

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Luke 11:1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

REFLECTION 1:

JESUS ON PRAYER

Sodom and Gomorrah were two cities of the ancient world whose reputations for evil have not only survived but also have grown more sordid at the passing of centuries. Infamous for certain sexual aberrations and inhospitality, Sodom and Gomorrah have become synonymous with evil and depravity of every kind. Although a precise location for these cities has not been discovered, archaeological researchers believe that the ruins lie beneath the southern end of the Dead Sea.

Today's first reading (Genesis 18: 20-36) makes it clear that Abraham is conversing with the Lord himself in a very personal way. God and Abraham sound like people at a market bartering back and forth until a satisfactory deal has been struck, none of that awesome distance between God and humanity. In reference to today's Gospel on prayer (Luke 11: 1-13) Abraham embodied and exemplified all the qualities Luke called for in his community – an intimate relationship with God – he has Jesus counsel, 'When you pray, say Abba, Papa, Daddy, Father'. Also to persevere in our prayer – just as Abraham did not relent but kept bartering, so the Christian believers were instructed to persist in asking, seeking and knocking. They were also to be daring, even in the seemingly hapless case of Sodom; Abraham had hope and proceeded with confidence to bring his needs to God.

Besides the Lord's Prayer, Luke has included in today's Gospel other selected passages on prayer and has drawn them all together in a dramatic setting of Jesus himself at prayer. While it is obvious in the other Gospels that Jesus was a man of prayer, only Luke puts stress on this fact. He even records seven occasions when Jesus was observed at prayer – after Jesus had been baptized, before he chose the Twelve, before Peter's confession of faith, the prediction of the Passion, at his Transfiguration, before teaching his own to pray, at the Last Supper, during the agonizing night in the garden and on the cross. Jesus taught the necessity of prayer in every aspect of our lives. A sign of dependence and trust in God, it was also a mark of true faith and genuine hope. In the spirit of the Our Father, we are to

pray that God's reign might take hold of the space in which we live – our need for daily sustenance, daily bread, a forgiveness that is unconditional, victory over temptation, the gift of the Spirit and the ultimate victory of God. The Our Father reminds us that the victorious power of God's Holy Spirit is already at work among us and that this power is enough to sustain us until the Second Advent.

Peculiar to Luke is the parable of the 'friend at midnight'. No one would refuse a friend no matter how pressing the request. Jesus would say that if a friend would answer another's need because of the obligation of hospitality and the friend's persistence – how much more will our loving Father answer our prayers! Our heavenly Father is the very source of life and goodness for all who have become his children in Jesus. Prayer, Luke would say, is the essential and first vocation of every believer.

REFLECTION 2:

TEACH ME TO PRAY

TS Eliot once wrote, 'Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go'. Today's first reading and gospel are about persistence and about God's invitation to keep on asking for his help. We are called to prayer, Luke says, 'for everyone who seeks, finds, and to the one who knows, the door will be opened'.

It was the regular custom of a Rabbi to teach his disciples a simple prayer they might habitually use. John had already done that for his disciples and now Jesus' disciples come along asking him to do the same for them. This is Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer (Lc. 11: 1-13). It is shorter than Matthew's, but it will teach us all we need to know about how to pray and what to pray for. Victor Hugo once said that 'certain thoughts are prayers and there have been certain moments when, whatever the attitude of the body, the soul is on its knees'.

Prayer begins, says Jesus, by calling God Father - Abba, Abba signalled that special relationship Jesus enjoyed with his Father. We are not coming to someone out of whom gifts have to be unwillingly extracted, but to a Father who delights to supply his children's needs. Before anything is asked for ourselves, God and his glory and the reverence due to him, comes first. Only when we give God his due, will other things fall into place. Prayer covers all life, it covers present needs, it tells us to pray for our daily bread. However, it is bread for this actual day we pray. Like the manna in the desert, only enough for the needs of the day might be gathered. We are not to worry about the unknown future, but to live a day at a time. As Cardinal Newman wrote in his much-loved hymn 'Lead kindly light, I do not ask to see the distance scene, one step alone for me'.

Prayer covers past sins, we pray for forgiveness, for even the best of us is a sinner coming before the purity of God. Prayer covers future trials. Temptation means any testing situation - it includes more than the mere seduction to sin, what may be alluring, enticing, provocative. It covers every situation which is a challenge to, and a test of, a person's humanity and integrity. The power of prayer is limited only by our failure to persevere with confidence in the graciousness of God. We learn that in prayer we don't bend God to our will, rather we are shaped by the will of him who is the source of every perfect gift.

As the opening prayer in today's liturgy pleads 'O God bestow in abundance your mercy upon us and grant that with you as our ruler and guide, we may use the good things that pass, in such a way as to hold fast even now to those that ever endure'.