**17th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C**

**24th July 2022**

**Genesis 18:20-32**

Ancient people generally regarded deities as having good and bad traits like human beings. Judaism was somewhat exceptional, with Yahweh having a moral character with high principles. This week we have another reading from the Abraham cycle. Its context is clear: God is about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of the inhabitants’ immorality. The traditional source from which this story comes uses the occasion as an opportunity to reflect on the problem of divine justice, and does so in the form of a dialogue between Abraham and Yahweh.

Abraham voices the popular conviction that Yahweh is a God of justice. He would not destroy Sodom if it also meant the destruction of a few righteous persons along with the guilty majority. Pleading his case by a kind of Dutch auction, Abraham arrives at the point where he asks Yahweh if ten righteous persons would be enough to save the city and is assured that it would. The dialogue is then broken off, but the city is not spared. So in the Genesis narrative the dialogue throws the wickedness of Sodom into even sharper relief—there were not even ten righteous persons there.

Abraham’s role highlights an important aspect of Biblical prayer. It was taken for granted that God had endowed some of his servants with a special grace of efficacious intercession. It originated the long Jewish tradition of bargaining with God. (Exodus 32:30-32 & Deuteronomy 9:18-19).

Abraham displays a refreshing outspokenness. Look at his plea, here, for the people of Sodom. We catch the flavour of a bargaining bout in an oriental bazaar with prices being ruthlessly slashed. Abraham's clever opening gambit is designed to put Yahweh on the defensive. Yahweh is surely not going to wipe out the righteous! 'Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked’ Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?' (vv. 24-25).

That the author could, in such an uninhibited manner, present such a lively dialogue between a human and God, reveals a unique understanding of God. He is transcendent but not remote, and surely not a fearsome God.

**Responsorial Psalm: 138:1-3, 6-8**

As the reference to the temple in verse 1 suggests, Psalm 138 is a liturgical psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance. It forms a suitable response to the reading from Genesis, in which God is depicted as a God of mercy as well as of justice.

**Reading II: Colossians 2:12-14**

Baptism is the Greek for ‘drowning’ or ‘immersion’ When a candidate was baptised, he died and in the same moment was born into the Body of Christ. Those who had been dead because they were sinners 'die' to their sins because they go through the experience of dying with Christ. They renounce sin and can have nothing more to do with it (see Rom 6:2).

Baptism identifies the baptized with Christ's resurrection so that in the same moment the candidate begins to live a new life. But we must guard against a superstitious understanding of baptism which imagines that its receipt ensures salvation. It is only the beginning of this new life. It must be nurtured through a life-long struggle against all that threatens it. And equally, the lack of Baptism does not mean that spiritual life cannot begin.

Crucifixion details and methods varied with the whims of the soldiers present. But, it was customary to nail the record of the crimes being punished to the upright. In the last sentence of the reading, Paul says that the record lists humanities debts.

Our forgiveness through his sacrifice is logically difficult yet it has been at the heart of Paul’s theology since the beginning. All Christian experience throughout the ages has persisted in following Paul, even if the various theories of the atonement are intellectually unsatisfying.

**Gospel: Luke 11:1-13**

What we call ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ occurs in two different forms in the Gospels attributed to Matthew and Luke. Both Gospels were published around 30 years after Jesus’ time on earth and so the prayer would have already been familiar through use in the weekly Eucharist.

In many manuscripts of Luke's Gospel the Lord's Prayer has been amplified to make it conform to Matthew's longer version, but there is no doubt that the shorter form is what Luke wrote. Luke has also provided a wholly credible setting for the Lord's Prayer (v.1).

It is not only that the disciples were, understandably, impressed by the demeanour of Jesus in prayer to the Father. They had also come to see themselves as a group apart, a group, in their own eyes, as distinctive as that of the followers of the Baptist. It was time for them to have their very own prayer. And that prayer will remain, for all time, the characteristic prayer of the disciples of Jesus.

At some points Matthew’s is the more original and at some points it is Luke’s. The clauses in Matthew which have no parallels in Luke can be regarded as additions acquired through repetition in the Eucharists. On the other hand, in the petitions for bread and forgiveness, Matthew's precise and particular form is more likely to be original than the generalized form of Luke. Matthew has altered by addition, Luke by modification.

The actual words of Jesus may tentatively be reconstructed as follows:

Father, may your name be kept holy.

May your kingdom dawn.

Give us for to-day sufficient bread,

and forgive us our debts,

as we have also forgiven our debtors.

And let us not be tempted more than we can stand.

From the very earliest days, this prayer has been repeated parrot fashion because Christians thought that is what the Lord had said. But he did not intend it to be a repetitive expression. It was an example to be mimicked in one’s own words.

Christians today are also free to modify, revise, and restate the Lord's Prayer without fault. Yet liturgical commissions know how strongly people can feel and react to any tampering with time-hallowed phrases. It is ironic that the only example in the Missal which retains formal language is the Lord’s Prayer in the Eucharist.

These days, we commonly regard prayer as a personal mystical experience but in the first century, it was more of a working with God in carrying out his purposes in the world and a communal activity at that.

Luke follows the Lord’s Prayer with teaching on prayer. He records a parable that is commonly misunderstood by his readers, past and present, and even by Luke himself. Before another parable with the same teaching point as this one, Luke says, “….. he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18;1)

This is exactly the opposite lesson of both the stories. The point of persistence in appealing to the friend at midnight it that even that will work, so with God, persistence is unnecessary. He is more than ready to act and even before we ask.

This point is important because it demonstrates an original and distinctive source in the teaching of Jesus, which was sometimes misunderstood even by his closest contacts.