman, she is a pest!....She will not take "no" for an answer....I guess they didn't have restraining orders in Jesus' day, because she keeps banging on the door of this judge.....And do you know what? She makes such a pest of herself; she gets him to relent.....

*"Alright, alright already...enough....Here take your justice...You can have it....Just leave me alone!"* That's not exactly what it says in Luke, but it's pretty close...

Jesus concludes the parable by saying to his disciples, *"Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them"* (Luke 18:6-7).

Now it is probably here that we get a little confused and a little troubled.....Is Jesus saying that God is like that judge and has no respect for people? Well, he is not saying that....He is not saying that at all....

Jesus is using a common rhetorical strategy of arguing from the lesser to the greater.... He is essentially saying, "If even someone as despicable as this unjust judge will respond to the persistent petitions of this woman, how much more will a loving God hear and respond to the prayers of his faithful people....." Jesus is encouraging his disciples to remain prayerful and faithful in all circumstances....

In the section of Luke's Gospel immediately preceding the parable of the persistent woman, Jesus is speaking with his disciples about the coming of the Kingdom of God and the coming of the Son of Man...This reference is to the time of judgment and God's renewal of the earth. (Luke 17:22-37).

No one knows when this time will be, but there will be much suffering before it comes, Jesus says to them: *"No matter how long it takes have faith....God is working his purpose out... Be faithful....Be persistent in prayer.....Be like this widow with the unjust judge....Be like Laura Bush and Aung San Suu Kyi."* "Pray always," Jesus is saying, *"and demand justice unceasingly, one informs the other...."*

Years ago, when I was on staff at Grace Church in Massapequa, Long Island, I had to go into New York City for a meeting....I decided to take the Long Island Rail Road into the city and ran into another member of Grace Church on the train....After we arrived at Penn Station, we ended up taking the same subway across town....It was a cold winter day....Because of this, the subway stations had lots of homeless people sitting in the benches along each subway platform.....It kept them out of the weather.....

*“Chip,” this woman said to me.... “Every day I ride into Manhattan and I see all these homeless people and I pray for them and I wonder what God is doing for them. Why do you think God doesn’t help them?”*

It’s a question I’ll bet we all often ask....Why doesn’t God do this? Why doesn’t God do that? Why isn’t there a miracle?

*“Maybe God is trying to,” I answered. “Maybe God is calling you to see them in your prayers and to do something about what you see.”* She paused and looked at me and nodded....She hadn’t thought about it that way....She later ended up seeking ordination as a deacon, that woman, and she has served with the homeless and needy and many others in her ministry since.....

That was my answer then, and it is my answer now...God is a God of justice and the Church is called to be a vehicle both of God’s justice and God’s mercy....God works through us....We are the body of Christ....We are called to be Christ’s eyes, ears, hands, feet and above all, Christ’s heart in the world...We are called to be God’s miracle and we are God’s miracle, when we are faithful; faithful to God and faithful to our core values; values like justice.....

Justice is a central biblical demand....As *The Harper Bible Dictionary* rightly observes, “justice is the standard by which the benefits and penalties of living in society are distributed....Justice is founded in the being of God, for whom it is a chief attribute....”<sup>5</sup> The Harper Bible Dictionary further observes, that as justice is a chief attribute of God, “God is a sure defender of the poor and the oppressed...and that since the justice of God is characterized by a special regard for the poor and weak, a corresponding quality is demanded of God’s people...”<sup>6</sup>

In the Episcopal Church we uphold this understanding....In the Baptismal Covenant, one of the commitments we make is to “strive for justice and peace among people....” (See BCP p.305) They go together, justice and peace....St. Augustine of Hippo recognized it a long time ago, “without justice there can be no peace.”

The military junta in Burma may have suppressed the demands for justice momentarily, but they have not silenced them....They have arrested hundreds of monks and students, and even killed some, but more will come in their place.....They have Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest, but they cannot contain her spirit and courage...Her spirit and courage are free for all the world to see....

It is vitally important that we keep her in the forefront of our minds and pray for her unceasingly....It is vitally important that we have eyes for injustice wherever and whenever we see it. If we are doing injustice, we need to stop doing it and repent of our sin.....

It is vitally important that when we see injustice at work, we bang on the doors of the unjust judges of the world, whether they be immigration judges in Miami, military juntas in Burma, state legislators in Tallahassee, Presidents or Senators or

Representatives in Washington, or Archbishops and Primates of the Anglican communion...

God will grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night, you can be sure of it... God will not delay long in helping them....I can promise you, the voices of justice are preparing to rise up again in Burma....They will bang on the door again....

And if we have done our duty, our annoying, persistent, pesky, duty; if we have been ceaseless in prayer and persistent in banging on the doors of unjust judges, then when the Son of Man comes he will indeed find that there is faith, bold faith on earth and blessed be those who on that day are found to have kept the faith!

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<sup>1</sup> Bush, Laura "Stop the Terror in Burma" *The Wall Street Journal* Tuesday, October 9, 2007

<sup>2</sup> See "Bush imposes New Sanctions On Myanmar" at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/10/19/world/main3385805.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> See "Bush Imposes New Sanctions on Myanmar"

<sup>4</sup> Bush, Laura "A Burmese Birthday" *The Wall Street Journal* June 19, 2007

<sup>5</sup> See "Justice" in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (New York: harperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 557.

<sup>6</sup> See "Justice" above.