

## **“Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?”**

In last week's OT passage, we read about the declaration of a new beginning for Abraham and Sarah and this week our passage follows on from that with the prospect of a destructive end for the city that Abraham, from his tent in the mountains could see in the distance on the plain. The Lord deliberates about whether or not to take Abraham into his confidence and when he does, he finds in Abraham a highly confident questioner who does not hold back in making his demands of God. Abraham was a righteous man and by this point in his life had a fully developed relationship with his God and it was this familiarity which gave him the confidence not to hold back in interceding hard for the righteous of the two cities down below. Abraham exemplified the great privilege of God's covenant people; God has revealed his purposes to them and allows their voices to be heard through intercessions. “Abraham remained standing before the Lord” illustrating the mutual accessibility existing between God and his servant. This is not the first time that Abraham has interceded on behalf of his relatives (Lot) and for Sodom. If you look back to Chapter 14 Abraham rescues his nephew Lot from a sticky situation when Sodom is overwhelmed by foreign forces. The interchange could be viewed as some good old-fashioned haggling or even horse-trading but that is probably not really the term to describe what Abraham was trying to do in his attempt to save the people of Sodom.

Abraham was basing his plea on the justice and authority of God, confident that God would do what was right. And throughout this interchange when Abraham addresses God as Lord, he is appealing to God as “judge of all the earth”. By contrast, Abraham described himself as insignificant (Job 30;19; 42.6). This questioning by Abraham is out of compassion for his relatives and wanting to know God's ways. Maybe he stopped at ten because in totting up how many relatives he had in the city it would appear to be ten. Abraham puts God on the spot. The question is not whether there will be judgement on the city but what decides the extent of it: the wickedness of the many or the righteousness of the few?

Abraham presses hard in his negotiating until he receives the answer that a few innocent and righteous people are more important than many wicked people. Righteousness is the key concept here: Noah was righteous but that quality has yet to be ascribed to Abraham, that will come later. But God has chosen Abraham to lead his descendants in the way of righteousness and justice. So this is a testing both of God's purposes and or Abraham's commitment to and understanding of what it means to be righteous. Here is a chance for God to show us that he is both reasonable and righteous. [This dialogue between God and Abraham establishes the principle that collective punishment for individual wrongdoing is an injustice unworthy of God. ]

The Lucan Lord's Prayer takes this a stage further.

Looking at Abraham's interceding with God shows that our way of praying should not be limited to the polite and formal. However, what is clear is that the manner of Abraham's approach to God is the consequence of years of building a rapport between them so that when the chips were down Abraham had the confidence of a mature relationship to work with and faith that he would not be let down by God.

Luke's form of the Lord's prayer is his view on Jesus' teaching about prayer. What emerges clearly is that Jesus expects his disciples to pray with boldness, trusting God to take care of their daily needs. The disciples clearly sense that there is something about the way Jesus prays to the Father that they need to inhabit for themselves. The 'model' prayer he gives them is fairly unremarkable, full of phrases familiar to any pious Jew. But what is critical here is the teaching that follows which stresses the need for persistence, cue back to

Abraham. The friend at midnight who at first refuses to provide food for an unexpected visitor stands here for our constant experiences of setback in prayer; our projections onto God of our impatience and lack of compassion. We are not born trusting God; trust has to be discovered and learnt and we are to persist in spite of any damage to our image of God that arises from past experience or wounded memories.

God is not like the friend at midnight; yet we sometimes feel abandoned and that our requests are not heard. Praying with persistence requires discipline and courage. Our spiritual muscles need developing and exercising before we can rely on them to carry us through barren times. I am reminded at this point of Mother Teresa of Calcutta who, it was discovered from her writings after her death, spent years struggling with the seeming lack of God's presence to her.

Once again Jesus is preparing the disciples for his passion. To interpret his suffering and the suffering they themselves will endure, requires the consoling gift of the Holy Spirit.

In his epistle Paul urges the Colossians to a fuller appreciation of Christ. This is not simply for the sake of deepening their spiritual growth but he is concerned with their spiritual protection: 'see to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit'.

Paul doesn't at this stage elaborate further but in his insistence that in Christ the Colossians had been circumcised 'with a spiritual circumcision', it may be that some people were insisting that non-Jews still needed to submit themselves to physical circumcision. This is no longer necessary says Paul because Christ's victory on the cross has superseded any need for this distinguishing mark of membership. Stand firm, he says, in the Christ you have received and 'continue to live your lives in him'.

We are encouraged to hold fast to what we know and have experienced of Christ but we are also urged to exercise discernment. Now, as then, many things are said of Christ and taught in his name and not all will necessarily ring true with the understanding of Christ growing within us. A similar sentiment expressed in the first epistle of John encourages us to 'test spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world (1 John 4.1).

Our individual experiences are constantly being shaped by our environment. Like the pattern of river erosion, experience and circumstance carve trackways on us where we are yielding like limestone and divert around us when we are tough like granite. Some parts of us are worn down, eroded like confidence, conscience and trust while others are built up such as wisdom at one extreme and vanity at the other. But, incorporated into a structure we assume a strength that goes beyond what we can achieve as an individual.

So, looking again at Luke's form of the Lord's prayer we consider his phrase: "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us" This contrasts with Matthew's form which we are more familiar with: "forgive us our sins as we forgive....." rather than Luke's "for we forgive". Luke seems to be implying that our forgiving of others is a necessary precursor to God's forgiving of us. Matthew's suggests a balance in which the measure of forgiveness we give will also be the measure we receive. When you drill down into either form they can both appear somewhat daunting.

What both forms tell us is that pure individualism is not the Christian way. The ability to forgive is a fundamental ethical principle of our faith. Every Christian needs to be both forgiven and forgiving. It has to be said that we all find the former easier and less painful than the latter. And because we struggle to be fully contrite it leads us to be ill-equipped to value full forgiveness at its true price.

So as I said earlier, Abraham established the principle that collective punishment for individual wrongdoing is an injustice unworthy of God while the Lucan Lord's Prayer takes this a stage further: unless Christians are a living Temple, a Church united as the "body of Christ", there is no "us" to be forgiven.

Amen.