

Sunday, July 24, 20

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

Conventual Mass

Bargaining and Intercession

Years ago, my friend Anne took a trip around the world. Among other souvenirs, she brought back a large, copper bread tray from the Middle East. And she told us how she managed to get it at a good price. At one place the ship docked, she found this bread tray for sale and asked for the price. It was much too high, so Anne walked away, Unwittingly, Anne entered into the favorite past time of a Middle Eastern market. By walking away, she had done the right thing and gave the appearance of wanting to haggle. The merchant ran after her with the tray. Anne ultimately came away with it at a price that satisfied both of them.

As a teenager I went with my friend Joe and his parents to an open air market. Joe's mother saw a piece of fabric that she wanted, asked the price and began to haggle. Back and forth it went replete with pleading, cajoling, flattery and even insults. Joe's mother eventually got the fabric, but being a teenager I was totally embarrassed by my friend's mother. I was used to going by the absolute of a price tag and had no appreciation for the fine art of bargaining. In the Middle East it is a way of life.

In our first reading, even though Abraham seems to be bargaining with God there is something much deeper going on. First of all, God speaks to Abraham about the purpose of his coming, that is to see whether or not the actions of the inhabitants of Sodom justify their destruction. By speaking as if the decision

had not yet been made, God opened the way for Abraham's audacious prayer.ⁱ

Even though Abraham's encounter with God is couched in language common to bargaining, it is not really a bargaining as such. At its core is the question whether the life of a just person compensates for the sins of a society and bring about God's merciful forgiveness. It is this conviction in the worthiness of a just person that makes Abraham bargain with God.ⁱⁱ

By his "bargaining of mercy" Abraham begins the ministry of intercession which is taken up by the prophets.ⁱⁱⁱ When God threatened to destroy the Israelites after the disaster of the golden calf, Moses prayed, "Forgive their sins – and if not, blot me out of the book which you have written" (Exodus 32:32). A bold prayer indeed!

The Scriptures speak of the effectiveness of the prayers of the just one, one whose will is in total conformity to the will of God. Of such a person it can be said that he wills what God wills and God wills what the just one wills. Of all those who can be called just or holy, the foremost of these is Christ. He is the all holy one, the Son of God. In his life among us, his will was always one with the Father's. When his disciples found Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman, they urged him to eat something. Jesus answered them, "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:34). In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me, still, not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

To Christ belongs this ministry of intercession par excellence first by his cross and now in his glory. “He is the one who “is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25). This is even now his work in heaven.

But there is more. We the baptized, members of Christ’s body, have been called to share in his work. Just as we are called to share in his work of spreading the good news of the kingdom so we have been called by our baptism to share in Christ’s ministry of intercession. We are baptized to share in his role of priest, king and prophet. When we exercise the ministry of intercession we share in Christ’s priesthood.

Intercessory prayer is an intense form of prayer. But what should we intercede for? First of all there are those which are most apparent: our family, our friends, our own needs. But we should intercede for more universal needs as well: for the spread of the gospel, for those who have lost their faith, for the renewal and reform of the Church as well as the unity of all Christians, for our persecuted brothers and sisters, for the children of the world, for peace and an end to violence, for the shepherds of the church, for our elected leaders as well as good political leaders, for racial and religious harmony in our country and among nations. This is only a partial list and each one can add many more. All of these are important and close to God's heart. With this form of prayer we join with Christ in bringing his light into the darkness.

And with so many things to pray for, what should I pray for particularly? Abraham interceded for the people of Sodom because God himself opened up the way for Abraham's prayer. Let the Spirit guide us also. We begin by sitting quietly and ask for guidance. Perhaps an attraction, a nudge or even a crisis will point us in the right direction. But it should always be surrounded by a sense of peace.

In today's gospel, Jesus stressed the importance of perseverance in prayer. We are an impatient people, wanting to see immediate results. Jesus teaches us that we must look beyond the visible, material world and recognize that by our prayer we are bringing God into the situation. Perhaps that's the difficult part, learning to trust, to trust even in God. But the God who has loved us so much that he has

brought all creation into being and reconciles us to himself by the life, death and resurrection of his Son will not fail us. God never fails us. God's ways are mysterious, and we may not understand them, but a loving God never lets us down. And that is the source of our perseverance in prayer.

The form intercessory prayer can take is multiple: First of all there is the Eucharist itself when we unite ourselves and our intentions with Christ offered on the altar. There is also the rosary; it can also be spontaneous prayer. What is important is that we communicate earnestly and with our hearts our concern to God and have confidence that God does not reject our prayers, even if they are answered differently than we had hoped.

And now as we turn to the altar we lay ourselves,
our prayers and our concerns on the paten with the
host, so that all may be transfigured and be united to
Christ.

ⁱ Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, v.6, Ordinary Time, Year C (Collegeville, Minn., The Liturgical Press, 1993) 138

ⁱⁱ Days of the Lord 139

ⁱⁱⁱ Days of the Lord 138