

Do not lose heart: Luke 18:1-8

by [Mark Harris](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

What the widow in the Luke parable wants from the judge is vengeance or vindication. True, some have translated the original into something more polite such as “give the verdict to my side” or “give me justice.” Well, it is true the widow wanted justice done, and to her benefit. But it seems she wanted more. It was not enough that she get her due; every person should hope for that. She demanded to be heard for who and what she was, a person wronged. She did not simply want justice done, she wanted to be avenged. She was vindictive.

Christians believe that to the extent that vindication or vengeance is necessary, it is the Lord’s to provide (Deut. 32:35). We want to let that be our final word on the matter: vengeance is the Lord’s, and although not pretty, at least in reference to the Holy God it is magnificent, as befits God’s stature. Even vengeance can be made acceptable as the wrath of God working its way out to final payment.

The widow, however, is not about to let the satisfaction of vengeance be felt by God alone: she wants to feel it herself. And it is the feeling, the passion of it, that constitutes the heart of the matter in this passage. Justice is mostly a matter of what is due, what is required by law, what is right. It can be obtained without a shred of vindication, without a bit of feeling, without passion. But justice in itself does not satisfy. It is not tasty, it does not make us feel full of life. The widow knows all this and wants more. She wants vindication: to experience the feeling of righteous triumph or perhaps just plain delicious gloating.

We are told that the judge feared neither God nor the powers of others. Perhaps this made him a good judge—judging impartially and without feeling. Jesus says he was unrighteous, which is not a comment about his abilities as a jurist. Jesus means that he had or exhibited no ability to show righteous indignation or delight.

The widow wanted no part of this. She wanted partiality to her side. “Vindicate me against my adversary!” she cried. In the end the widow provoked the judge to feeling, to passion, to partiality, for she bothered him. He was moved to choose sides, and acquired something of what we call “heart.”

Does God take sides? Jesus himself asks, “Will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you he will vindicate them speedily.” If we believe, as we have good reason to, that God’s justice is preferentially directed to the poor, then they are numbered among his elect, among those who will be vindicated. This little lesson suggests that God is at least as passionate as the pestered judge. So keep praying and do not lose heart.

Yet, there is more here than drumming up a little passion for the poor in the Great Judge.

We lose heart when we believe that no one cares for us, that no one is on our side taking our needs to heart or loving us for who we are and what we have experienced. We lose heart when we feel like we are alone. What we expect from God, which we do not expect from the judge, is a passion *with* us. We expect compassion.

The unrighteous judge is driven to take the widow’s side, to be her advocate and avenge her. But there is no suggestion that he is with her in her feelings. This woman is in no way someone the judge has chosen as his own. She is a bother, and he is bothered.

God, on the other hand, vindicates those who are God’s own, God’s chosen. God chooses to be with us, and in doing that God also commits to taking our side and being by our side.

The incarnation (not the doctrine but the fact) is precisely about how the Judge became the Friend; how God took our side, stood with us and finally for us. The incarnation is about how God moved from impartiality to partiality, from distant thunderer to compassionate companion.

It turns out that life is not fair—not to the poor or the poor in spirit, to the comfortable or uncomfortable, to the rich or powerful. Everyone agrees, the world is basically unfair. Just when it gets comfortable, people do surprising things—like die—and we are left holding the empty bag. Neither the judge nor God can make this unfairness go away. Justice has nothing to do with ridding us of the unfairness of the “changes and chances of this mortal life.”

But our vindication is nearer than we supposed. All the widow had to do was pester the judge until he felt something. All we have to do is find God in Jesus Christ by our

side, no stranger now, but someone who feels for us, and with us. We ought always to pray and not lose heart, says Luke. We ought always to pray so that the judge as well obtains a heart—a heart of compassion for all of us, together and separately.

Justice alone is cold and calculating. The heart gives justice some breadth of emotional engagement, some passion. And the heart of God, whose preference is for all of us in our mortality and our various poverties, hears our cry for vindication and comes close by, speedily.