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Abraham and Jesus Teach Us to Pray

Biblical Reflection for 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JULY 20, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, home to Abraham's nephew, Lot, were full of sin. Israelite tradition was unanimous in ascribing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to the wickedness of these cities, but tradition varied in regard to the nature of this wickedness.

In many earlier interpretations, the sin of Sodom was homosexuality (Genesis 19:4-5), also known as sodomy; but according to Isaiah (1:9-10; 3:9), it was a lack of social justice. Ezekiel (16:46-51) described it as a disregard for the poor, whereas Jeremiah (23:14) saw it as general immorality. Further studies have revealed that the sin of Sodom the grievous sin of inhospitality in the biblical world -- an assault on weak and helpless visitors who, according to justice and tradition ought to have been protected from danger (Ezekiel 16:49).

Biblical bargaining session

Today's first reading from Genesis (18:20-32) presents the famous bargaining session between God and Abraham over the destruction of the two cities. When Abraham heard that God was going to judge the cities where his nephew lived, he began with a general question: Will you destroy the innocent along with the guilty (23)? Abraham appeals to God's better nature, as one does when one is trying to persuade a powerful person to do the right thing!

God starts at 50, if there are 50 righteous men, Sodom will not be destroyed, and Abraham gradually brings God down to 10. A subtle difference emerges in the way God speaks of the matter: God says that if a certain number of righteous persons are found in the city, God will not destroy it (28-32). But the first time God speaks, after Abraham has rested his case on the basis of the righteous 50, God does not say, "I will not destroy it," but that "I will spare the whole place for their sake" (26).

This intriguing story of Abraham interceding for Sodom is not really about a numbers game but about the significance of salvation for the righteous in a corrupt community. Abraham's fervent intercession points to the central theme of biblical faith: The steadfast love of God that refuses to be frustrated even in the context of immoral societies and cultures and sinful people. Christian theology teaches us that humanity is saved by the life of one righteous person!

Elements of good negotiation

What are the essential elements of good negotiation? First, demand or request must be clearly articulated and understood. Second, the logic behind the demand or request must be presented and agreed upon. Third, the person requesting or demanding must persist in the negotiation. What are ultimately required are clarity, logic and persistence. We cannot give up!

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Abraham did all three in his prayer to God. Abraham pointed to Lot's faith and character, not to the fact that Lot was related to him by blood. While he never clearly stated his request, Abraham clearly made his point to God: Save those who worship you and act morally! Be faithful to those who are faithful to you; be merciful to those who treat others with mercy. Abraham persisted until God and he agreed upon the number 10 (18:26-32).

The number 10 did not only tell us the size of Lot's family; it revealed the minimum number of believers necessary to form a community of faith. It gave the *raison d'être* for a minyan in the Jewish tradition. Judaism refers to the quorum of 10 male Jewish adults required for certain religious obligations. Ten was the minimum number needed for public prayer, and the minimum number needed to hold services at a synagogue.

When we pray to God, we should take Abraham's example to heart. We must pray with a clear request, seek God's will, and persist in prayer, even when we pray for something small. How are we clear in our prayer, logical in its implications, and persistent in its petition? How does our prayer reflect these wonderful Abrahamic qualities?

Centrality of prayer in Christian life

Throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus at prayer is a model for us. In each prayerful moment, Jesus lives out the story of God's great dialogue with the human family by remaining totally open to the power of God. We must pray unceasingly, for prayer is a sign of our faith in God. Prayer is not something that we use to put pressure on God to get our own way. Authentic prayer opens us up to the action of God's Spirit, bringing us in line with God's desires, and making us into true disciples, obedient to Jesus and to the Father who has sent him. Prayer becomes one of the ways by which we follow Jesus in the Christian life.

Three episodes concerned with prayer

In today's Gospel scene, Luke presents three episodes concerned with prayer (11:1-13). The first (1-4) recounts Jesus teaching his disciples the Christian communal prayer, the "Our Father"; the second (11:5-8), the importance of persistence in prayer; the third (11:9-13), the effectiveness of prayer.

The Matthean version of the "Our Father" occurs in the "Sermon on the Mount" (6:9-15); the shorter Lucan version is presented while Jesus is at prayer and his disciples ask him to teach them to pray just as John taught his disciples to pray (11:1-4). His disciples watch him from afar, and are keenly aware of the intensity and intimacy of his prayer with God. Jesus responds to them by teaching them the Our Father. Jesus presents them with an example of a Christian communal prayer that stresses the fatherhood of God and acknowledges him as the one to whom the Christian disciple owes daily sustenance (3), forgiveness (4), and deliverance from the final trial (4).

The prayer of the community

The "Our Father" is taught to the Twelve in their role as disciples, not just as individuals to be converted but also as persons already co-responsible for the community. This prayer is an apostolic prayer, because it is said in the plural and takes for granted one's awareness of a people, of co-responsibility, of solidarity, linking each of us to the other.

When we pray "thy kingdom come," we reveal our deepest longing to see the day when the triumphant, sovereign lordship of our loving God will no longer be a mere hope clung to desperately by faith, but a manifest reality in all human affairs. Our souls can never be entirely content until God's honor is fully vindicated in all creation. These words utter a heartfelt plea: When will the reign of evil and death end?

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When we beg for bread, we are really pleading for more than food. We beg the author of life for all the necessities of life. "God, give us what we need in order to enjoy the gift of life ... bread for today and bread for tomorrow, to sustain us as a community."

We ask God to forgive our sins as we forgive everyone their debts to us. This may possibly reflect Luke's concern that possessions not hinder community fellowship. The final petition is most likely eschatological: Do not lead us into trial; i.e., the final, great and ultimate test and agony of evil before the end.

The "Our Father" becomes the prayer of the poor, of those who plod along -- weary, hungry and struggling for faith, meaning and strength. It is perhaps the first prayer we ever learn, and the last prayer we ever say before we close our eyes on this life.

God's assurance of good gifts

The parable of the friend at midnight is found nowhere else in the New Testament. Its message, too, is about prayer and its point is that if our friends answer importunate or shameless appeals, how much more will God who desires to give us the kingdom (12:32). The concluding section (9-13) builds on the previous section. The analogy moves from friends to parents: if parents give good gifts, how much more so will God. Prayer is to be continual asking, seeking, knocking, but even so, this persistence is within a parent-child relationship, which assures good gifts. Authentic prayer opens us up to the action of God's Spirit, bringing us in line with God's desires, and making us into true disciples, obedient to Jesus and to the Father who has sent him.

I conclude this reflection by offering you two thoughts on Luke's great lesson on prayer in today's Gospel. First, from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 239: "By calling God 'Father', the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children. God's parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood, (cf. Is 66:13; Ps 131:2.) which emphasizes God's immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature. The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: (cf. Ps 27:10; Eph 3:14; Is 49:15) no one is Father as God is Father."

I also draw your attention to [one of Cardinal John Henry Newman's homilies on today's Gospel](#). The great cardinal wrote in the 19th century words that still ring loud and clear today: "He (Jesus) gave the prayer and used it. His Apostles used it; all the Saints ever since have used it. When we use it we seem to join company with them. Who does not think himself brought nearer to any celebrated man in history, by seeing his house, or his furniture, or his handwriting, or the very books that were his? Thus does the Lord's Prayer bring us near to Christ, and to His disciples in every age.

"No wonder, then, that in past times good men thought this Form of prayer so sacred, that it seemed to them impossible to say it too often, as if some especial grace went with the use of it. Nor can we use it too often; it contains in itself a sort of plea for Christ's listening to us; we cannot, so that we keep our thoughts fixed on its petitions, and use our minds as well as our lips when we repeat it. And what is true of the Lord's Prayer, is in its measure true of most of those prayers which our Church teaches us to use. It is true of the Psalms also, and of the Creeds; all of which have become sacred, from the memory of saints departed who have used them, and whom we hope one day to meet in heaven."

[The readings for the 17th Sunday of Ordinary Time are Genesis 18:20-32; Colossians 2:12-14; Luke 11:1-13]

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