

This Sunday's Readings – the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time – The theme of today's readings is prayer, more specifically, persistence in prayer and our relationship with God.

The first reading is from the Book of Genesis, the first book of the bible. In this familiar account, Yahweh comes down to earth to investigate the alleged wickedness of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, with the intent of destroying them. What was the sin of these two cities? According to the Yahwist tradition, the sin was homosexuality or sodomy (hence the name of the city Sodom); according to Isaiah, lack of social justice; according to Ezekiel, disregard for the poor; and according to Jeremiah, general immorality. Abraham on the other hand confronts Yahweh with the question – will you destroy the innocent along with the wicked. In the end Yahweh concedes that if there are 10 innocent people, He will not destroy the cities. Ultimately Yahweh destroys Sodom and Gomorrah because there were not 10 innocent people to be found. It might seem to us that Abraham is an irritant and a pest in how he “wears down” Yahweh. That is not the case at all. Abraham uses a traditional Middle Eastern technique called bartering, which is a bit alien to our Western mode of reasoning. Because Abraham was persistent, Yahweh granted him his request. In this passage, Yahweh is shown to be merciful, compassionate, and understanding of human weakness.

That same message is carried forward into today's Gospel reading from Luke and comes directly after last week's story of the Good Samaritan. This Gospel reading is divided into three parts – first, Jesus teaches the disciples the ultimate communal prayer, the Lord's Prayer; second, He teaches them how important it is to be persistent in prayer; third, He teaches them how effective prayer can be. Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is somewhat different than that of the other Gospel writers. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* explains another of the differences – “The Lucan text of the Lord's Prayer in the RSV is shorter than the Matthean version, consisting of only five petitions, compared to Matthew's seven. The RSV follows the earlier Greek texts. The later text was assimilated to the Matthean form, which became traditional in the liturgy. The additional petitions of Matthew (“Thy will be done” and “But deliver us from evil”) are probably liturgical expansions, each of the extra clauses being elucidations of the petition immediately preceding it. The simple address “Father” (Abba) was characteristic of Jesus. “Our Father in heaven” (Matthew) is again a formalized liturgical expansion”. Also in Luke's version there is a sense of immediacy that is lacking in the other accounts. The power of prayer can be summed up in one of the most powerful verses in the Gospel – “ask and you will receive, seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you”. By being persistent like Abraham, we enter into a deeper relationship with our Father. God is our Father and we are His children. A father always lovingly cares for and protects his children. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2007 syndicated column adds this comment on today's Gospel reading – “Luke's Jesus presumes our relationship with God, and God's relationship with us must be before our eyes whenever we pray. Though experts agree this version of the "Lord's Prayer" is older and more original than the Matthean version we normally use, even here the petitions are surrounded by Jesus' assurance that God isn't playing a game of "Red Rover" with us. We don't have to say the proper words to get what we want. If human

parents and friends can be moved to action because of their relationship with us, so can God. But notice what God gives: the Holy Spirit. We can never forget that the Holy Spirit is the force in our lives which tells us what to ask God for in the first place”.

Mediterranean prayer and American prayer are different. John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* explains why – “In general, prayer is a form of communication with someone who is considered to be in charge of life. For most believers, God is in charge of life and everything. Americans, who take pride in their scientific abilities and achievements, have gradually reduced the areas of life of which God is in charge. Only in extreme cases do Americans (turn) to God regarding needs in the economy, health, space conquest, and so on. This is one reason why American believers sometimes find it difficult to pray. In the Mediterranean world of our ancestors in the Faith, peasants—constituting about 90 percent of the population—realized only too well that they were not in charge of anything. Nature determined their weather and climate. The landowners determined what they might plant and how much they might keep. Rome determined the taxes they should pay—in crops, not in cash! What could a peasant do? Above all, the peasant could pray, that is, communicate with anyone—including God—who was controlling one or another part of life and hope to obtain benefits from that person. In other words, prayer is a form of communication intended to influence the decision of a patron, someone who looks upon and treats a client, the one praying, as *if* that one were a family member. This is what the disciples ask Jesus to share with them. “Teach us how you communicate with and have an influence upon God.” Jesus encourages the disciples to address God as “Father,” just as he does (see 10:21; 22:42). In other words, Jesus says: “Consider God as a Father, as one who is as near as and behaves just like a father toward his children.” In the Middle East this kind of relationship is called “patronage” and someone who behaves like a father to people who are not his children is a “patron.” The patron can get things for clients that the client could not obtain by personal ability, or on better terms than the client could manage by personal ability. This is the appropriate context for interpreting the five petitions of Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer.

Praise of the Father/patron. The first two petitions praise God as children would praise a father. These first two petitions concern things no human could achieve but that God can easily achieve with divine power. “To hallow one’s name” is to “be in truth who you really are”: Father, patron, truly in charge of life. “Your kingdom come” urges God to achieve and establish kingly dominion once-and-for-always, definitively, over all of life.

Three human needs. The plurals in these petitions give the prayer a communal rather than an individual dimension. This accords with the Mediterranean cultural preference for groups over individuals. Having praised God, the community can now ask for daily sustenance, forgiveness of sins, and preservation from temptation to apostasy. Jesus encourages petitioners to present these petitions with confidence that they will be granted. Whence this confidence?”

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