Fr Matthew Charlesworth, SJ
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29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Date: Sunday, October 16, 2016 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C
First Reading: Exodus 17:8–13
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 121:1–8 | **Response:** Psalm 121:2
Second Reading: 2 Timothy 3:14–4
Gospel Acclamation: Hebrews 4:12
Gospel Reading: Luke 18:1–8
Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

Today's readings present us with three rich images about perseverance in prayer and strength of faith. They show us three things, firstly, that we need help to pray, secondly, that we should not give up, and thirdly that God will answer our prayers if we have faith.

Last weekend we gathered here to celebrate the Sacrament of Healing. We received it to fortify ourselves with the word that the Lord will save us and raise us up. How little did we realise the fittingness of receiving that fortification in prayer and faith last week, as it prepared us to stand upright this week and not to turn away.

In the first reading we see the dispute between two peoples, between the nomadic Amalekites and the people of Israel. In fact, if you go through the Old Testament, we seldom find an Israel who is not at war at some point. What does this say to us? I think it holds a deeper meaning than just a narration of facts. I believe that Israel's covenant with God is a slowly evolving one that begins simply with wanting victory of the other, and evolves into revealing a God who is Father to us all and who is recognized through acts of love, justice and peace. In this example with the Amalekites, Israel's victory is obtained only while Moses holds out his arms outstretched to God, in a sign of prayer. We can imagine Moses being supported by Aaron and Hur while seated on a stone, high on a mountain and Joshua prevailing below and being comforted by the sight of Moses' unflagging belief in God. What I draw from the first image is that we can ask for help in our prayer, and often times it is only possible when we assist each

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other. The way we pray, and how we persevere in our prayer, can also be helpful to others who look to us for strength and encouragement, so that they might not despair or lose hope.

The second image is drawn from the second reading, where it says: “preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching”. St Francis of Assisi used to say that we should preach all the time, and only use words if we have to. This week, this Church, our parish, you and I, have witnessed an extraordinary example of preaching in Fr Graham who taught us all about non-violence, and the lengths we must go, in season and out of season, to preach God’s Word of peace and hospitality. I was not with Fr Graham when he was shot, but I know that he was shot in the pursuit of keeping this Church a safe and sacred space. The image in the second reading is one of perseverance. Whilst in the first reading we see the importance of assisting each other in prayer, in the second reading we are encouraged not to give up, or as the Gospel says that we “ought always to pray and not lose heart”. We can give thanks that Fr Graham did not lose heart when that Nyala was bearing down on him at high-speed, or while it slowly shot into the church as it drove past. Fr Graham persevered in his prayer. I hope that our perseverance might not need to be as dramatic, but each of us has a role in God’s drama that is our lives and we have to persevere in that role.

The third and final image is from the Gospel. Jesus uses a parable of a judge, who does not fear God, nor regard men or women very highly – so not exactly an example of a righteous or upstanding gentleman – and a widow, one of the most vulnerable persons in Jewish Society. The widow is seeking protection from the authorities and so this poor widow continuously pesters the Judge, who ultimately finds in her favour, not for any legal reason, but because of her faith in God and her persistence in proclaiming it. Jesus is saying that if this unjust man would support the widow in her time of need, how much more would God, who is Justice, support us in ours? And he asks where is our faith?

We know that every time we receive communion, we say “look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church”. In this past week this Church has been sustained by faith: faith that we are a sanctuary and refuge for God’s people; faith that our option for the poor and the persecuted is not misplaced; faith that non-violence is the only answer; faith that Fr Graham would survive his injuries; a faith confirmed that whereas in many places young people don’t want to come to

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Church, we have, in the past two weeks, had scores of young people break down the gates to come inside. We could not proclaim our Church to be a neutral, safe and sacred space if those of all faiths and none, did not already perceive it to be so.

We have received criticism, of course, for concretely siding with the poor. But then, when hasn't the Devil tried to infiltrate our thoughts so that we do give up, refuse help and lose hope so that our faith diminishes?

Some think that we have no business getting involved – but our very mission is to preach peace and to offer reconciliation. Isn't that the very heart of the Gospel? Every time God enters our lives the Angel says "Do not be afraid" and the first words are "Peace be with you" At last week's Penitential Service on Friday we had an excellent examination on social sin – you can see it on our website. The cause of Free Education that the students are nobly advocating is very much part of righting an injustice that is an example of a social sin. And they look to the Church, to be like Moses, the person who intercedes with God for their success.

I said to the people who came to this Church this morning, that many of them have only been able to listen to things as they unfolded in the media, and especially on social media. And I told them that as wrong as the rogue students have been in throwing stones, there has also been stone-throwing on social media that has confused, exaggerated, and yes – even lied – about what has gone on.

But I know that most of you gathered here this evening have been up close and personal witnesses to the trauma of the last week. My heart goes out to you all. I have heard stories of students studying in residence rooms when their windows were shattered by rubber bullets; how students going to class have been mistaken as trouble-makers and had to endure the indignity of being searched. How you cannot gather in groups of five without risking being apprehended. I know that many of you are worried about what will happen. Whether the year will be sacrificed; whether Government will ever respond to your demands; the discernment of choosing between a greater good you believe in and your own personal well-being; having to cope with family who do not understand your struggle; friends who are indifferent to it; and a media who are increasingly disparaging of it. But, my friends, comrades, brothers and sisters, you are keeping your faith strong in this great struggle. The students of 2015 and 2016 have awakened the

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country to an injustice that is long overdue to be undone. For that we thank you. And we beg you now, allow the rest of society to continue the struggle on your behalf as you return to classes so that you do not lose what you have gained. It will not result in a loss of momentum – because when you graduate you can continue the struggle as graduates, in the workplace – ensuring that the mechanisms you propose to fund Higher Education honour their commitment. The struggle, in the long-run, cannot be helped by sacrificing your academic year.

I would like to share with you all some examples I've seen this week that have strengthened my faith. But before I do, we must ask is the student's cause perfect? No, of course it is not. As I said to reporters, there is indeed a rogue element, probably a criminal one too – but my faith has been increased this week because I have seen so much more than just the rogue element – which is truly, as you can attest yourselves, a minority in all of this. In this church I have seen the best of humanity show itself.

The first example of how my faith has been strengthened has been witnessing to how many people have come forward to be peacemakers. We've had the mediation team meet in our Church hall for hours – till 1 or 3 am at times – taking time out of their jobs and busy lives to try and stand between what to anyone else seems irreconcilable differences between people and in so doing they valiantly attempt to rebuild trust, encourage dialogue and work towards peace – their commitment only makes sense if you can believe that reconciliation is possible and worthwhile.

I've been particularly impressed with the solidarity among the students here who have, from various different races, cultures and backgrounds, contributed their time treasure and talent. Whether it is in the work of accounting and finance students who are sincerely trying to propose a solution that actually can work to provide cheaper, if not 'free', education by next year; or in the psychology students who have come to the church to offer trauma counselling to students and staff who have been traumatized at being caught in a cross-fire; or in the medical students who have literally spent entire nights tending to the wounded, carrying the injured and seeing to the weak or to those with asthma who inhaled chemicals from fire-extinguishers. My faith has been strengthened when I saw Fr Graham forgive the police General after he apologized unreservedly; my faith has been strengthened when I talked with the police who agonized about being caught in the middle, having to follow orders, but also being parents of children

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at university – and yes – even at Wits University. My faith has been strengthened when, after Fr Graham was shot, two Jesuits whom I lived with – one of whom had just started his holiday after a very grueling and difficult assignment – rushed forward to volunteer to stand-in for Fr Graham at the parish. I have been impressed with the support of various Muslim students who have rallied to deliver food and medical supplies; the number of staff who have phoned to express support and gratitude; the number of students who have time and time again explained that they want to return to class, that they want a negotiated solution, that they want the Fees to fall, that this violence is not being done in their name.

In all of this, we have not set out to organize or plan anything. There have been many times when we have seen on social media that xyz is about to happen at Holy Trinity. We are really just host to many people's good intentions to help and to be generous in the face of a great and growing need. We've tried to do our best to do this whilst insisting that we keep Holy Trinity a safe and sacred space.

Jesus told his disciples "Blessed are the peace-makers". When our arms get tired from being outstretched we can recall Moses being supported by Aaron and Hur, or we can recall Christ who had his hands nailed to a cross. We recall these images so that we know we are not the first to be in this position. But we cannot give up. Violence and intimidation, as I said last week, can never be a solution. But giving up and turning people away is surely not a solution either. May what we pray for always be for the vindication of the widow, and those who are weak and vulnerable in our society; may our prayer concretely show our concern for the poor.

Let us remember to ask for help when we need it, especially help to pray. On that point, we thank the Bishop for coming tonight. For showing us that it is not just ourselves at Holy Trinity that are concerned about your struggle, but that this is something shared by the whole Church. Indeed, I can tell you that Fr Graham has had the nuncio phone him four times trying to speak with him – such is the concern of the Pope's Ambassador to South Africa about what has happened here this last week. Even our own Jesuit brothers in Rome, who on Friday elected a new Jesuit Superior General from Venezuela, have prayed for us at the Jesuit General Congregation. We are feeling the effects of their prayer, and I ask you to join yours with theirs so that the entire Court of Heaven might intercede on your behalf.

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Let us ask God for the courage not to give up in our prayer. And finally let us beg God to give us a faith so that we can remain confident that God will answer our prayers, and bring peace in our days, and justice in our time.

Amen.

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