

17th Sunday of the Year, Year C

The first reading of today's mass is taken from the Book of Genesis, which is made up of memorable stories attached to the names of the ancestors of the tribes that made up ancient Israel. In these stories certain key values are taught. The main character in the story selected for today is Abraham, the 'friend of God'(James 2:23), and the key value that is being taught is the value of intercessory prayer. Jesus is making the same point in today's gospel.

The man in Jesus' parable is reluctant to help and doesn't like being disturbed at night. However, if it got out that he had refused his friend's request for bread, he would be shamed before his neighbours. So, however ungraciously, he eventually decides to answer his friend's request for bread. Jesus has just told his disciples to pray to God, for the bread we need for today, for forgiveness and for protection. The point of the parable is that if a reluctant friend cares about his reputation enough to meet our request, how much more will the gracious God answer our prayers.

No doubt there were many listening to Jesus, just as there are many of us here today, who had memories of what we are inclined to call 'unanswered prayers'. So Jesus goes on to teach us that, while we should pray to our Father for whatever we want, we must remember that we are like little children. We don't always know what is best for us. He speaks of a little child who is hungry and who reaches out for what he thinks is a roll of bread. In fact it is a stone. So the father, interpreting the need, gives the child, not the stone it asks for but the bread it needs. To a child a small snake could look like a fish. No father would be foolish enough to give the child the snake when it stretched out its hand towards it. He would distract the child momentarily, and give her a piece of fish, for the father knows that it is fish that the child needs and really wants.

Jesus is telling us to pray for whatever we want, but always to pray, trusting that our Father knows what is best for us and for those for whom we pray. Our prayer will always be answered - not necessarily in the way we expect, but always what is really needed will be given; always God will give his Holy Spirit, his love to us and to those whose needs brings us to prayer. And it is this Spirit of love that will bring real healing and real life and real peace to us according to our real need. but not necessarily in line with the object of our request. In all our intercessions we are to follow the example of Jesus himself and say: 'Not my will but thine be done'.

Sometimes we wonder how prayer works. I do not think that we should imagine that prayer changes God. God is love. God is pouring out his Holy Spirit upon us and upon every person walking this earth, whether we are praying or not. Prayer changes us and it opens us up to receive the grace that is already being offered. It is like opening up the roof to let in the rain, or drawing the blinds to let the sun into a cold, dark room. It is like throwing open a window to allow the fragrant Spring air to enter a home. When we pray we are looking towards God. Our heart is sensitive to God and more likely to notice and to receive the grace God is offering. Sometimes we wonder how our prayers for others help them. May I offer you some thoughts for your reflection.

1. When I have been in special need, the knowledge that other people were praying for me was very important to me. It soothed what otherwise would have been a profound spiritual

loneliness. I felt held in prayer, and the prayer of those who love me reminded me that I was not alone, and also encouraged me to look towards God in faith. The conclusion of today's responsorial psalm reads: 'The Lord will fulfil his purpose for me'(Psalm 138:8). The psalmist is reflecting on the words of Deuteronomy: 'It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed'(Deuteronomy 31:8). When things are hard we can easily think that there is no hope. The prayer of other people reminds us that we are held in love and that God will continue to fulfil in our lives the purpose he has for us. I imagine that your experience is like mine. Don't forget that Jesus is praying for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25).

2. But what about when the person for whom we are praying does not know? I think it is usually good to tell the other person that he or she is in our prayers. But if this is not possible, or not appropriate, we are reminded that we are all connected to each other even when we are unaware of the connection. We are like branches on a vine. If one branch draws nourishment in from the sun, all the other branches are helped. Ultimately the best help you can give me is to be close to God yourself. Then your open heart draws grace in and this helps me and everyone else in the world. Herein lies the importance of holiness and of prayer.

3. Other people's prayer for us does not substitute for our own openness to God or response to God's grace. Likewise we cannot live other people's lives for them. But we can surround each other with grace. We can draw each other close and encourage each other to believe in God's love, and even when we are not conscious of other people's prayer, this prayer is working, like radium in the dark, giving out the spiritual energy of love. Henri Nouwen writes:

'Often I have said to people, 'I will pray for you' but how often did I really enter into the full reality of what that means? I now see how indeed I can enter deeply into the other and pray from his centre. When I really bring my friends and the many I pray for into my innermost being and feel their pains, their struggles, their cries in my own soul, then I leave myself, so to speak, and become them, then I have compassion. Compassion lies at the heart of our prayer for our fellow human beings. When I pray for the world, I become the world; when I pray for the endless needs of the millions, my soul expands and wants to embrace them all and bring them into the presence of God. But in the midst of that experience I realise that compassion is not mine but God's gift to me. I cannot embrace the world, but God can. I cannot pray but God can pray in me. When God became as we are, that is, when God allowed all of us to enter into his intimate life, it became possible for us to share in his infinite compassion. In praying for others, I lose myself and become the other, only to be found by the divine love which holds the whole of humanity in a compassionate embrace. ... Compassion belongs to the centre of the contemplative life. When we become the other and so enter into the presence of God, then we are true contemplatives. True contemplatives, then, are not the ones who withdraw from the world to save their own soul, but the ones who enter into the centre of the world and pray to God from there'(Genesee Diary, Henri Nouwen, page 144)

However, prayer for other people's needs can tend to take over our prayer and we can do it with anxiety and be so pre-occupied going over the sickness or the troubles of those we love, that there may be in reality very little communion with God going on. I would like here to share with you some hints that have helped me, and may help you, to find a way to express our concerns for others while at the same time not being distracted from a genuine faith-

communion with God.

1) Be aware that God loves them, and has been gracing them long before we thought to pray for them, that God is gracing them now, and that our desire is to be, in our prayer, in communion with all the members of the church, living and dead, praying for those for whom we wish to intercede.

2) Take the person for whom we are praying into our hearts. This is the best way also to listen to people: take them and what they are saying into our hearts and listen to them there. Well, if someone has asked our prayers, take that person into our heart, and then, from our heart, hold them up to God. A strenuous effort of concentration is not required. Just simple awareness, as we might stand in the presence of a picture or of a sunset.

3) Then put the request aside and just *be* in the presence of God. We do not now have to reflect that we are there on behalf of another: we have already made that clear. We just *are* in the presence of God. Our intention – we do not have to reflect upon it any more – is simply that God's love flow freely in this other person, as we hope it does in us.

To pray for others we do not have to be clever or eloquent or even perceptive of their needs; just be ourselves as we are: simple, a little confused perhaps, but wanting God's will, or wanting to want God's will for ourselves and others. It is God's business to take things on from there. We are to fill the water pots with water – and we are to fill them to the brim – the wine-making is for God to do (see John 2:7-10). We are to remove the stone: <Lazarus, come forth> belongs to God (see John 11:41-44). We are the dry bones; the clothing with flesh, and the breathing upon them is God's (see Ezekiel 37:1-14).

In this way the prayers we pray for others are more trusting. We take these people into our own hearts and entrust them to the heart of God. Then the best thing we can do is not go over and over their problems, but to be ourselves in communion with God, in simple trust, and to spend the time of prayer open to God's grace and praying that the will of God will be done in our lives and in the world, and that we may be a vehicle of God's grace to others.