

## **Ss. Bartholomew and Guthlac**

**23 August 2020**

**Readings: Genesis 32: 22-32, Psalm 121, Hebrews 3: 5-6, Luke 18: 1-8**

Today we are celebrating two more of our church's patrons, Bartholomew and Guthlac, having celebrated our other patron, the Blessed Virgin Mary, last Sunday. Although we don't really know anything about Jesus' disciple, Bartholomew, apart from various legends, we do know a bit about Guthlac. Above all, we know how Guthlac felt called to live a life of prayer, a call that eventually brought him to what was then a lonely island in the Fens, the place we know today as Crowland. When I think about Bartholomew or Guthlac or any outstanding person of faith I think of how they must be people rooted in prayer.

Prayer can take many forms. But how often, if ever, do we think of prayer as a sort of wrestling with God? In our first lesson today we see Jacob wrestling all night with a man who turns out to be God. When the man says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking," Jacob replies, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." What an amazing thing to say to God! God in the form of this wrestling man later says these amazing words to Jacob: "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." The name, Israel, means 'the one who strives with God.' When we communicate with God, it is not by literally wrestling with him all night as Jacob did. We communicate with God by praying. But can we not see our prayer as sometimes taking the form of wrestling?

Consider today's gospel, the story Jesus told of the poor widow and the corrupt and unjust judge. The widow had no way of getting the judge to give her justice apart from persistently nagging him. When the judge eventually gives the woman a just decision he does so simply to get rid of her, Jesus in so many words tell us that God, who is a perfect judge, will give us justice if we but persist in asking him for it. I take justice here to mean not simply a decree that sees that a just law is upheld, but the righting of all wrongs, whatever they may be. In other words, God's justice has to do with God's promise of the coming of his kingdom, a kingdom where perfect justice and peace will reign.

The problem with us humans is that that kingdom has yet to come. Whenever we consider our sorrows, the sorrows of our friends, family, or neighbours, or the sorrows of the world, we can easily begin to wonder where God is. And we can begin to shake a fist heavenwards, saying 'Why, Lord?' or 'When, Lord?' When we do this I see it as our wrestling with God.

Of course, we get impatient, especially if we have striven long and hard for something we know is right and just, only to see it fail. And when I speak of

striving, I am thinking not only of our striving to accomplish something in the world, but also of our prayerful striving. Sometimes we can feel as if the door of God, on which we are knocking, will never open.

When this happens we need to remember Jesus. Think of how he sweated blood while praying in the garden of Gethsemane the night before his execution. If that was not wrestling with God, I don't know what is. It's ok to feel frustrated with God. It's ok, in other words, to sweat blood in your prayer life. In fact, it just may be that we never know the profound depths of prayer if we have not done a lot of wrestling with God.

The key thing in this wrestling is not giving up, just as Jacob did not give up or just as the widow did not leave off nagging the judge. This is because genuine healing, reconciliation, and new life can only come about through God. For all those who have died as a result of oppression and cruelty, no one apart from God can give them justice. For all who strove for justice but were unsuccessful in this life, who apart from God can make it right for them? Who, in short, apart from God can bring life and justice and peace out of death?

So persist in your conversation with God, however tempestuous it may be. Persist, because we know that only God can bring about the ultimate reign of justice and only God can give us the strength we need to persist in helping him to bring his kingdom in. Yes, we may emerge from our conversation with a limp, but ultimately what we get is the blessing that comes from not giving up on God, from persisting in our walking and talking with him.

Charles Brown