

Seventeenth Sunday of the Year July 24, 2016

Genesis 18:20-32; Colossians 2:12-24; Luke 11:1-13

The readings of today remind us of the necessity to persevere in our prayer life. Our prayer life is a reflection of our true faith in God. Prayer is understood as a form of communication, a way of talking to God, raising our hearts and minds to God. In our prayer we strengthen that recognition of the presence of God, which draws us closer to Him. If we truly have come to know God in faith, then this spiritual encounter has created a growing bond between the Father, Jesus and us as individuals. In the first reading we have Abraham bargaining with God, trusting in his personal relationship to save Sodom if he can only find ten righteous people. In the Second reading we have St Paul reminding us of the need to persevere in our living faith in Christ. The Gospel invites us to encounter God in prayer, to experience his generous love, forgiveness and compassion. Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer and teaches us pray for the kingdom, our daily needs for life, forgiveness and perseverance. In the kingdom of God all are welcomed and there is the familiarity and freedom. Each person can individually experience love, safety and forgiveness from God. Our hearts and hands reach out in healing and service of the community. It is a place of peace, safety and abundance and there is the freedom to ask, plead and receive what is best for us for our life and for existence. Our faith also tells us that God gives to each one what is the best.

In our first reading of today Abraham is pleading for divine mercy as he was concerned that God would destroy Sodom where his nephew Lot was staying. God so highly regards the Patriarch that he decides to disclose to him the mission to Sodom and Gomorrah. God tells him of the wickedness of these two towns. His trust in God is not yet so strong that he can imagine God sparing the innocent within the city. It seems God is forbearing and is not yet prepared to pronounce judgment. Through his discussion with God he wins a reprieve for the city if just fifty innocent righteous souls were found within the city. Then as if bartering with a business partner he obtains God's unconditional promise that he would not destroy the city on behalf of a lesser number of righteous persons, even ten. Abraham was apparently confident that there would be at least ten innocent people within the city. In fact there was only Lot and his small family. Unfortunately, as history tells us, ten righteous persons could not be found and the city was destroyed by God. If God were to apply strictly the terms of Abraham's plea, those few innocents could be swept away with the guilty. But God's mercy proves to be far greater than Abraham ever imagined.

Today's Second Reading from the Letter to the Colossians reminds the converted Christians of the need to persevere in their living faith in Christ. It reminds them to live their lives in Jesus, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as we were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. Faith and Baptism unite us with Christ's burial and resurrection. Already here on earth they are sure to enjoy something of the risen life. When they were buried with Christ in baptism, they were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised Christ from the dead. This is because in Jesus dwells the fullness of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Through Jesus, they would come to know each and every Divine Person of the Holy Trinity. Paul tells his converts that the actions they went through in baptism were not empty symbols but actual facts. Through baptism they had put their natural selves to death. Paul invited

them to understand the basic truths that most of them have learned in order to build up their faith in the sound teachings that have been handed down to the Holy Church. Here Paul uses the image of a bond being nailed to the cross of Christ. The point is that by freely accepting the death on the cross Christ freed everyone from all the transgressions and from all the empty and futile religious practices.

The Gospel passage of today could well be described as Luke's catechism on Prayer. The disciples had often seen Jesus praying alone and sometimes spend long time in prayer. They were anxious to learn some prayers from him, as John the Baptist had evidently taught his disciples some special prayers. As Jews the disciples knew the ordinary morning and evening prayers. Prayers before eating were usually said by the Jewish people and the disciples would have known those prayers well. The motive for the teaching is a request by the disciples for some kind of prayer that would identify them as followers of Jesus. It was the custom for a Jewish Rabbi or teacher to teach his followers a simple prayer they could regularly use. They now make a request of their rabbi to teach them to pray. They use as an argument that John the Baptist had done the same for his disciples that gave them a special identity. In response to this request Jesus gives them the prayer what we call today as Our Father. Further, he does more than they ask, for he teaches them what to pray for, how to pray and what could be their expectations from their prayer.

Jesus teaches them to pray a series of petitions addressed to God under the title, "Abba." This title is important in that it expresses deep intimacy and a close parental bond. It captures the relationship Jesus had with his Father, which he now hands over to the disciples as part of their self understanding when they pray. It might be worth noting that Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray and not a prayer to say. In response Jesus says to them: "Say this when you pray..." and there follows what we know as the "Lord's Prayer". The version in today's Gospel passage is from Luke is shorter version than the version we have in Matthew. As such it may indeed be the earlier original version and closer to what Jesus actually said. In any case the contents of the petitions are not extra ordinary. They were used in the Jewish prayer and found in the teachings of rabbis. What is extra ordinary is the tense of the verbs. In the rabbinic terms it was always a future, a hope of the end times. In the version of Jesus the tense of the verbs is present imperative indicating a command or a demand. It is asking God to give us now what we remotely expect at the end times.

Jesus begins the prayer by calling God, Abba Father a most endearing term used in a close parental bond. In our prayer we recognize the awesome holiness of God who wants to share his very life with us. His holiness in no way depends on us. What we are rather asking for is that God's holiness be acknowledged by us not only by our words but by the way we live. The Kingdom of God that Jesus came to proclaim is understood as a world in which everything that God stands for becomes a reality in the lives of people everywhere - a world that is built on truth, love, compassion, justice, freedom, human dignity, peace. So in saying this invocation we are not only calling on God's help but reminding ourselves of our responsibility to work with God to make the Kingdom a reality. In the second half of the prayer we pray more directly for our own needs. And we begin with present needs. We ask God for today's bread, food, and today's material needs. Our trust in the divine providence must show that there is no need for worry and anxiety about the future. It also reminds us of the Eucharistic table. Further we pray for our past

sinful actions but our prayer is conditional, linking us once again to all those around us. We pray that God will forgive us all that we have done wrong, because we already have forgiven all those who we feel have done wrong to us. It is imperative that we forgive others and we trust in the forgiving gift of God. Finally, we pray for protection from future trials that might overwhelm us. Trials are the situations or hardships or difficulties, where we may fail and betray our following of Jesus.

Jesus, however, does not stop with teaching his disciples how to pray. His catechesis on prayer ends with some what a humorous story meant to emphasize the necessity for perseverance in prayer. He tells a parable about a man wanting some bread in the middle of the night. This parable was indeed true to life. It could happen anywhere, any night. A friend had come travelling a long distance late at night. There was no bread in the house and fresh bread would be baked only in the morning. So he goes to his neighbor with a request for bread. Naturally, his neighbour is reluctant to get up and give him some. The man outside was not going to be put off by one single refusal. He kept on knocking until the neighbor had to get up and do what he was asked. He did not want his family members be disturbed of their sleep. The man does not get what he wants based on mutual friendship but gets it because he is persistent in his request. This indeed may sound crude behavior but indicates the correct mode of prayer that we must be persistent and persevering in our prayer. Jesus tells his disciples to persevere in their prayers as the man requested bread from his friend.

Our prayer must be bold, for prayer is neither about trivial matters nor about a reminder to God but a close bond of relationship of a parent and child. The message is clear enough. When we really want something from God, we must keep asking. "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For the one who asks always receives ... who searches always find ... who knocks will have the door opened." Second, he reminds them that they are dealing with a loving and compassionate Father. Even human fathers will not give stones when their children asked for bread or scorpions when they asked for eggs. Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount adds another item that they will provide serpent in place of fish. "How much more", then, can we expect from the Father of all who is generous? In Palestine the river side stones resembled baked bread. A poisonous scorpion when remained coiled up looked like an egg. The Jews considered the eel fish which resembled a snake. These were not edible items and certainly not the food for children. Every father in the audience who wanted to show his generosity to their children would easily accept the dictum of Jesus.

Jesus concluded His teaching by using three expressions to stress the need for perseverance in prayer saying that they must ask, search and knock. It does not mean God is slow in helping us but he wants to prove our sincerity and filial trust in him. It should be noted here that the reference to asking, searching and knocking is a reference to requesting the Holy Spirit. For he says, "How much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him." The asking, searching and knocking is in reference to Divine knowledge, understanding and wisdom. It is a reference to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is a reference to the fruit of the Holy Spirit. All of these are needed for the sanctification of the soul during its perseverance in the living faith. God loves us and wants to share with us the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life who is a gift of the Father and the Son. The Spirit is the one who lives with us and guides us but is given to us by Jesus himself.

The prayer of Jesus was always marked by simplicity and directness. Again and again he raised his eyes to heaven and cried, Father, whether in the joy of raising Lazarus to life, or in the anguish of his bitter agony. He was aware of the power of his prayer and he knew that his Father was answering him. He was confident in his trust of the Father and said during his Passion that if only he asks his Father he would send twelve legions of angels to defend him. However his prayer was always to carry out the will of his Father even when things were difficult. Finally on the cross with his prayer on his lips, Jesus said, Father into your hands I commend my spirit. No matter what, he had full trust in his Father. Jesus gives us some basic principles on Prayer: BE ALONE, BE BRIEF, BE CENTRED. To be alone, he chose quiet lonely places for his prayer. He tells the disciples to close the door and pray in the inner chamber. Being alone with God will make us feel closer to him. While telling us to be brief he does not say shorter time of prayer. Rather prayer should be less talk and more listening.

Today we have from Jesus a formula for all prayers, namely the gift of the Our Father. This prayer contains the teaching of Jesus in its totality. God is addressed as our father. He really is since he made his son our brother. We praise and honour him and wish that all will honour him. Here we ask for things we can rightly desire but in the sequence in which they can be desired. We ask for our daily temporal needs and especially for our spiritual needs. We ask forgiveness for all our offences while we likewise promise to forgive our brothers if they offend us. Jesus did not intend to give just one prayer but also a model of prayer. While this prayer is important for us it also is a guideline for us as to keep our constant relationship with God. He wants us to recall to mind the essential elements we need in our prayer and spiritual life: adoration, contrition and thanksgiving. Above all or prayer has to be the summary of our faith and love in God.

A member of a monastic order once committed a fault. A council was called to determine the punishment, but when the monks assembled it was noticed that Father Joseph was not among them. The superior sent someone to say to him, "Come, for everyone is waiting for you." So Father Joseph got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water, and carried it with him. When the others saw this they asked, "What is this, father?" The old man said to them, "My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the error of another?"

Bill was a notorious and troublesome boy in the class. The Teacher was always finding it hard to control him and it was disturbing the whole class. She was sad. One day as the boy entered the class he found the teacher writing something in shorthand and the boy asked her out of curiosity, what she was writing. She told him quietly that it was a prayer. The boy asked her whether God knows short hand and she said God knows everything and reads every heart. As she looked at the board the boy took the letter and hid it in his book. After several years when Bill was a successful man when he looked through his past materials found this note and out of curiosity took it to the office to translate. The clerk told him that the note said: Dear God I am finding difficult to control Bill and he disturbs me. Please touch his heart. He is capable and he can be very good or very evil. Bill had tears in his eyes. He knew the prayers of his teacher were heard.

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