

Pray always without becoming weary (Luke 18:1)

In the tribal culture of today's first reading, vengeance was the norm for dealing with "injustices" committed by one tribe against another. A "Holy War" was declared and the offending tribe was offered as a holocaust to the gods. So what edification can we derive from such a violent text? At best maybe we can detect a *contrast* between the behavior of the Israelites in today's first reading and that of the persistent woman in the Gospel? *In the first* it's a blowout: *Joshua mowed down Amalek and his people* with the help of God! *In the Gospel* a widow who has been ignored by an unjust society gets even *not by any violence* but by *demanding* justice, depriving society of its sleep until she is treated with respect. Much more humane.

On September 13th, 2001 Jane and I took off for Italy as planned - two days after September 11th. I was of two minds after those events: to cancel our trip or to go anyway. I chose to go, if only to erase the images of that fateful day. But after a flight from San Francisco to a sojourn in that jewel of a city, Spoleto, the horrid images remained. It was as if I had tried to outrun those clouds of dust that cascaded down Manhattan's streets only to have them engulf me after all. I had thought that the ancient facade of Spoleto's cathedral with its blue and gold mosaic of Christ, Mary and St. John or its interior frescoes by Filippo Lippi or the civilized panorama of a medieval city with its narrow streets and crowning citadel would be powerful enough to purge my memory of the evil I had beheld and restore my faith in humanity.

But they were of no avail. I would stand there in the piazza, sip coffee from a terrace whence I could take in the beauty of the Ponte delle Torri, a fourteenth century arched bridge spanning a gorge two hundred and forty feet deep and ask myself: "What relevance do any of these frescoes and facades, these charming towns have in the wake of so violent an event?" September 11th's manifestation of human hatred, intensified by a righteousness bereft of any compassion, turned everything beautiful to ashes.

And then I realized: I was letting the toxicity of that event make of me one more casualty. And it was fright over such a consequence that awoke me to the fact that faith is a feeble thing if all it amounts to is a passive inheritance, a habit, a mere reflex; that faith must be a *willful* thing possessed of the defiance exhibited by the woman in today's parable. True faith is no mere "maybe" to be easily shaken by contradiction. True faith amounts to an invincible Yes to life rendered only the more vigorous by any subtle or outrageous coercion to despair.

And so I resolved to nip in the bud my least tendency to sneer, to criticize other people, to damn inconvenience, to doubt my own worth, to ridicule the politically "incorrect" - in a word, to purge my own heart of those sour, resentful, negative tendencies that throughout humanity's history have been the seed bed out of which holocausts explode. On the other hand, I resolved to cherish every apple I see (bruised or not), every park and tree. every check-out person or banker I meet, every Cal Trans worker sweating over the asphalt, every human artifact (be it a billboard or a cathedral or a cheap vase tucked in the corner of a second-hand store window), - in other words, anything that testifies to humanity's capacity - however modestly - to create rather than destroy a world

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