Listen to what the unjust judge says… Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”

In nomine…

Some parts of the Bible are hard to cope with. In the book of Judges, for instance, we have to pick our way with trepidation through all the bloodshed; and elsewhere in the Old Testament we often struggle with the assumptions of a patriarchal society very different from our own. In different ways we encounter stumbling blocks in the New Testament too: and even in the gospels there are passages that provoke. Over the nineteen years of my ministry the two that most often cause complaints from among the faithful are the story of Mary and Martha and the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. Why does Jesus commend Mary, the idle dreamer and chide her dutiful sister Martha? Why do those who have toiled for hours in the heat of the day receive no more recompense than the johnny-come-latelys who’ve worked scarcely an hour. The short answer, of course, is because these are images of the kingdom of God whose currency is grace, but that doesn’t stop us from burning with resentment: like children in the playground we want to cry out at the unfairness. But if we’re looking for occasions of scandal in the gospels, the passage we heard today must come close to the top of most lists. What are we to make of this ‘judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people’?

The first thing to realise is that, once upon a time – long before this was the set gospel for the eighteenth Sunday after Trinity in Year C – once upon a time this was a funny story! It was told by Jesus to get a laugh, to capture the attention of those mocking or dozing off on the back row. As John Pridmore says, another way of rendering the judge’s words would be something like: ‘This tiresome woman will end up giving me a black eye’. The
unjust judge is a huge comic caricature on the lines of a *Spitting Image* puppet. Invariably in the Bible the core of a judge’s job is to defend widows and orphans, so his refusal to do so is a brazen dereliction of duty; and his caving in in the face of her persistence is final evidence of his complete lack of principle. This monstrous man is an affront to everything Jesus stands for; and yet he tells us to listen to him.

The point of course is that this tale is not an allegory, but an argument from lesser to greater: if even the unjust judge does the right thing in the end, ‘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’.

Our Old Testament reading, from Genesis 32, shows persistence of a different quality and character: there is no pester power here; this is close combat, hand to hand. This astonishing passage is one of the great theophanies of the Old Testament, those moments when – as to Moses at the burning bush or to Elijah on Mount Horeb – the living God is met by mortals. And like all theophanies the passage is mysterious through and through.

The first mystery is the sheer oddity of this combat between a human being and something more than a human being: an angel, a messenger of the Lord. Perhaps the most famous representation of this in art is Eugène Delacroix’s painting in the church of Saint Sulpice in Paris: Delacroix’s image is faithful to the text in depicting a wrestling match. Jacob and the angel are locked in brute physical combat with one another – which, to say the least, is not how we usually conceive of encounters between human beings and God.

The second mystery is how we are to understand the struggle here. The angel gives a name to Jacob. The translation we heard this morning renders it like this: ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.’ That seems straightforward, if surprising: how can a mortal contend with God and prevail? But other interpretations are possible. The Greek Septuagint, sees the new name, Israel, as implying not enmity but alliance between Jacob and the angel: *you shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel, for you have been strong with God and alongside God.* Obviously there is an ambiguity here, but I wonder if it’s an ambiguity inherent in the nature of wrestling. A wrestling match is a contest in which the opponents cling to each other as they fight. Even as Jacob wrestles with the angel and the angel with him, they are locked in the closest of embraces; and, as Delacroix’s depiction shows, there is tenderness here as well as antagonism. Perhaps, as Rusty Reno observes, what is being
purged here is the sin of self-sufficiency. ‘God is for Jacob as the one who is against him’ (R.R. Reno, *Genesis*, p.247): an event that seems harmful at first chastens and educates the patriarch into a proper sense of dependence. And Reno continues, ventriloquizing Jacob:

> I’ve spent years in exile, we can imagine him saying. I’ve been cursed by my father-in-law. My wives quarrel My brother very likely wants to kill me when I return. Tell me, O Lord, how are my father’s blessings a gift and not a curse? How is being chosen a source of joy rather than grief, rest rather than travail?

But in his brief moment of vision – ‘I have seen God’ – Jacob sees the end. He has a glimpse of the face of God, the fullness toward which the history of the covenant strains: ‘Thy face. Lord, do I seek’, says the psalm (27:8), and from now on Jacob can seek what he has seen. (*Genesis*, p. 250)

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The widow’s encounter with the unjust judge; Jacob’s encounter with the angel of the Lord. These readings could scarcely be more different: the latter sublimely subtle; the former a caricature that is consciously ridiculous. Yet the truth expressed by both is that the encounter between us and God, between created beings and the one who made us, while it will always exceed our ability to articulate or comprehend it, is also utterly real.

‘If God is for us then who can be against us?’, asks Paul in the letter to the Romans (8:31). The answer is *nobody except ourselves*: if God is for us, it is only we ourselves who can be the obstacle to the workings of his grace. We with our self-pity, our self-obsession, our self-reliance, all of which are aspects of the sin which clings so closely.

‘Listen to what the unjust judge says’, [says Jesus]. 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. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’

Let us pray: O God our God, your property is always to have mercy. Free us, we pray, from our caricatures of you and of one another. Grasp us in the embrace of your love and help us to know, serve and love you in one another, whom to serve is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.