

Ask and it will be given to you

17th Sunday of the Year – Cycle C – 28 July 2019

Readings: Ex 18:20-32; Col 2:12-14; Lk 11: 1-13

Jesus said: “*Ask, and it will be given to you*” (Lk)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The focus of today’s first and third readings is quite obviously the power of prayer—more specifically, *intercessory prayer*. This passage is a continuation of last Sunday’s passage where God continues speaking to Abraham, informing him about the “very grave sin” of the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah which, situated at the southern end of the Dead Sea, had become an abomination in God’s sight on account of the unnatural sexual aberrations of the inhabitants there. God’s statement, “I must go down and see ...” is evidently an example of anthropomorphism since God—being omnipresent and omniscient—need not “go down” and “see”. Nonetheless, the focus of this reading is the pleader, the one who intercedes on behalf of his people: Abraham! Let’s not forget that in the Bible he is described as “our father in faith” (Rom 4:11). Thus, “Abraham remained standing before the Lord” in prayer. Abraham shows us what intercessory prayer is; namely, dialoguing face-to-face with God. For fruitful dialogue, each party must *know* the other. Undoubtedly, God knows Abraham; and, Abraham seems to know the heart of God. He echoes the conviction that “Yahweh is just” and would not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if it meant destroying the righteous with the guilty. Thus, like a child begging for favours from its parents or like a Dutch auctioneer lowering the prices of items to be auctioned, Abraham comes down from 50 to 45, to 30, and finally to just 10. Sadly, not even 10 righteous persons were found there. Two points call for attention: (a) Abraham’s faith in and familiarity with God are exemplary, (b) He prays *not* for himself, but for his people.
2. “Lord, teach us to pray!” is a touching plea that some disciples make of their *Guruji*, Jesus. The plea arose not because the disciples desired a discourse on prayer, but after they *saw* Jesus “in a certain place, *praying*.” They’d often seen him fade into the shadows of night and the obscurity of hills to spend endless hours in communion with *Abba*, His Father. Prayer seemed to come so naturally to Him. So, finding it difficult to pray, themselves, they wanted to learn how to pray and what to say. Jesus, always the one to oblige an open, sincere and eager learner, teaches them the Lord’s Prayer. Although the essence of the ‘Our Father’ is the same in the three synoptic gospels, today’s version in the gospel according to Luke is shorter than that of Matthew since “Thy will be done” and “Deliver us from evil,” are probably Matthew’s liturgical expansions that stress the petitions immediately preceding them. It is worth spending time reflecting on this prayer, which is so central to Christian faith and liturgy. Jesus simply tells us to call God: *Abba*, meaning, daddy, *pappa* or *appa*. Every Jew would’ve shrunk from calling God *Abba*, for it was too intimate an appellation for Yahweh who was an awesome, fearsome God. In fact, Jesus would suffer because of preaching the nearness of God, calling God ‘Abba’, daddy!
3. Many ingredients are seen in the Lord’s Prayer: praise, worship, hope, surrender, contrition, confession and petition. After teaching his disciples the ‘Our Father’ Jesus goes on to give them some down-to-earth explanations of what the prayer means in concrete

terms. He first gives the example of a neighbour in need of bread who knocks at the door of his friend even at midnight to plead for some bread. Wouldn't he surely get some? Also, if a child asks his parents for fish or eggs, will they give him a serpent or a scorpion instead? Surely not! That point that Jesus drives home is the need to be, (a) persevering and persistent in prayer, and, (b) absolutely certainty that whatever Abba gives is, indeed, for the child's best since God cannot do otherwise.

The Response of the Psalm (138): "On the day I called, you answered me, O Lord," echoes praise and thanksgiving for God's providence; for God answers our prayers in the best way possible.

Three Core Concerns of the Lord's Prayer:

The Kingdom Concern: The Lord's Prayer is one of the shortest, yet loftiest of prayers. It is known and said not only by Christians but by *all people*, for God is Universal Parent and we all hope and pray for the blossoming of God's Universal Family: the kingdom or reign of God. Opening with praise and worship of God, we pray, "May *your* kingdom come!" The stress is on '*your*', not on '*my*', which is what today's self-seeking society tells me to strive for.

The Bread Concern: We pray for *our* daily bread – not *my* bread alone, but for bread for all those who die in hungry deserts of Africa and dig for scraps of food in the garbage bins in India. We cannot pray this prayer without being concerned about global hunger and malnutrition.

The Forgiveness Concern: The plea for forgiveness reminds us that our forgiveness of others does not earn God's forgiveness for us, but is *the condition* of our continuance in forgiveness (see parable of the unforgiving servant in Mt 18:22-35). This is a dangerous prayer to say! For, I am telling God: "Do not forgive me if I am not ready to forgive my neighbour!"

A Papal Corrective to Catholic Tradition in the Lord's Prayer:

Pope Francis has approved a correction in the words of the 'Our Father'. Instead of saying "lead us not into temptation", it will say: "do not let us fall into temptation." He explained, "It is not a good translation because it speaks of a God who induces temptation. I am the one who falls. It's not God pushing me into temptation to then see how I have fallen. A father doesn't do that; a father helps you to get up immediately. It's Satan who leads us into temptation – that's his department."

In Lighter Vein:

1. Two boys who were strolling through a farm when they saw an enraged bull charging after them. Running towards the fence, they realized that they wouldn't make it. In desperation one shouted: "Quick, say a prayer!" The other replied: "I don't know any prayers except what daddy says before meals!" "Go ahead, any prayer will do!" screamed the first boy. The other cried, "Lord, make us truly grateful for what we are about to receive!"
2. Grandma once asked her grandson: "Do you say your prayers every night?" "Oh, yes!" replied the kid. "And," continued grandma, "your prayers every morning?" "No!" said the boy, "I'm not scared in the daytime!" Prayers effortlessly emerge from our lips when it gets dark or when bulls charge after us. But Paul tells us: "Pray constantly!" (1 Thess 5:17). If stuck for words, let me but say: "Lord, teach *me* to pray!"
